



Testimony of:

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Committee on General Welfare and Committee on Aging

*Oversight – Reducing Food Insecurity in New York City*

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Good morning. My name is Ariel Savransky and I am the Policy and Advocacy Associate for Child and Adolescent Health and Mental Health at Citizens' Committee for Children of New York (CCC). CCC is a 73-year-old independent, multi-issue child advocacy organization dedicated to ensuring that every New York child is healthy, housed, educated and safe. I would like to thank Chairs Levin and Chin and the members of the City Council Committees on General Welfare and Aging for holding today's hearing about food insecurity in New York City. While today's hearing is focusing on seniors, children and families face many of the same issues with regard to benefits and access to food.

CCC is grateful to the entire City Council, Mayor de Blasio, and the City Administration for their work to fight poverty and increase New Yorkers' access to healthy, affordable food. We are confident that these efforts will improve health and overall well-being outcomes for New Yorkers.

It bears noting that the City Council has long been committed to enhancing the food security of New Yorkers. In fact, today's hearing continues the Council's tradition of holding a hunger oversight hearing each year. The annual hunger hearing is a testament to the Council's dedication to tackling hunger and food insecurity throughout the City.

Sadly, the need to address food insecurity has not decreased since the last hunger oversight hearing in January of 2016. Recent data show that a staggering number of New Yorkers continue to struggle with poverty, food insecurity and hunger. According to the most recent U.S. Census data, New York City's overall poverty rate is 20 percent, which means that one in every five New Yorkers lives in poverty.<sup>1</sup> Even more sobering is the child poverty rate in New York City, which now stands at 28.6 percent.<sup>2</sup> This translates into about one in three New York City children living in poverty. We also know that 9.2% of New York City children are living with their grandparents.<sup>3</sup>

In addition, citywide, almost 1.4 million people live in food insecure households, and this number has been steadily increasing since 2006.<sup>4</sup> This number includes about 400,000 – or one in four – New York City children who is living in a food insecure home. Furthermore, about 1.7 million individuals received SNAP (Food Stamps) benefits in August of 2016.<sup>5</sup>

Poverty and hunger are a tragic combination as a poor diet can have lifelong health consequences, and can exacerbate health conditions with which an individual may currently be living. We are confident that the City will continue to make the fight against poverty, hunger and food insecurity a top priority. We respectfully ask Mayor de Blasio

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<sup>1</sup> Citizens' Committee for Children. *Keeping Track Online: The Status of New York City Children*. <http://data.ccnnyork.org/>

<sup>2</sup> Id.

<sup>3</sup> United States Census Bureau. *American Fact Finder Table B09018*. <https://factfinder.census.gov>

<sup>4</sup> New York City Food Bank. *New York City's Meal Gap: 2016 Trends Report*. <http://www.foodbanknyc.org/files/dmfile/MealGapTrendsReport20162.pdf>

<sup>5</sup> New York City Department of Social Services Human Resources Administration. *HRA Facts*. [http://www1.nyc.gov/assets/hra/downloads/pdf/facts/hra\\_facts/2016/hra\\_facts\\_2016\\_08.pdf](http://www1.nyc.gov/assets/hra/downloads/pdf/facts/hra_facts/2016/hra_facts_2016_08.pdf)

and the City Council to support and expand those programs that have been proven to assist food insecure seniors, families and children. In order to achieve these goals, CCC submits the following recommendations to make healthy food more affordable and accessible to all New Yorkers.

### **1. Strengthen the anti-hunger safety net**

Safety net programs are absolutely vital resources to the large number of New Yorkers who struggle with hunger and food insecurity. Programs such as SNAP and WIC are critical supports that help New Yorkers feed their families and access the nutritious foods that children need for healthy growth and development.

Moreover, these programs function as economic engines, bringing federal resources to local supermarkets, corner stores, farmers' markets, and even Green Carts. Research shows that there is \$1.80 of economic activity resulting from every \$1 of SNAP spent. Further, SNAP receipt has been proven to lift a significant number of Americans above the poverty level.<sup>6</sup> According to the most recent data available, in 2013, only about 77% of eligible individuals in NYC were receiving the SNAP benefits for which they qualified.<sup>7</sup>

We know that the City administration and the City Council have been taking steps to address this. For example, the Medicaid data match has helped identify thousands of New Yorkers who qualify for SNAP. The Council has also provided support to non-profits so that they could conduct SNAP outreach. Mayor de Blasio and HRA have also employed a number of initiatives to increase enrollment in SNAP, including allowing applicants to submit necessary documents using their smartphones as well as allowing clients to re-certify for benefits over the phone in specific neighborhoods. Furthermore, in 2015, a citywide outreach campaign was launched in the form of a website – [foodhelp.nyc](http://foodhelp.nyc) – to spread the word about SNAP to New Yorkers who qualify for SNAP benefits but are not receiving them. This outreach is extremely important this year due to eligibility guideline changes. In the summer of 2016, the state expanded eligibility from 130 percent to 150 percent of the federal poverty level.

We are grateful that the Council has recognized the beneficial role that farmers' markets and federally-funded food programs play in helping New Yorkers access healthy, local foods. This recognition is evident in the Council's historic support for the use of SNAP at the City's farmers' markets.<sup>8</sup> As you are aware, the number of New Yorkers who

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<sup>6</sup> United States Department of Agriculture Office of Research and Analysis, *Trends in Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program Participation Rates: Fiscal Year 2002 to Fiscal Year 2009, August 2011*. <http://www.fns.usda.gov/ORA/menu/Published/SNAP/FILES/Participation/Trends2002-09.pdf>

<sup>7</sup> New York City Human Resources Administration. *SNAP Program Access Index and Participation Rates: 2002-2013*. <https://www1.nyc.gov/assets/hra/downloads/pdf/facts/snap/2002.2013NYCSNAPParticipation.pdf>

<sup>8</sup> Data from our 2013 report *From Farm to Table: The Use of Federally-Funded Food Programs at New York City Farmers' Markets* show, use of SNAP, the WIC Fruit & Vegetable check, and the Farmers' Market Nutrition Program (FMNP) in our City's farmers' markets positively impacts both the food security of low-income families and the incomes of regional farmers

make SNAP purchases at farmers' markets grows substantially each year, as a result of the DOHMH Health Bucks program and the repeated Council distribution of one-year funds to support EBT technology at the markets.

Further, federal government cuts to SNAP, which occurred in November 2013, decreased the amount of SNAP benefits that New Yorkers received.<sup>9</sup> The average SNAP benefit in New York City declined from \$162 per person per month in December 2012 to about \$138 per person per month in October 2016.<sup>10</sup> This benefit reduction, known as the Hunger Cliff, has resulted in a loss of over 161 million meals in New York City since November 2013, and although Emergency Food Programs (EFPs) are working to fill that meal gap, resources are not adequate and the gap continues to exist at about 100 million meals.<sup>11</sup> In addition, EFPs also saw a substantial growth in visitors preceding the SNAP cuts, as a result of both the recession and Hurricane Sandy. However, it is encouraging to note that fewer food pantries and soup kitchens reported running out of food, reducing the number of meals in their pantry bags and turning people away as compared to September of 2015.<sup>12</sup>

## **Recommendations**

- a) Continue to engage in efforts to expand participation in SNAP to reach more eligible New Yorkers, as well as efforts to ensure New Yorkers can use their benefits more widely

We urge the City to continue to build upon the current efforts to increase participation in the SNAP program, including through continuing to use the Medicaid data match to help identify New Yorkers who qualify for SNAP as well as through allowing applicants to submit documents using their smartphones.

Other efforts by individuals are also aimed at increasing participation in these programs, such as the recent development of an app that allows New Yorkers to see what benefits, programs and tax credits they may be eligible for.<sup>13</sup> We urge the City to promote the use of these tools to enroll more New Yorkers in these programs.

We are extremely excited about the recent announcement that New Yorkers will soon be able to use their SNAP benefits to purchase food online. This option will increase access to fresh, affordable food, especially for those individuals living in neighborhoods with limited access to fresh fruits and vegetables, as well as for those individuals who may have trouble traveling to stores to purchase food. We urge the City to invest in efforts to

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<sup>9</sup> A household of three lost approximately \$29 per month – more than 20 meals.

<sup>10</sup> New York State Office of Temporary and Disability Assistance. Office of Temporary and Disability Assistance Statistics, October 2016. <https://otda.ny.gov/resources/caseload/2016/2016-10-stats.pdf>

<sup>11</sup> Food Bank for New York City. Still Scaling the Hunger Cliff: Need at NYC Food Pantries & Soup Kitchens. [http://www.foodbanknyc.org/files//dmfile/2016\\_LegislativeBreakfast\\_ResearchBrief\\_11\\_19.pdf](http://www.foodbanknyc.org/files//dmfile/2016_LegislativeBreakfast_ResearchBrief_11_19.pdf)

<sup>12</sup> Id.

<sup>13</sup> NY1. *Benefit Kitchen App Helps Low Income Households*. <http://www.ny1.com/nyc/all-boroughs/money-matters/2017/01/18/benefit-kitchen-app-helps-low-income-households-.html>

publicize this program so that SNAP recipients are aware that they will be able to use their benefits online.

Given the positive impact the ability to use SNAP at farmers' markets has on the food security of New Yorkers and the local economy, we urge the City to ensure all New York City farmers' markets and Green Carts are equipped with EBT technology, and we will be urging the Administration to baseline this funding. We are also urging the City to continue to explore ways to use Health Bucks as an incentive to participate in community-based organization's nutrition and health programming, especially with the new award from the United States Department of Agriculture which expands the Health Bucks season from five months to year-round.<sup>14</sup> In addition to being awarded Health Bucks for spending EBT benefits at farmer's markets, community organizations may also distribute Health Bucks to their clients as an incentive to support nutrition education and other health-related activities.

b) Continue to engage in efforts to expand participation in the WIC program

We urge the City to explore the creation of outreach programs similar to those being employed for SNAP eligible New Yorkers to increase participation in the WIC program such as through using the Medicaid data match and allowing individuals to submit documents over the phone. Furthermore, we believe that there is more that New York can do to increase the take-up rate for the WIC fruit and vegetable voucher at farmers' markets or on green carts, such as working with the state to ensure WIC is added to the EBT benefits' card before 2020 (when it is federally required) and making it easier for farmers and green carts to enroll in WIC by making WIC, FMNP and SNAP all on one application form.<sup>15</sup> Additionally, we urge the Administration to explore ways to make it easier for WIC Fruit and Vegetable voucher recipients to use these vouchers by giving them easily accessible opportunities, such as by placing Green Carts outside WIC centers or providing WIC centers with information on local farmers' markets.

c) Baseline and add funding for the Emergency Food Assistance Program to account for increased need

We will be urging the administration to baseline the \$4.9 million the City Council added last year and to add additional needed funding. We once again look forward to partnering with the City Council in our efforts to increase funding for emergency food programs.

d) Ensure that new SNAP guidelines imposed on retailers do not limit access to the food New Yorkers need

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<sup>14</sup> The City of New York. *Food Metrics Report 2015*.

<http://www1.nyc.gov/assets/foodpolicy/downloads/pdf/2016-Food-Metrics-Report.pdf>

<sup>15</sup> Citizens' Committee for Children, *From Farm to Table: The Use of Federally-Funded Food Programs at New York City Farmers' Markets, May 2013*. <http://www.cccnewyork.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/05/CCCFarmersMarketReport.May-2013.pdf>

This year, new SNAP guidelines were imposed on SNAP retailers, increasing the number of food items a retailer must stock in order to accept SNAP benefits.<sup>16</sup> In order to ensure that SNAP recipients have access to staple foods, the USDA requires that retailers accepting SNAP benefits stock a variety and a minimum amount of items in certain food categories. This new rule change requires a minimum stock of 84 items within four staple categories of vegetables or fruits; dairy products; meat, poultry, or fish; and bread or cereals. Each category must have a minimum of seven different varieties with three units of each variety (for a total of 84 varieties). Furthermore, if more than 50 percent of a store's business comes from prepared foods, including those heated after purchase, that retailer will no longer be eligible to accept SNAP benefits. Although these rules will not impact larger retailers, such as grocery stores, these changes could potentially affect the smaller bodegas and grocery stores currently accepting SNAP benefits. We urge the City to monitor the effect of these new guidelines on smaller retail outlets to ensure that New Yorkers are still able to conveniently access the food they need. It is possible that the City might need to take steps to ensure bodegas and other small grocers are able to maintain their ability to accept SNAP.

**2. Expand existing efforts to bring fresh, healthy foods into all New York City neighborhoods, and establish new programming that brings foods into underserved areas**

New York City has many communities where residents have limited access to healthy, affordable food. We support initiatives that aim to increase the presence of healthy and fresh food retail outlets in these communities, often referred to as food deserts.

We are pleased that the City has undertaken a number of initiatives in recent years with the aim of achieving this goal. For example, CCC has long supported the Green Carts program, advocating for its establishment and then producing a report about the first year of its implementation. We are pleased that the City is continuing to work to expand the presence of these Green Carts as well as to expand the capacity of Green Cart vendors to accept EBT. CCC also advocated for FRESH financing at its inception, and we are so pleased that since 2009, 24 projects have been approved, including twelve that have been completed and are now open to the public.<sup>17</sup>

Additionally, we are very pleased to see progress being made with the Building Healthy Communities initiative, which seeks to improve the health of New Yorkers in 12 high-poverty neighborhoods by improving opportunities for physical activity, increasing access to nutritious and affordable food and promoting public safety. This past year, three new farms were established on NYCHA developments in partnership with Green City Force, bringing fresh fruits and vegetables to NYCHA residents as well as dynamic programming including opportunities for workforce and leadership development for

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<sup>16</sup> United States Department of Agriculture. *Enhancing Retailer Standards in the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program*. <https://www.fns.usda.gov/sites/default/files/snap/Retailer-Enhancing-Retailer-Standards-SNAP.pdf>

<sup>17</sup> The City of New York. *Food Metrics Report 2015*. <http://www1.nyc.gov/assets/foodpolicy/downloads/pdf/2016-Food-Metrics-Report.pdf>

youth. By redesigning neighborhoods and bringing programming to the people who need it, this public private partnership can potentially help to alleviate the high rates of crime, as well as the high rates of obesity and diabetes often disproportionately present in these neighborhoods.

Along the same lines, we applaud the creation of the NYC Department of Health and Mental Hygiene's Center for Health Equity, which will work to reduce health disparities and promote health equity by directing resources to high-need neighborhoods that continue to be disproportionately affected by food insecurity. This past year, three Neighborhood Action Centers – formerly called DPHOs – were launched and four more are expected to be opened this year.<sup>18</sup> These centers will be important places for community-based organizations and Health Department staff to work together to advance neighborhood health.

CCC respectfully submits the following recommendations to improve access to healthy, affordable food in food deserts:

- a) Explore ways to strengthen and expand the Green Carts initiative

We believe that the administration should consider additional ways to strengthen<sup>19</sup> the Green Carts initiative through more efficiently moving potential vendors off wait lists and expanding this initiative so that the program can operate at full capacity. Currently, there are 320 active Green Carts with 161 Green Cart operators on the waiting list.<sup>20</sup> At full capacity, this program can license up to 1000 Green Carts. We also hope that the City will explore ways to help Green Cart vendors serve New Yorkers year-round, including through partnerships with CBOs and other agencies, so that vendors can receive more technical assistance in order to acquire food; be housed in sheltered spaces so that they continue to work and serve their communities during inclement winter months; and find more targeted placements, especially near NYCHA facilities.

As the City Council explores ways to improve street vending laws, we once again remind you to ensure that there are no negative unintended consequences to Green Carts.<sup>21</sup>

- b) Increase investment in the FRESH program to bring fresh, healthy foods into all New York City neighborhoods

We believe that more investment is needed to bring fresh, healthy foods into all New York City neighborhoods. We suggest that the City should build upon and learn from the successes of the FRESH program, and continue to use it to upgrade outdated

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<sup>18</sup> Id.

<sup>19</sup> Citizens' Committee for Children. *Green Cart Implementation: Year One. 2010.* <http://www.ccnyc.org/wp-content/publications/CCCReport.GreenCarts.Sept2010.pdf>

<sup>20</sup> The City of New York. *Food Metrics Report 2015.* <http://www1.nyc.gov/assets/foodpolicy/downloads/pdf/2016-Food-Metrics-Report.pdf>

<sup>21</sup> Citizens' Committee for Children. *Food Vendor Modernization Act.* <http://www.ccnyc.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/11/CCC-testimony-Food-Vendor-Modernization-Act-.pdf>



infrastructure at grocery stores in neighborhoods that lack sufficient fresh food retailers. Such upgrades should include efforts to ensure that these retailers, including and especially smaller stores and bodegas, have the capacity to obtain and refrigerate fresh produce, fish, and meats. We also hope that the City will consider additional grants or incentives that would encourage food retailers to improve or further develop their outlets in underserved neighborhoods. We also urge the City to explore how to leverage FRESH in relation to the new affordable housing plans so that those individuals living in these developments have access to food retail outlets.

- c) Continue to invest in programs and explore ways to achieve the goals of the Center for Health Equity to reduce health disparities and promote health equity

We urge the City to continue to invest in the Building Healthy Communities initiative to ensure all 12 neighborhoods have programs promoting physical activity, consumption of and access to nutritious and affordable food and public safety.

We also urge the Administration to explore ways to reach more residents of the communities that have or will eventually have a Neighborhood Action Center through initiatives targeting nutrition education, cooking classes, and the development of farmers markets. Additionally, the work being done at these centers could focus on exploring ways to ensure the residents in these communities are taking advantage of the fresh food options available as well as ways to bring fresh food to communities in need.

In conclusion, New Yorkers continue to face significant hardship in accessing the nutritious and affordable food they need. Federal programs administered in New York City, as well as local innovations, assist these individuals in their efforts but barriers still remain. We ask that the City consider how to further support and grow the use of programs, so that more New Yorkers across the five boroughs can benefit.

Thank you for this opportunity to testify.