Serving under Stress Post-Recession: The State of Food Pantries & Soup Kitchens Today

When Hurricane Sandy left entire communities devastated, New York City's network of emergency food organizations – the food pantries and soup kitchens that provide food to an estimated 1.4 million New Yorkers in need[1] – had valuable assets at the ready to assist in disaster relief: facilities at which to prepare hot meals; a dedicated staff and volunteer base to distribute large quantities of food, water and supplies; and a number of mobile food pantries to fill gaps in service in hard-hit areas.

Though this network responded readily in crisis, it is a network shrunken and squeezed over five years by the Great Recession and a stagnant recovery[2] that have drained public and private resources from the safety net while leaving hundreds of thousands of New Yorkers in new need. *Serving under Stress Post-Recession: The State of Food Pantries & Soup Kitchens Today* describes food pantries and soup kitchens today and provides important comparative analysis from 2007, before the Great Recession began.

- **Size of the Emergency Food Network:** There are far fewer food pantries and soup kitchens in New York City now than before the Great Recession. As of July 2012, 742 food pantries and soup kitchens were in Food Bank For New York City's network – a loss of 247, or 25 percent, from 989 in 2007.
- **Volume of Visitors:** While the number of food pantries and soup kitchens has shrunk, the need for their services is growing. More than three-quarters of both food pantries (79 percent) and soup kitchens (77 percent) reported that the number of New Yorkers that came to them for relief increased over the previous twelve months.
- **Food Shortages:** Food shortages have become more pervasive at New York City's food pantries and soup kitchens. In 2011-12, 63 percent of food pantries and soup kitchens reported they had run out of food to produce adequate pantry bags or nutritious meals at some point during the previous twelve months. In 2007, only 49 percent of food pantries and soup kitchens reported such food shortages.
- **Turning Participants Away:** While the proportion of food pantries and soup kitchens that turned participants away (40 percent) is similar to findings in 2007 (47 percent), lack of food is more commonly cited as the cause (83 percent in 2011-12, and 70 percent in 2007.)
- **Hours of Operation:** Despite rising demand, majorities of food pantries (66 percent) and soup kitchens (75 percent) reported that their hours had stayed the same, or gone up and down in the previous twelve months. Less than a quarter of food pantries and soup kitchens (23 percent) reported they had increased the number of hours they were open.
- **Staff/Volunteers:** The proportion of food pantries and soup kitchens without paid staff has increased. Approximately two-thirds of food pantries (68 percent) and soup kitchens (66 percent) reported that they had no paid full-time staff; even fewer had paid part-time staff. By contrast, in 2007, nearly half of food pantries (46 percent) and more than half of soup kitchens (51 percent) reported having at least one paid staff member.
- **Types of Food Distributed:** Distribution of fresh fruit and vegetables has increased at food pantries and soup kitchens alike. Among food pantries, 85 percent include fresh fruit (compared to 82 percent in 2007), and 88 percent include fresh vegetables (compared to 80 percent in 2007) in pantry bags. Among soup kitchens, 89 percent use fresh fruit (compared to 82 percent in 2007) and 88 percent use fresh vegetables (compared to 82 percent in 2007) to prepare meals.

These findings illustrate the necessity for a combination of policy and programmatic approaches to guarantee all New Yorkers have meaningful access to nutritious food. Strategic investments in emergency food and the network of emergency food providers can ensure emergency food access as a short-term solution to hunger, enable food pantries and soup kitchens to better act as a bridge to longer-term supports like SNAP (formerly Food Stamps), and enhance our city's readiness to meet food needs in a disaster. Simultaneously, ensuring government nutrition assistance programs like SNAP remain robust and effectively designed to address need will help keep New Yorkers from reaching the doors of a food pantry or soup kitchen in the first place.

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[1] The number of New York City residents receiving food from food pantries and soup kitchens will be updated in early 2013.
[2] By economists' definitions, the "Great Recession" began in December 2007 and ended in June 2009.