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for the

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on behalf of

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INTRODUCTION

Good afternoon Chairman Levin and member of the City Council's General Welfare Committee. My name is Rachel Sabella and I am the Director of Government Relations at Food Bank For New York City. Food Bank appreciates the opportunity to present testimony today to the City Council about the Preliminary Budget for the New York City Human Resources Administration (HRA) for Fiscal Year 2016.

First, Food Bank For New York City thanks the City Council for your continued commitment to addressing the issue of hunger and ensuring that all New Yorkers have access to affordable, nutritious food. The City Council has long played a leadership role in this arena, and we are pleased to see continued strong leadership on anti-hunger initiatives this past year. The Council's instrumental role in implementing universal free school meals in middle schools, increasing enrollment of eligible households in the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), expanding the in-classroom School Breakfast Program, as well as increasing funding

for emergency food are especially appreciated. The Council's two citywide food drives this year have helped raise awareness and support about need among our neighbors.

For more than 30 years, Food Bank For New York City has been the city's major hunger-relief organization, working to end food poverty throughout the five boroughs. Nearly one in five New York City residents relies on our programs and services. Through our network of more than 1,000 charities and schools citywide, Food Bank provides food for more than 63 million free meals for New Yorkers in need. Food Bank For New York City's income support services, including SNAP enrollment and free tax assistance for the working poor, put more than \$100 million each year into the pockets of New Yorkers, helping them to afford food and achieve greater dignity and independence. In addition, Food Bank's nutrition education programs and services empower more than 275,000 children, teens and adults to sustain a healthy diet on a low budget. Working toward long-term solutions to food poverty, Food Bank develops policy and conducts research to inform community and government efforts.

My testimony today will focus on hunger in New York City and the importance of increased funding in the FY 2016 New York City budget and policy to work towards ending hunger.

NEW YORK CITY'S MEAL GAP: 250 MILLION

SNAP is our nation's first line of defense against hunger. A federal entitlement program, SNAP now provides food assistance to 46.5 million Americans.¹ Available to any household that meets the eligibility criteria (most importantly, income and immigration status), SNAP is *countercyclical*, meaning when the economy shrinks, SNAP has the flexibility to grow to meet rising need.

More than 1.7 million New York City residents (almost one in five) currently rely on SNAP to keep food on the table, with a monthly household benefit that has been averaging approximately \$260 since November of 2013's SNAP cut – a reduction of approximately \$18 per month.²

Despite SNAP and other nutrition assistance programs (like school meals, and the Special Supplemental Program for Women, Infants and Children, or WIC), **nearly 1.4 million New Yorkers rely on emergency food³ – evidence that a meal gap remains.**

The meal gap represents the translation into meals of the financial resources needed by food-insecure households to secure an adequate diet year-round. Commissioned by Feeding America and based on the federal government's annual food insecurity measure, the meal gap is the most sophisticated food insecurity metric available, enabling sub-county analysis and accounting for variations in local grocery costs. We were pleased to see the meal gap adopted by the Administration as the measure of food insecurity included in the City's annual food metrics report, in compliance with Local Law 133 of 2013. **New York City's meal gap (as of 2012, the most recent year for which data is available) is 250 million meals.**⁴ In terms of a borough breakdown, the meal gap for:

¹ United States Department of Agriculture (USDA). July 2014.

² Food Bank For New York City analysis of SNAP participation and benefit data reported by the New York State Office of Temporary and Disability Assistance (OTDA) and the New York City Human Resources Administration (HRA) as of September 2014.

³ *Hunger's New Normal: Redefining Emergency in Post-Recession New York City*. Food Bank For New York City. October 2013.

⁴ Gunderson, C., E. Engelhard, A. Satoh, & E. Waxman. *Map the Meal Gap 2014: Food Insecurity and Child Food Insecurity at the County Level*. Feeding America, 2014.

- the Bronx is 53 million
- Brooklyn is 88 million
- Manhattan is 45 million
- Queens is 55 million
- Staten Island is 8.6 million

As an attachment to my testimony, you will find a visual representation of the meal gap by City Council district. I look forward to meeting with individual Council Members to discuss the meal gap in your district and ways we can work together to ultimately eliminate it.

Emergency food, our last line of defense against hunger, is not sufficient to meet this need. When cash, benefits and the generosity of family and friends have been exhausted, the emergency food network is the resource of last resort for those struggling to keep food on the table. Yet even before SNAP benefits were cut, this network, which relies heavily on unpaid volunteers to do its work, was having a hard time meeting heightened levels of need that persisted past the end of the recession.⁵ Between 2007 and 2012, 250 food pantries and soup kitchens across the five boroughs have closed their doors, leaving those remaining to confront elevated need.⁶

FACTS ABOUT EMERGENCY FOOD

As referenced earlier, in November of 2013, sweeping cuts were made to the federal SNAP program. Food Bank For New York City surveyed its member food pantries and soup kitchens, and found that in the month benefits were reduced, more than three quarters of emergency food programs reported increases in need, and nearly half reported running out of food.⁷

Nearly a year later, a follow-up survey found that four out of five food pantries and soup kitchens continue to see increased visitor traffic, but that food shortages are even more widespread. In September 2014:

- **60 percent of food pantries and soup kitchens reported running out of food**, or particular types of food needed for complete pantry bags or meals – an increase of 12 percentage points from November 2013;
- **37 percent of food pantries and soup kitchens reported having to turn people away** due to food shortages – an increase of 11 percentage points from November 2013; and
- **61 percent of food pantries reported reducing the number of meals provided in their pantry bags** – an increase of 38 percentage points from November 2013.⁸

These statistics speak to a profound insufficiency of food in the emergency food supply, and the acute operational stress under which food pantries and soup kitchens have been functioning since the cuts. It is likely that the results we found about need at emergency food providers in

⁵ By economists' definitions, the recession, which began in December 2007, ended in June 2009.

⁶ *Serving under Stress Post-Recession: The State of Food Pantries & Soup Kitchens Today*. (2012). Food Bank For New York City.

⁷ "Visitor Traffic Increases at Emergency Food Providers Post-SNAP Cuts." Food Bank For New York City. January 2014.

⁸ "The Hunger Cliff, One Year Later: 56 Million Meals Lost; Need for Emergency Food Remains High." Food Bank For New York City. Nov. 2014.

November 2013 underestimated the true severity of the impact of the SNAP cuts due to two factors: first, November is a month when food donations peak, meaning more food was available at food pantries and soup kitchens than in an average month; and second, a class action settlement that provided retroactive benefits to wrongfully sanctioned households resulted in tens of millions of dollars in additional SNAP benefits issued to New York City residents that month. The survey findings from September 2014, by contrast, reflect neither holiday giving nor other special circumstances.

It is critical to know who relies on emergency food programs –

- An estimated 1.4 million New York City residents rely on emergency food programs, including soup kitchens and food pantries, each year.
- Approximately 339,000 New York City children or approximately one out of every five, rely on soup kitchens and food pantries.
- Approximately 604,770 New York City adult women, or approximately one out of every six, rely on soup kitchens and food pantries.
- Approximately 204,000 New York City seniors, or approximately one out of every five, rely on soup kitchens and food pantries.
- Approximately 70,000 New York City veterans, or approximately three out of every ten, rely on soup kitchens and food pantries⁹.

BUDGET PRIORITIES TO ENSURE NO NEW YORKER GOES HUNGRY

No New Yorker should go hungry: access to adequate, nutritious food is a fundamental human right. If New York City is serious about lifting the floor for all New Yorkers, let us at least set the threshold there. Thankfully, the policies and programs to realize this core principle are already in existence, and with the collective commitment of leaders across sectors, we can make this happen. While cuts to SNAP have intensified the challenge, policy and budget options well within the authority and discretion of City government can considerably improve the lives of New Yorkers who struggle to afford food.

New York City's anti-hunger resources – primarily those that bolster SNAP enrollment and fortify our emergency food system – are more vital than ever. Food Bank For New York City offers these recommendations on behalf of the emergency food network in a spirit of partnership. It is our hope this spirit will be met by constructive engagement by the City Council and the Administration. We are strongest and most effective when we take on hunger together. Closing our City's 250 million meal gap will require a thoughtful and aggressive strategy that uses every resource available. With millions of meals already lost, New York City's anti-hunger resources – primarily those that bolster SNAP enrollment and fortify our emergency food system – will be more vital than ever.

EMERGENCY FOOD

New York City's Emergency Food Assistance Program (EFAP) is a major source of food for our city's emergency food network. EFAP plays an especially important role because it provides a steady year-round supply of nutritious food for the approximately 500 food pantries and soup kitchens that participate. EFAP provides food from all five food groups, and all EFAP food meets the City's rigorous nutrition standards. In addition, EFAP is an important source of kosher food.

⁹ *Hunger's New Normal: Redefining Emergency in Post-Recession New York City*. Food Bank For New York City. October 2013.

The now-baselined funding of the City Council initiative that supplemented EFAP by \$1.3 million for food represents the first increase to baseline food funding for EFAP since 2009. This baseline increase effectively lifts the value of the program's funding to pre-recession levels, as it is comparable to increases in food costs since 2007.¹⁰ Poverty and food insecurity, however, remain entrenched at high levels, and food pantries continue to fall short of providing the standard nine meals per person in a pantry bag. It is vital to the ability of the emergency food network to address New Yorkers' immediate food needs to ensure that EFAP's food dollars are spent in a way that maximizes their purchasing power.

The baselined funding also reverses a major improvement to the program. Prior to the baselining of EFAP funds, the program operated in two distinct ways – the baseline funding for food was ordered by HRA (through DCAS) to cover a six-month period for EFAP providers. This food is shelf-stable and agencies were not given a choice as to what food they received. During the second half of the year, the City Council Initiative funding enabled EFAP agencies to choose which food options they could order through Food Bank's wholesale purchasing program. This allowed for agencies to choose which options would best serve their clients' needs. It is our understanding that since funding for the entire program has been baselined, the program will no longer operate with any choices for EFAP providers.

- We ask that EFAP baseline food funding increase to \$14.4 million in order to account for rising poverty and food costs, as well as adjust for the current inadequacy of the food supply, which only allows food pantries to provide 5.8 meals in a typical pantry bag – far short of New York State's nine-meal standard.
- We ask that HRA change the structure of the EFAP program so that agencies can have choice for all 12 months of the year. Choice allows them to better serve clients' needs.

SNAP

While SNAP cuts have reduced the benefit amounts of those already participating, it remains of utmost importance to ensure that eligible New Yorkers who are not enrolled in the program avail themselves of the benefit – particularly emergency food participants. Even at the currently reduced benefit amounts, SNAP benefits provide our city more meals in two months than the entire emergency food system distributes in a year.

- We encourage HRA to take advantage of all available federal waivers and options that increase benefit amounts and reduce the burden on applicants and HRA staff. We applaud HRA for having taken an important step last year in requesting (and receiving) the federal waiver that removes time limits on Able-Bodied Adults Without Dependents (ABAWDs); we look forward to working with HRA on continuing to improve SNAP access for seniors, students, working parents and others.
- We encourage HRA to ensure SNAP outreach materials are incorporated into outreach for other programs and services targeted to likely eligible populations – like the Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC).

¹⁰ Food Bank For New York City analysis of Consumer Price Index data for the NY metropolitan area from the Bureau of Labor Statistics, Dec. 2007-Oct. 2014.

COUNCIL INITIATIVES

In the FY2015 New York City budget, the Council included funding for key initiatives and programs that are designed to help New Yorkers struggling to make ends meet. We urge you to continue to prioritize funding for the following initiatives during the FY2016 budget negotiations:

- **Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC) Assistance Program.** Since 2010, the New York City Council has partnered with Food Bank For New York City on our Tax Assistance Program, which provides free income tax assistance services for low-income working individuals and families, ensuring they receive the full refunds and credits to which they are entitled. In addition, we are also able to connect tax filers with SNAP benefits and financial coaching.
- **Food Pantries and Technical Assistance (HRA).** This critical, existing Council initiative supports funding to food pantries city-wide through direct purchase of food and for capacity expansion efforts at EFAP pantries through Food Bank For NYC. Capacity expansion efforts would be through the Tiered Engagement Network (TEN), an approach developed by Food Bank that utilizes neighborhood-level partnerships among the network of Emergency Food Programs to increase access to food, public benefits and other vital social services and information to reduce hunger and poverty.

CONCLUSIONS

Over the last year, the Administration and the City Council have expressed a deep commitment to helping New Yorkers in need. In the wake of the worst economic downturn in generations and an unprecedented cut to our country's deepest investment in preventing hunger, local leadership has never been more important. This is our City's moment to come together as a united front to show its commitment to the principle that no New Yorker should lack access to an affordable, nutritious diet. Let us set a goal of closing New York City's widening meal gap and becoming the first city in the country to end food poverty. Food Bank looks forward to working with together with the City Council and the Administration to develop the plan and ensure no New Yorker goes to bed hungry. Together we can do this.

Thank you again for the opportunity to testify today.