

**THE NEXT HUNGER CLIFF:**  
**FOOD ASSISTANCE IN NYC**  
**FACES SAFETY NET CRISIS**



# Overview

When the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic in March 2020 brought about an immediate (and necessary) economic shutdown, millions of New Yorkers lost their jobs or became furloughed. Unemployment in New York City soared to an all-time high of 32 percent and many New Yorkers – some for the first time in their lives – had no choice but to turn to hunger-relief organizations for food.

Food pantries and soup kitchens across the five boroughs reported widespread increases in visitor traffic in just two months after the COVID-19 outbreak in New York City. [Food Bank For New York City reported on the dramatic spike in food need from January 2020 to May 2020.](#)

**Three years later, unemployment in New York City is still higher than the pre-pandemic level.**

Though 2022 marked a return to “normal” for many across the nation (with the current unemployment rate of 3.7 percent nearly back to its pre-pandemic level of 3.5 percent), New York City’s jobs have still not fully recovered. The current rate of unemployment in New York City is **5.8 percent**, nearly 2 percentage points higher than its pre-pandemic rate of 3.7 percent. This is the equivalent of 34,000 New Yorkers who used to work but remain unemployed.

# FACING NEW CHALLENGES

As the city continues to make its economic recovery three years later, new challenges are threatening the food security of vulnerable New Yorkers.

## Persistent inflation has posed a particular challenge for our neighbors.

As of November 2022, inflation was at 7 percent in New York City, but food inflation was much higher. **Since the start of COVID-19 in March 2020, the cost of groceries in New York City has increased by nearly 20 percent**, making it extremely difficult for working New Yorkers to put food on the table for themselves and their families. Those still struggling to recover from the economic fallout of the pandemic are doubly affected, forcing many to the pantry line each day.

## As the cost of food has risen, so has the rent.

More New Yorkers than ever are “rent burdened,” a term which, according to the U.S. Department of Housing, means they are **spending more than 30 percent of their income on housing**. Nearly a quarter of all New Yorkers are “severely rent burdened,” categorized as spending more than 50 percent of their income on housing.

Approximately one in two (44 percent) New Yorkers are rent burdened of which:

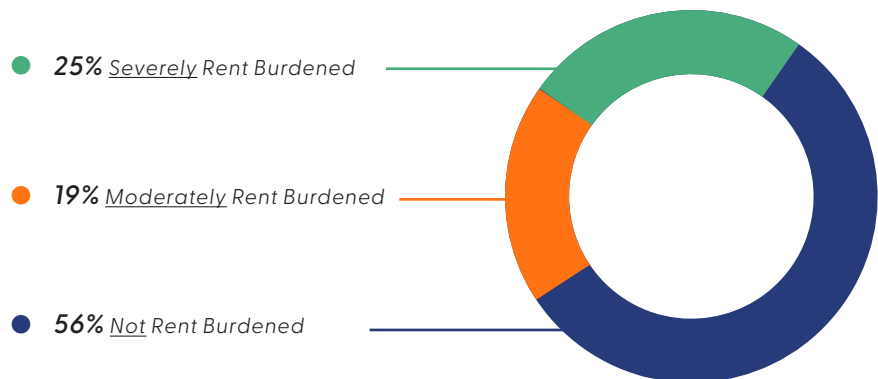
- **19 percent are moderately rent burdened** (spending 31-50% of their income on rent)
- **25 percent are severely rent burdened** (spending more than 50% of their income on rent)



### PROPORTION OF RENT BURDENED NYC RESIDENTS

Approximately one in two New Yorkers are rent burdened of which:

- 19 percent are moderately rent burdened
- 25 percent are severely rent burdened



As of December 2022, the cost of rent in New York City increased by nearly 15 percent. The price of a 2-bedroom apartment increased by over 21 percent.



#### 2022 FAST FACTS

Since the onset of COVID-19 in March 2020, the cost of groceries in New York has increased by nearly **20%**.

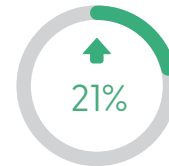
As of December 2022, rent has increased by nearly **15%** in New York City, with the cost of a two-bedroom apartment rising by **21%**.



GROCERIES



RENT



TWO-BEDROOM  
APARTMENT

A cost-of-living increase like this is untenable for New Yorkers already struggling to afford nutritious food and quality healthcare. Burdens this great make it impossible for New Yorkers to live their lives with the dignity and safety they deserve as they decide which basic needs to meet... and which to go without.

## Dwindling Benefits Are Making It Harder and Harder To Catch Up

As food and rent prices continue to increase, many families are now facing a new problem – the official end of Emergency Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) Allotments as of March 1, 2023. Instituted at the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, these temporary allotments made it possible for households to receive more SNAP benefits than they normally would be eligible for based on USDA guidelines.

The end of Emergency Allotments means tens of millions of Americans have lost the additional SNAP benefits that provided much-needed food for hardworking families since the pandemic began. Food banks across the country are bracing for a surge in demand with some advocates predicting a rise in hunger nationwide.

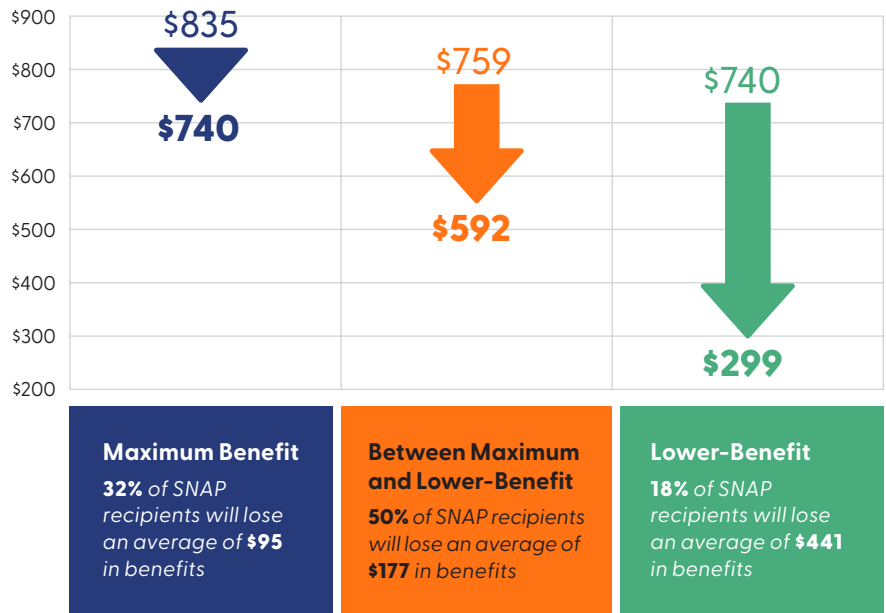
1.7 million New York City residents stand at the precipice of “Hunger Cliff” with across-the-board benefit reduction. SNAP households in New York City alone will lose an average of \$153 in benefits a month, for an approximate total loss of \$194 million in food assistance *each month*. This will also impact economic activity generated by SNAP, resulting in a major economic loss citywide.

It is also important to note that losses will vary across households based upon household composition, income, and size. As such, the impact will be felt disproportionately. Here is a snapshot of what the loss could look like for an average three-person household (currently projected at around \$197):



### HOUSEHOLDS RECEIVING SNAP WILL LOSE BENEFITS

Here is a snapshot of what the loss could look like for an average three-person household.



Source: Estimates based on CBPP analysis of fiscal year 2019 SNAP Household Characteristics data with income and expenses inflated to fiscal year 2023 values.

# ADDED STRAIN TO THE EMERGENCY FOOD NETWORK

When faced with a shortage of food, New Yorkers know they can turn to Food Bank For New York City and its extensive member network of over 800 food pantries, soup kitchens, shelters, campus pantries, and healthcare partners across the five boroughs to help fill in the gaps. Because SNAP benefits are often exhausted before the end of the month, SNAP recipients are among the most in need. **In fact, even before benefits were reduced, more than 30 percent of SNAP recipients in New York City visited emergency food programs like ours to help put food on the table.**

Since the outbreak of COVID-19, visits to hunger-relief organizations have almost doubled (by an increase of over 80%) and remain higher than pre-pandemic levels even as pandemic assistance begins to sunset and expire.

In the face of sustained high need and dwindling support, the Food Bank For New York City Member Network also ramped up operations to serve over **17,000 newly arrived migrants and asylum seekers** to our city in 2022.

## Navigating the Supply Gap

These challenges not only affected our network, but Food Bank itself, resulting in a 30.5% decrease in the food we were able to distribute to our member agencies (when marking from 2021 to 2022).

Since the pandemic, New York City's food pantries and soup kitchens have struggled to meet increased need with diminished resources.

During the height of the pandemic, additional food was made available through various government programs, including the Emergency Food Assistance Program (TEFAP) bonuses and COVID relief legislation. This emergency food assistance has now been largely discontinued, resulting in a significant reduction in the amount of federally provided food assistance, even as need at food assistance providers remains high. Additionally, the same high inflation our member agencies experience is impacting procurement and how far TEFAP funding goes, and due to recent supply chain issues, food banks were competing with other wholesalers and retailers for limited food supply. All these factors contributed to the widening gap between how much food is available and the demand at our pantry partners.

# FOOD BANK'S NETWORK-WIDE RESPONSE BASED ON SURVEY FINDINGS

To better understand how our powerful coalition of food pantries, soup kitchens, shelters, campus pantries, and healthcare partners across the five boroughs have responded to these challenges, we conducted a survey of our Food Bank Member Network in November 2022. The results below provide a snapshot of where we are and, more importantly, where we are going as **first responders, innovators, and cultural advocates**.

## Methodology

Survey results presented in this report are generated from two different surveys sent out to the network: one to Food Bank member agencies and one to clients served by those agencies.

**1** **The member agency survey** is an online survey that was sent to all food pantries and soup kitchens for which Food Bank For New York City has an active email address on file, followed by phone call interviews to non-respondents. There were 668 responses collected in total for a response rate of approximately 72 percent. After removing outliers, incomplete responses, and duplicated answers, 402 responses comprised the final sample size for analysis. The confidence level for all top-line survey results is at 95 percent, with a margin of error of plus or minus 5 percentage points.

**2** **The client survey** measures client-level characteristics like demographics, dietary intake, and income to gain a better understanding of the people we serve. We conducted a survey among clients at each community board district where there is a Food Bank member agency providing services (a total of 59) with the expectation of getting at least 100 surveys per site. The survey was self-administered through a flyer invitation distributed at pantry sites. Survey participants were randomly selected and received \$10 gift card incentives upon completion. Survey and flyers were available in three other languages other than English: Spanish, simplified Chinese, and Russian. The survey was conducted for a period of four months between the months of May 2022 and August 2022. A total of 3,696 citywide responses have been collected. After removing outliers, incomplete responses, and duplicated answers, 3,100 responses comprised the final sample size for analysis and findings.

# Highlights and survey results

## HOW WE RISE AS FIRST RESPONDERS

When crisis hits our city, we are the ones on the frontlines alongside our member agencies responding in real time to the needs of our neighbors. Throughout 2022, we collectively mobilized to nourish New Yorkers affected by a deadly **five-alarm apartment fire in the Bronx**, individuals and families displaced by **violence in Ukraine**, and **asylum seekers** from Arizona and Texas.

We continued the work of feeding those still struggling against the economic fallout of COVID-19 as soaring rates of inflation drove food and rent prices higher and higher. Food Bank and its network are working tirelessly to ensure that the needs of our fellow New Yorkers are met every day when needed. Some top-level findings:

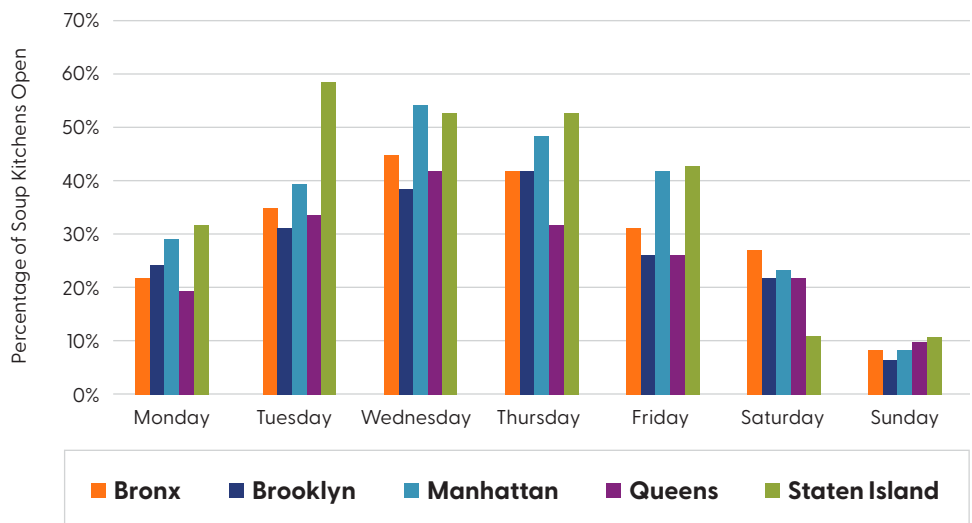
- Though not at the same frequency, Food Bank member agencies were and continue to be open **every day of the week** across the five boroughs.
- When asked about closures throughout the year, **26.2%** (or more than 1 in 4) of Food Bank member agencies reported that their food programs never close and are open throughout holidays and special occasions.
- As of 2022, nearly **60%** of Food Bank member agencies are in neighborhoods with high demonstrated need, meaning they're able to reach our most vulnerable neighbors.



### FILLING THE GAPS

Though not at the same frequency, Food Bank member agencies were and continue to be open **every day of the week** across the five boroughs.

### Food Pantries and Soup Kitchens Open Weekly





## HOW WE RISE AS INNOVATORS

Throughout 2022, the Food Bank member agencies once again proved themselves to be an innovative force against food insecurity. In the face of limited resources, limited budgets, and reduced capacity, our agencies found new ways to continue the work of nourishing our neighbors.

### Top-level findings:

- **95 percent** of Food Bank member agencies went “beyond food” to provide their neighbors with what they needed to thrive, including **Clothing** (48%), **Housing Referrals** (34%), **Personal Hygiene Products** (29%), **SNAP Assistance** (27%), **Diaper Programs** (26%), **Pet Food** (24%), **Health Services** (24%), and more.
- Over **78 percent** of Food Bank member agencies reported partnering with at least one other organization in 2022 to increase the reach of its services. Interestingly, **20 percent** of the network reported partnering with more than 10 other organizations.
- Nearly half (**47.6 percent**) of Food Bank member agencies promoted a client-choice model, allowing their neighbors to select the foods best aligned with their diets and needs.
- Nearly **90 percent** of agencies are actively promoting healthy food choices to their clients. Some verbally encourage clients to choose healthy food, while others use signage or host nutrition workshops.



### BEYOND FOOD

**95%** of Food Bank member agencies went “beyond food” to provide their neighbors with what they needed to thrive, including:



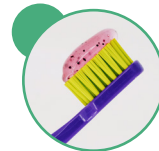
**48%**

Clothing



**34%**

Housing Referrals



**29%**

Personal Hygiene Products



**27%**

SNAP Assistance



**26%**

Diaper Programs



**24%**

Pet Food



**24%**

Health Services

## HOW WE RISE AS CULTURAL ADVOCATES

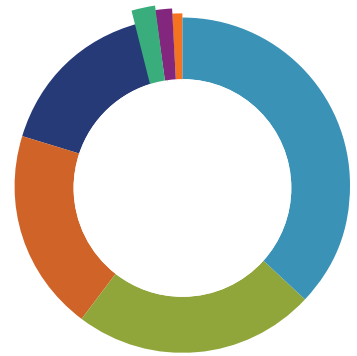
Every day, our partner community-based organizations reach New Yorkers from all different walks of life, and it's vital that we respond and listen to the unique and varied needs of the people we serve.

While Food Bank and its member agencies do not collect demographic information during the client intake process (so that guests always feel safe to use our services), an anonymous survey was conducted among clients to better understand the wide range of New Yorkers we serve. **Here is a breakdown, based on these survey results:**



### RACE AND ETHNICITY OF CLIENTS WITHIN THE FOOD BANK MEMBER NETWORK *(based on an anonymous survey)*

- **37.1%** Hispanic, Latino, or of Spanish origin
- **23.3%** Black or African American
- **19.4%** Asian
- **16.1%** White Non-Hispanic
- **1.9%** Middle Eastern or North African
- **1.4%** American Indian or an Alaskan Native
- **0.8%** Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander

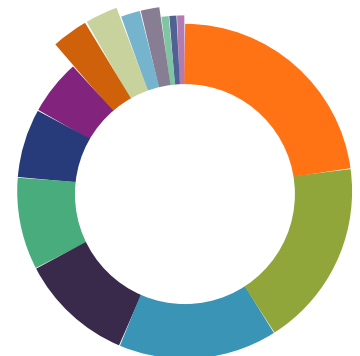


### We also asked with which culture clients most identified:



### CULTURES CLIENTS MOST IDENTIFIED WITH

- |                            |                              |
|----------------------------|------------------------------|
| ● <b>23%</b> Spanish       | ● <b>3%</b> Italian          |
| ● <b>18%</b> Other culture | ● <b>3%</b> West Indian      |
| ● <b>15%</b> Chinese       | ● <b>2%</b> South East Asian |
| ● <b>13%</b> Caribbean     | ● <b>2%</b> Indian           |
| ● <b>7%</b> Mexican        | ● <b>1%</b> Korean           |
| ● <b>6%</b> Halal          | ● <b>1%</b> French           |
| ● <b>5%</b> African        | ● <b>1%</b> Kosher           |



We acknowledge that these results only paint a partial picture of the immense diversity housed within these different identities. For example, the image below shows how different individuals within the above designated “Spanish” culture identify:



Food Bank member agencies prioritize providing services in different languages. **85.5 percent** of Food Bank member agencies reported offering services in languages other than English, with top languages including **Spanish** (82%), **Mandarin Chinese** (22%), and **Haitian Creole** (19%).

Additionally, **13.8 percent** of Food Bank member agencies provided services in at least four different languages and **27.7 percent** provided services in more than four different languages!

Advocating for New Yorkers entails not only being sensitive to specific cultural needs, but to differences in lived experience. According to survey results, these are just a few of the many different communities being served in high volumes across the Food Bank Member Network:



## COMMUNITIES SERVED

The following groups are served in high volumes across the Food Bank Member Network:



**88%** Seniors



**87%** Immigrant Communities



**76%** Latino/Hispanic



**67%** Children



**60%** People experiencing temporary homelessness



**54%** People with disabilities



**36%** Veterans



**31%** LGBTQIA+



**23%** Halal



**20%** Kosher

## CHALLENGES FACED BY THE FOOD BANK MEMBER NETWORK

Though the Food Bank Member Network remained dedicated to fighting food insecurity for all New Yorkers throughout 2022, member agencies faced significant challenges in addition to the rising costs of food and rent soaring across our city. According to the member survey, these are some of the biggest obstacles faced by the network:

### SMALL OPERATING BUDGET

Operating a food pantry or soup kitchen is expensive. In addition to renting out a space, one must consider costs for salaries, food, cooking supplies, utilities, and other expenses.

The median annual operating budget among member agencies is \$125,000. This implies that half of the network is running its organization with a budget of less than \$125,000 each year. In a city as expensive as New York City, this means that many of the food pantries, soup kitchens, shelters, campus pantries, and healthcare partners in the Food Bank Member Network are running their operations on a shoestring budget.

### STAFF SHORTAGES

Much of the Food Bank Member Network operates without any salaried workers, meaning they rely almost exclusively on volunteers to keep the doors open. In fact, nearly half (or **45.7 percent**) of the network runs service without any full-time staff at all. According to the member survey:

- **35.7 percent (or more than one in three member agencies)** operate without any paid staff.
- **The median paid staff (full time and/or part time) is two**, which means half of the network operates with at most two paid staff.
- **The median full-time staff is one staff member**, which means half of the network operates with at most one full-time staff member.



## CURRENT STAFFING CHALLENGES



**35.7%** (or more than 1 in 3) of our member agencies report operating **without any paid staff**



**47.5%** of the network operating **without any full-time staff at all**

Without the generosity of volunteers, many Food Bank member agencies would not be able to keep their operations running. Food Bank member agencies rely on an average of **49 volunteers each month** to help provide services to New Yorkers in need. The median number of volunteers is **20 volunteers each month**.

### RENT ASSISTED OR HIGH RENT

It's no surprise that the rent increases seen across the five boroughs have impacted Food Bank member agencies as well.

- **The median monthly rent among the network is “0” dollars.** This implies that half of the network relies on the generosity of their church or another organization to have a place to operate.
- The average monthly rent among member agencies that need to pay rent is **\$8,940**. This means that the average yearly cost of rent for Food Bank member agencies is over **\$107,000**, a number that is particularly significant when you consider, again, that the median annual operating budget for members is \$125,000.

### HIGH COST OF UTILITIES (ELECTRICITY, GAS, INTERNET, ETC.)

In addition to the high cost of rent to maintain their spaces, member agencies report spending a great deal of money on their monthly utilities with an average overall cost of **\$4,174** on utilities and a median monthly cost of **\$400**.

### LOW EQUIPMENT CAPACITY

While the network is proud to be multi-faceted in its approach to going “beyond food” in service of its neighbors, more than **15 percent** of the network doesn't have a computer on site. Of those with a computer on site, **11.5 percent** do not have an internet connection or Wi-Fi.

DESPITE THESE CHALLENGES, THE NETWORK REMAINS EAGER TO LEARN AND DO MORE

When asked to rank the learning opportunities they would like to take advantage of, the network indicated **Grant Writing, Food Safety, and Nutrition Education** as top opportunities.

Additionally, many member agencies want to provide more nutrition information to their clients and guests. When asked “What nutrition information is your organization interested in giving to clients?” they answered:



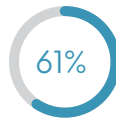
TYPES OF NUTRITION INFORMATION ORGANIZATIONS ARE INTERESTED IN GIVING TO CLIENTS



RECIPES USING AS MANY PANTRY ITEMS AS POSSIBLE



MYPLATE RECOMMENDATIONS



HEALTH TIPS



NUTRITION WORKSHOPS PROVIDED BY FOOD BANK COMMUNITY NUTRITIONISTS



VIDEOS THAT CAN BE PLAYED FOR CLIENTS



WEBINARS TO EDUCATE AND TRAIN PANTRY STAFF AND VOLUNTEERS



NOT INTERESTED AT THIS TIME



OTHER

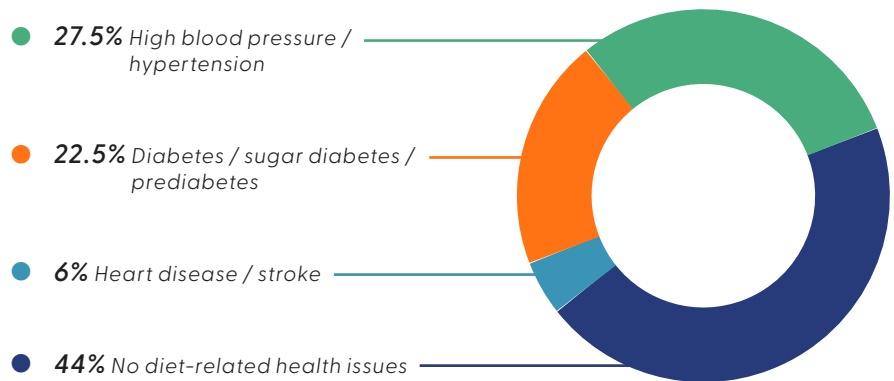
This focus on nutrition is especially important considering the results of our anonymous client survey. According to the data, **56.2 percent** of the people we serve reported being told by a health professional that they have some sort of diet-related health issue, including:

- **High blood pressure / hypertension** (27.5%)
- **Diabetes / sugar diabetes / prediabetes** (22.5%)
- **Heart disease / stroke** (6%)



#### DIET-RELATED HEALTH ISSUES

**56.2 percent** of the people we serve reported being told by a health professional that they have some sort of diet-related health issue.



Respondents from the client survey also reported that they would like to see more produce at distributions, with nearly **85 percent** saying they would like more fresh fruits and vegetables to be made available at food pantries. They would also like to see more low-sodium and heart-healthy food options!

Additionally, **55.7 percent** of clients reported wanting to see foods from their culture at distributions, a matter we take seriously as we continue to expand culturally relevant food options throughout the Food Bank Member Network.

Nearly **85 percent** of survey respondents said they would like more fresh fruits and vegetables to be made available at food pantries. And nearly **38 percent** said they would like to see more low-sodium options.



# POLICY IMPLICATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

As New York City continues to grapple with the economic fallout of the pandemic, many New Yorkers face continued hardship and food insecurity as rising costs of living and inflation widen the gap between resources and food needed for families.

Compounding this hardship is the abrupt end of programs that are proven to lift families out of poverty including enhanced earned income and child tax credits and increases to SNAP allotments. In the face of these ongoing challenges, Food Bank For New York City and our network of member partners continues to serve New Yorkers who visit our doors. The survey responses within this report make clear the best paths for addressing food insecurity through policy change and are summarized below.



## Fortify our community food distribution system

**Expand Federal, State, and City support for food supply at food banks, food pantries, soup kitchens, and other community food distribution programs.**

Common challenges reported by the network include increased demand for food, low operating budgets, and capacity limitations. The report shows the need for leveraging our collective community connection and reach, to advocate for **expanding Federal, State, and City funding for food supply** throughout the network. New York City and State must expand the investment in food assistance to increase supply and ensure capacity grants are available to agencies providing food distribution. New York State should fully fund the **Hunger Prevention and Nutrition Assistance Program (HPNAP)** and **Nourish New York (NNY)**, critical anti-hunger programs that provide fresh, locally sourced food.

In Congress, the **Farm Bill reauthorization** oversees a wide range of programs including the cornerstones of our national anti-hunger policy such as the **Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP)**, commodity food programs like **The Emergency Food Assistance Program (TEFAP)**, and the **Commodity**

**Supplemental Food Program (CSFP).** These policies protect our communities from hunger and create a more just food system for all.

New York City should maximize the opportunity to invest in flexible and innovative programs that can address emerging needs such as **mobile and school-based food pantries and client-choice models.**

**Serve community need by expanding food choice, access, and availability of culturally appropriate, minimally processed, frozen, fresh, and sustainably produced foods.**

Survey responses highlighted the unique and varied needs of our neighbors and for **expanding food choice, access, and availability** of culturally relevant, minimally processed frozen, fresh, and sustainably produced foods. Congress must strengthen TEFAP by expanding the availability of fresh food and culturally significant foods, including **Kosher and Halal** products produced by diverse growers that support local and regional food systems.

**Expand initiatives to increase access to needed non-food items, such as hygiene products, for distribution at food assistance programs.**

95 percent of the network is stepping up to provide services beyond food. Policy makers should expand initiatives that **increase access to needed non-food items** including diapers and personal hygiene items for distribution at community programs that provide food assistance.



**Expand access and participation in nutrition assistance and education programs for New Yorkers of all ages**

**Expand the impact of nutrition assistance benefits by addressing benefit level insufficiency and expanding benefit access and eligibility for low-income households.**

With SNAP Emergency Allotments in place, 30 percent of NYC households that accessed SNAP also visited the food assistance network. Today, as families face the end of Emergency Allotments, New York State must step up to protect New Yorkers from a Hunger Cliff by creating a supplemental food assistance benefit. Our local leaders should join the NYC Congressional Delegation to ensure a strong Farm Bill that **expands access and remove barriers to Federal food assistance programs like SNAP and WIC** and addresses benefit sufficiency by adopting the Low Cost Food Plan to calculate benefits.

**Expand investment that increases participation in nutrition assistance programs including school and summer meals by expanding access, investing in community outreach partnerships, and lowering barriers to participation.**

Survey responses demonstrate that the community food assistance network alone cannot bridge the meal gap. Nutrition assistance programs including **grocery benefits, school, and summer meals** are vital resources to families experiencing food insecurity. Policy makers should work to connect New Yorkers to these programs by expanding access, investing in community outreach partnerships, and lowering barriers to participation. Anti-hunger priorities such as universal school meals and investment in **New York State's Nutrition Outreach and Education Program (NOEP)**, which helps connect people to SNAP, help the Food Bank For New York City network meet the increased need for food assistance.



## **Fight Poverty and Inequity to End Hunger**

**Expand affordable access to essential needs including housing, healthcare, childcare, and education for all New York households while addressing nutrition needs of food insecure households.**

78 percent of Food Bank member agencies reported partnering with at least one other organization in 2022 to increase the reach of its services. Advocacy to prevent food insecurity must also **ensure affordable access to basic needs**, such as housing, healthcare, childcare, and education for all New York households while addressing nutrition needs of food insecure households.

**Expand anti-poverty income policy including living wage, paid time off, the Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC), and Child Tax Credit (CTC) and support community resiliency by adopting economic, environmental, and budget policy to further social equity and justice.**

As New Yorkers face rising costs of living due to inflation, too many families compromise on food when faced with fixed bills like rent, health and childcare, and transportation. Fighting food insecurity demands fighting for **anti-poverty income policies** like living wage, paid time off, expansion of the Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC), and targeted Child Tax Credit (CTC) for low-income households.



## CONCLUSION

The results from our client and member agency surveys emphasize an urgent community need for more nutritious, culturally relevant food across the five boroughs, a need that has only grown in the face of rising food and rent costs.

Food Bank For New York City's Member Network is resilient and will continue to close the gaps for New Yorkers in need, but is also overwhelmed with its own unique set of challenges, from dwindling food supply and limited access to support for capacity expansion.

At a time when 1.6 million New Yorkers are facing food insecurity, it's more important than ever to fortify our city's hunger-relief organizations with the resources they need to continue serving their neighbors with the dignity and care they deserve.