

Food Bank For New York City testimony
for the
New York City Council Committee on General Welfare
on the
Executive Budget Hearing
May 6, 2024

My name is Nicholas Buess, and I am Director of Government Relations at Food Bank For New York City (Food Bank). Thank you, Chairs Brannan and Ayala, committee members and staff for all the work you do to fight food insecurity and poverty.

On April 26, Mayor Eric Adams released the FY25 New York City Executive Budget proposal. This budget totals \$111.6 billion, an increase of \$2.2 billion over the \$109.4 billion preliminary budget plan released in January, and is \$4 billion more than the current budget. As the Mayor announced earlier this year, higher than predicted revenue allowed the administration to restore some spending cuts and to baseline some funding that had previously utilized temporary federal stimulus funds.

With this new budget proposal, Food Bank applauds the Mayor's plans to roll back programmatic cuts and to make permanent pandemic era programs that New Yorkers have come to rely on. The Executive Budget proposal restores funding for programs that connect people to food such as funding for school meals, home delivered meals for seniors, Pre-K and 3K enrollment, NYC Benefits, and the MyCity portal.

Unfortunately, **the Mayor's most recent budget proposal continues to include cuts to funding levels for Community Food Connection (CFC), New York City's only baseline funding for food assistance food pantries and soup kitchens.** Further, there are also outstanding questions about commitments to other existing City-sponsored food security programs, including **congregate meals at Older Adult Centers** and **Groceries to Go**. The Council forecasts more than \$1 billion in revenue is still available to restore additional cuts. We hope these important programs will be fully funded in the final budget, including **\$60 million for NYC's Community Food Connection which provides essential food to many of our City's Food Pantries and Soup Kitchens.**

FOOD BANK FOR NEW YORK CITY

Food Bank For New York City empowers New Yorkers to achieve food security by distributing food to over 800 member and community organizations throughout the five boroughs. **Since 1983, we have distributed nearly 1.5 billion meals, including 60 million meals last year.** As a member of Feeding NYS and Feeding America, Food Bank partners with our colleagues to advance state and federal policy that protects people from hunger.

Our **Campus Pantry** programs provides food for students at public grade schools and colleges across the city at nearly 80 locations in 35 City Council districts. Food Bank's **Mobile Pantry** program has expanded in response to growing need, targeting gaps in the food assistance network where programs have closed, do not exist, or simply need more capacity to serve the long lines in their neighborhoods. These distributions are flexible and can be deployed across the 5 boroughs, providing shelf-stable items, frozen protein options, and seasonal fresh produce, allowing for a selection of items based on preference and the dietary needs of their household and for culturally relevant foods to better meet the needs of the different communities being served. Innovative distribution models like mobile pantries play a significant role in filling gaps that member agencies are struggling to address due to capacity issues and an increased demand for food resources. They allow the flexibility and

mobility to serve children and families and the public living in low-income communities of color who face the most food insecurity and have low levels of affordable food access.

In addition to food assistance, our financial empowerment services connect people to **SNAP benefits** and provide **free income tax preparation, which put \$77 million back into the pockets** of low-income New Yorkers last year alone and stimulated the economies of our local communities. Food Bank expands the ability of community-based organizations to connect New Yorkers to SNAP through training on outreach, eligibility screening, and application assistance, and convenes **New York City's SNAP Taskforce**. The Taskforce brings together community-based SNAP advocates and NYC's Department of Social Services/Human Resources Administration (DSS/HRA) to share policy updates, provide ongoing technical assistance, and implement our innovative **SNAP Mediation Model**. This Mediation Model improves cooperation between NYC non-profit providers and DSS/HRA staff in our joint effort to improve benefits access. The Model helps DSS/HRA identify and eliminate existing systemic barriers, reduce the need for future mediation and Fair Hearing cases, and ensure New Yorkers receive critical food assistance faster.

Our nutrition education programming reaches New Yorkers of all ages – including over 50 DOE schools through our **CookShop** program and 50 community-based organizations through our **Just Say Yes to Fruits and Vegetables** program.

Community Need

Food pantries, soup kitchens and community-based organizations are on the frontline of ensuring food security for our most vulnerable neighbors. Our network of community partners is being asked to do more with less, as the high cost of food and sunsetting of pandemic resources strain household budgets, the food assistance network is rising to meet the increased need for food and other necessities, including among migrants and asylum seekers. While our network of food assistance providers serve people without questioning immigration status, many partners report serving an increased number of migrants and asylum seekers.

According to the 2023 NYC True Cost of Living Report, 50% of NYC families do not have sufficient resources to meet their needs. As food prices and cost of living continue to outpace wages and resources, the demand experienced by the food assistance network remains significantly higher than pre-pandemic levels. **Visits to the food assistance network have increased 80% since pre-pandemic levels, with nearly 1.2 million New Yorkers experiencing food insecurity.**

At the same time, federal pandemic-era increases in food benefits and food supply at food pantries and soup kitchens has expired. Despite the proven ability to reduce poverty rates, especially among children, resources such as enhanced **federal earned income and child tax credits**, increases to **SNAP allotments**, and robust **food assistance support** are ending at a time when New Yorkers have been cutting back at the grocery store and increasingly turning to food assistance organizations.

INVESTMENTS IN FOOD ASSISTANCE CAPACITY & INNOVATION

The FY25 budget must invest resources to help mitigate the coming rise in food insecurity in New York City and provide support to the CBOs on the ground at the frontlines of the fight against hunger. The work of Food Bank and our member organizations would not be possible without support from City government funding from the Council and agencies. As the Council and the Administration negotiate the next budget, we urge our Council Members to continue to advocate to protect and enhance funding for direct food assistance, benefits outreach and access, and city-wide food initiatives.

Food Assistance at Food Pantries and Soup Kitchens

In the FY25 budget, New York City must support its food assistance program, the **Community Food Connection (CFC)**, formerly known as the Emergency Food Assistance Program (EFAP), with additional funding. We join our anti-hunger coalition partners in calling for \$30M in baseline funding and a total of **\$60M to CFC to account for rising food costs, providing more fresh produce, and meeting the continued elevated need.**

City Council Food Initiatives

We thank the New York City Council for their ongoing support of key food security initiatives including **Food Pantries** (FY24 total \$7.26 million) and **Food Access & Benefits** (FY24 total \$1.5 million). The Food Pantries initiative provides grants to food pantries and soup kitchens, supporting hundreds of organizations in every corner of our City. The Food Access & Benefits initiative includes funding to Food Bank for income support services including SNAP outreach and assistance, direct service referral network, and our free income tax assistance program – work that in FY23 alone put \$77 million back into the pockets of New Yorkers, providing essential resources for household food budgets. Food Bank is proud to partner with the Council on these initiatives and **supports enhanced funding in FY25 to ensure that these services help more New Yorkers achieve food security.**

Connecting New Yorkers to Benefits and Assistance

We applaud the Administration for announcing continued funding of **\$10 million** for *NYC Benefits* program in FY25 to ensure current providers can continue this vital work of benefits outreach and assistance. Food Bank supports the efforts of administration in improving the administration of critical food benefits, and applauds the efforts of HRA/DSS for clearing the backlog of SNAP applications. More can and must be done to streamline benefits access to ensure New Yorkers can quickly and easily access critical benefits to which they are entitled. To that end, we support the Mayor's inclusion **\$8M for the implementation of a comprehensive MyCity portal** in FY25.

Additional City-wide Priorities

School Food

We support the restoration of recent cuts to school food funding, and the ability of schools to bring back popular menu items that students enjoy, and to invest in infrastructure like cooking facilities to ensure school meals are both nutritious and delicious. While all NYC students have received free breakfast and lunch since September 2017, **1 in 4 children in the city remain food insecure**, according to recent data. School meals are an important resource for families and an investment in our future. Providing free, healthy meals at school is a proven strategy to help make sure kids have enough to eat, helps them focus, improves attendance, improves test scores, gives kids more energy, and regulates their mood. We must now ensure that the nutritional content of school food does not suffer, especially as more students enter the system.

Congregate and Home Delivered Meals for Older Adults

The budget must support older adults facing food insecurity by increasing investment in meals provided via Department For the Aging (DFTA) Older Adult Centers (OAC) and home delivered meals program. Support for this work must include an increase to the per meal reimbursement rate to keep up with increasing need for meal service and participation at OACs and the increasing costs of food, preparation and service. We support the Mayor's inclusion of \$60.7M for 4.8 million home delivered meals in FY25, and ask that OACs also receive adequate funding necessary to provide their valuable services.

Groceries to Go

Begun in response to the pandemic, Groceries to Go has evolved into a prescription meal delivery program providing a grocery benefit to uninsured New Yorkers with health conditions that have a proven link to diet, such as hypertension and diabetes. This program serves thousands of New Yorkers, and we encourage Groceries to Go to continue receiving **at least \$10 million funding**, ensure ongoing service to current participants, and to expand and meet this need.

CONCLUSION

While we see some promising investments in the Mayor's executive budget, we must remain vigilant and stand with our network of direct service organizations who have the expertise and community connection to protect our neighbors from hunger. We are eager to collaborate with the Council to ensure that New Yorkers have access to the resources they need not only to survive but also to thrive. Thank you for your time and for giving us the opportunity to testify today.