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Testimony prepared by

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for the

Committee on General Welfare

on

Hunger in New York City

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on behalf of

Food Bank For New York City

INTRODUCTION

Good afternoon and thank you, Chairperson Levin and members of the General Welfare Committee. My name is Triada Stampas and I am the Vice President for Research and Public Affairs at Food Bank For New York City. Food Bank appreciates the opportunity to present testimony today to the City Council about hunger in New York City.

First, Food Bank For New York City thanks the City Council for your continued commitment to addressing the issue of hunger and ensure 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 as it is experienced by the emergency food network – the almost one thousand food pantries, soup kitchens, shelters and community-based programs that act as the last line of defense against hunger for nearly 1.4 million New York City residents. If poverty and food insecurity rates are any indication, the recovery that began more than five years ago has been barely perceptible to those struggling to make their way up from the bottom rungs of the economic ladder. Food pantries and soup kitchens, already experiencing need beyond the network's capacity, saw more even more people on their lines when SNAP benefits were cut one year ago this month.¹

One year later, these SNAP cuts have deprived low-income New Yorkers of millions of meals, and need for emergency food remains at elevated levels. In the most urgent terms possible, Food Bank calls for a forceful response to our City's hunger crisis, with a coherent and aggressive strategy shared by governmental and nongovernmental players alike.

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.² 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 last November's SNAP cut – a reduction of approximately \$18 per month.³

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 food⁴ – evidence that a meal gap remains.**

¹ "Visitor Traffic Increases at Emergency Food Providers Post-SNAP Cuts." Food Bank For New York City. January 2014.

² United States Department of Agriculture (USDA). July 2014.

³ 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.

⁴ *Hunger's New Normal: Redefining Emergency in Post-Recession New York City*. Food Bank For New York City. October 2013.

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.**⁵

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.⁶ Since the start of the recession, 250 food pantries and soup kitchens across the five boroughs have closed their doors, leaving those remaining to confront elevated need.⁷

Given these statistics, it should come as little surprise that the efforts of the emergency food network fall short of completely providing for the needs of food-impooverished New Yorkers. Indeed, **after the last soup kitchen meal is served and the last pantry bag distributed, our city's meal gap remains more than 100 million meals wide.**⁸

THE HUNGER CLIFF, ONE YEAR LATER: >56M MEALS LOST SO FAR

One year ago this month, sweeping cuts to SNAP benefits took effect, the result of an unfulfilled promise by the White House and Congressional leaders to reverse a deal struck in the December 2010 "Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act" to pay for a \$0.06-per-meal increase in federal school lunch reimbursements by reducing household SNAP benefits

The SNAP cuts have resulted in a **loss of more than 56 million meals** for New York City residents in the first 11 months since they took effect.⁹ 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.¹⁰

Nearly one year later, a follow-up survey finds 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:

⁵ 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.

⁶ By economists' definitions, the recession, which began in December 2007, ended in June 2009.

⁷ *Serving under Stress Post-Recession: The State of Food Pantries & Soup Kitchens Today*. (2012). Food Bank For New York City.

⁸ Food Bank For New York City estimate based on FeedNYC data.

⁹ "The Hunger Cliff, One Year Later: 56 Million Meals Lost; Need for Emergency Food Remains High." Food Bank For New York City. Nov. 2014.

¹⁰ "Visitor Traffic Increases at Emergency Food Providers Post-SNAP Cuts." Food Bank For New York City. January 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 2013.¹¹

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 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

BUDGET AND POLICY STRATEGIES TO CLOSE NYC’S MEAL GAP

Closing our City’s 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. Because the emergency food system relies heavily on donations, variety, quality and availability of product can vary widely. 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.

The now-baselined funding of the City Council initiative that supplemented EFAP by \$1.3 million for food (and \$200,000 for SNAP outreach) 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 2007.¹² 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.

¹¹ “The Hunger Cliff, One Year Later: 56 Million Meals Lost; Need for Emergency Food Remains High.” Food Bank For New York City. Nov. 2014.

¹² 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.

- 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.

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 earlier this 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).

SCHOOL MEALS

Maximizing participation in school meals, through adoption of Universal School Meals (USM) and expansion of Breakfast after the Bell, will not only provide hundreds of thousands of New York City children with access to a nutritious breakfast and lunch, it will also help close New York City’s meal gap.

New York City now has two federal incentives for providing USM: the Community Eligibility Provision (CEP) and Provision 2. CEP provides federal reimbursement of school meals in high-need schools determined by a formula indexed to the proportion of students who are categorically eligible for free school meals through their participation in other federal means-tested programs (like SNAP, Temporary Assistance to Needy Families, and Medicaid) or because of their status as homeless or in foster care. This is a fully paperless process that entirely does away with the submission and processing of school meals applications – thus reducing administrative resource needs. Last year, CEP was implemented only in District 75 schools.

Provision 2 provides USM on a four- to six-year cycle, with school meals applications required only in the first year of the cycle. While it does not entirely eliminate the administrative burden associated with the forms, it significantly reduces that burden. Provision 2 has been implemented in hundreds of New York City public schools and has been shown to increase school meal participation, most dramatically in participating high schools. Regrettably, the Department of Education has chosen to reduce the number of schools receiving USM through Provision 2 at a time of such high need.

- Food Bank For New York City applauds the City Council for providing funding in the current budget to make USM possible in our city’s middle schools. We encourage the City Council to work with the new Administration to develop a plan for expanding USM beyond middle

schools, while using CEP and Provision 2 to maximize federal reimbursements and minimize cost to the city.

New York City's public schools have offered universal, free school breakfast since 2004. The breakfast period is scheduled 30 minutes before the start of the school day. Unfortunately, the inconvenience of the program and the stigma associated with participation – the only children in the cafeteria before the start of the school day are those whose parents could not provide them a breakfast at home – conspire to keep participation low. Indeed, in a survey of large school districts, New York City most recently ranked 55th of 57 in school breakfast participation among low-income students.¹³

Breakfast after the Bell allows schools to adopt practices that reduce stigma and increase participation: whether through Breakfast in the Classroom (BIC); “grab-and-go” breakfast; and/or making cafeteria breakfast available through first period. In New York City, BIC is a principal's decision, and while more than 300 schools offer it in at least one classroom, few offer it schoolwide.

- We encourage the Council to work with the Department of Education to make BIC an opt-out, rather than an opt-in, program for schools.
- Recognizing that some schools may need facilities improvements in order to accommodate program necessities and anticipated growth in participation associated with USM and BIC, we encourage the Council to work with the Administration to fund those capital needs.

SUMMER MEALS

The federal Summer Food Service Program (SFSP), commonly known as Summer Meals, provides free lunch and breakfast to children up to (and including) age 18 during the summer months when access to school meals is lost. Summer meals are available at certain schools, as well as at other community-based locations, including parks, pools, playgrounds, libraries and emergency food programs. While New York City's participation rates are higher than the national average, they remain woefully low relative to participation in school meals – summer meals participation is less than 30 percent of the participation of free and reduced-price eligible children in the school meals program.¹⁴ Tellingly, among those households that use emergency food programs and have school-aged children, SFSP participation is little different from the city's participation rate overall.¹⁵ There are clearly opportunities to increase participation and help shrink our city's meal gap.

- We encourage the City Council to work with the Administration to identify appropriate school and non-school sites to act as summer meals sites, as well as to encourage your constituents to take advantage of the availability of free meals for children throughout the summer.
- We welcome collaboration to leverage the reach of the emergency food network to connect families that rely on food pantries and soup kitchens to nearby SFSP sites.

¹³ *School Breakfast: Making It Work in Large Districts, School Year 2012-2013*. Food Research and Action Center. Jan. 2014.

¹⁴ *Hunger Doesn't Take a Vacation: Summer Nutrition Status Report 2014*. Food Research and Action Center. Jun. 2014.

¹⁵ *Hunger's New Normal: Redefining Emergency in Post-Recession New York City*. Food Bank For New York City. 2013.

INCOME SUPPORT & POVERTY REDUCTION PROGRAMS

Approximately one in five adults on food pantry and soup kitchen lines is working.¹⁶ Recognizing that there is no surer way off a food pantry or soup kitchen line than a living wage job, there is much our city can do to support working New Yorkers who are earning too little to afford needed food.

- We urge the City Council to work with the Office of Financial Empowerment in the Department of Consumer Affairs to expand free tax preparation services available to low-income New Yorkers throughout our city. Approximately 20 percent of tax filers eligible for the EITC in New York fail to claim it, and the high-quality free tax assistance services available throughout our city can ensure low-income New Yorkers receive every refund and credit to which they are entitled.
- We encourage the City Council to work with State lawmakers to raise the minimum wage during this legislative session so that full-time workers can be assured of their ability to afford food.

CONCLUSIONS

Cuts to SNAP have had profound repercussions for low-income New Yorkers already struggling to put food on the table. With SNAP benefits reduced, these cuts have placed new demands on front-line services supported by State and City funding. Recognizing the needs of this moment, the Administration and City Council must work together to marshal our city's resources wisely to alleviate the hunger and hardship imposed by Washington's unfulfilled promises. As a city, this is a responsibility we share. The 1.4 million New Yorkers who find themselves turning to food pantries and soup kitchens for needed food deserve no less.

¹⁶ *Hunger's New Normal: Redefining Emergency in Post-Recession New York City*. Food Bank For New York City. 2013.