



**Testimony of Jill Berry, First Deputy Commissioner
New York City Department of Social Services**

**Before the New York City Council,
Committee on General Welfare, Committee on Aging, Subcommittee on Senior
Centers and Food Insecurity
Oversight, Food Insecurity in New York City Hearing
April 19, 2023**

Good morning. My name is Jill Berry and I serve as the First Deputy Commissioner at the Department of Social Services (DSS). I would like to thank Deputy Speaker Ayala, Chair Hudson, Chair Mealy, and the members of the Committee on General Welfare, Committee on Aging, and the Subcommittee on Senior Centers and Food Insecurity for holding today's hearing on Food Insecurity in New York City. I am happy to have the opportunity for the Department of Social Services to offer testimony.

I want to begin by relaying a message to any New Yorker who is currently experiencing food insecurity: We are here to help. You can call 311 or visit foodhelp.nyc.gov to find nearby food pantries and community kitchens; in addition, Access HRA and our Benefits Access Centers serve as further resources to connect with assistance.

As the Mayor's Office of Food Policy has outlined in the *Food Metrics Report*, "food insecurity is the lack of access, at times, to enough nutritionally adequate food for an active, healthy life for all members of a household. Food insecure families may worry that food will run out before they have enough money to buy more, eat less than they should, or be unable to afford to eat balanced meals."

The City of New York serves as an active partner in combatting food insecurity. The nation's largest municipal social services agency, DSS assists approximately three million New Yorkers every year, administering critical programs that provide greater food security to vulnerable New York City households.

The Department of Social Services administers critical programs that connect New Yorkers to the food assistance they need. The Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) helps approximately 1.7 million New Yorkers access nutritious food; the average monthly number of SNAP recipients aged 65 or older in FY 2022 was approximately 360,000 New Yorkers. Community Food Connection (formerly known as the Emergency Food Assistance Program, EFAP) funds more than 600 community kitchens and food pantries across the city. Community Food Connection (CFC) distributed more than 17.7 million pounds of shelf stable and frozen foods in FY 2022. Community kitchens provide hot meals and food pantries provide groceries for clients to prepare meals at home.

The new name reflects the critical role food pantries and community kitchens play in addressing food insecurity across communities citywide, ensuring that everyone has access to fresh, healthy food. DSS CFC's new emergency food distribution model, which launched in September 2022, provides an increased variety of food, including fresh produce, dairy, shelf-stable foods, frozen foods, and more flexibility when ordering and scheduling deliveries.

Additionally, we have progressively pursued culturally sensitive food options in our CFC offerings. For the first time, CFC is providing Halal certified proteins; CFC offerings have also expanded the number of options for Kosher certified foods. In addition to religious dietary needs, we recognize the diversity of our New York communities and endeavor to provide foods people are used to and grew up with. Cultural sensitivity is a shared value; we appreciate your work as a Council in uplifting the need to be intentional in pursuing more culturally sensitive food options and we will continue to work with CFC partners to achieve that aim.

Outreach is an essential component of our work – we have a responsibility to not only make assistance available but make New Yorkers aware that the City is a partner in food security. To that end, the DSS Office of Community Outreach (OCO) conducts targeted outreach campaigns to organizations serving specific populations, including older adults, the LGBTQI community, persons with disabilities, and immigrant communities. OCO conducts presentations and attends resource fairs, farmers markets, and other events to promote SNAP awareness and increase engagement. In addition, SNAP Support Services works to educate the public about SNAP benefits to maximize the City's use of available federal programs to increase the purchasing power of low-income New Yorkers. SNAP Support Services also provides SNAP trainings and presentations, prescreens potentially

eligible applicants, and assists with the SNAP application process. As I mentioned at the start of my testimony: New Yorkers in need of assistance should call 311, visit foodhelp.nyc.gov to find nearby food pantries and community kitchens, or reach us through Access HRA or our Benefits Access Centers.

While we endeavor to support a range of nutritious food options at pantries, it is important to remember that external events that impact the national food system also impact local pantries. Supply chain disruptions, inflation, and other external shocks that have consequences for the corner bodegas, supermarkets, and grocery stores also have real consequences for our food pantries.

As a City, we work to be the best partner we can in helping pantries account for the seasonality of items and use funds in the most cost effective ways to get the most out of taxpayer dollars used to support food pantries' important work. We should also keep in mind that as the federal government and New York State government wind down COVID pandemic-related emergency food assistance measures, lines of funding that were available in the past are reduced or halted altogether; some one-time payments have already ended. For example, February 2023 marked the final month of federal funding for supplemental benefits for SNAP (Emergency Allotment of Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program benefits). Food pantries also receive lines of funding from multiple levels of government – thus advocacy on the State and Federal levels to be conscious of the challenges food pantries face remains important. Indeed, we value the Council's support and advocacy in reaching out to partners across government to highlight the importance of tackling food insecurity and mobilizing resources to meet neighborhood's needs.

On benefits processing – I would like to reiterate several points made by Acting Commissioner Park when she testified before the Council in March. The COVID-19 pandemic caused extraordinary adversity and resulted in an increase in demand for public benefits; relative to January 2019, January 2023 SNAP applications were up 67%. Throughout, we have pursued steps to streamline the process, make the best use of technology, adapt our systems, and mobilize our teams to accommodate New Yorkers' needs. We prioritized frontline staff hiring, we sought and obtained waivers from State and federal partners, and our teams connected more New Yorkers to benefits than in recent pre-pandemic years, with 1.77 million New Yorkers receiving SNAP benefits – the highest number since 2014. We remain focused on solutions to deliver for our fellow New Yorkers.

We appreciate the opportunity to testify today, and we welcome your questions.

Thank you.