



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

**Before the New York City Council Committee on General Welfare
Oversight, Hunger and Food Insecurity in New York City Hearing
May 29, 2024**

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 and the members of the Committee on General Welfare for holding today's hearing on Hunger and Food Insecurity in New York City.

There are many faces of food insecurity: a child going to school hungry in the morning, a parent laying awake at night wondering how they'll put the next meal on the table, a pregnant person seeking nutritious options as a part of their diet to foster healthy prenatal development. Because food security intersects with so many aspects of our well-being, it is essential that our City continue to build on efforts to be a strong partner in aiding food insecure households.

DSS serves as an integral part of a safety net that includes the NYC Department of Health and Mental Hygiene (DOHMH) and the Mayor's Office of Food Policy, as well as a panoply of community stakeholders including neighborhood older adult centers, our houses of worship, and community-based organizations. Collectively, this array of institutions participate in tackling the challenge of food insecurity. Our shared commitment stems from our understanding that everyone deserves the peace of mind that comes with food security.

If anyone listening is facing food insecurity, know there is help available. You can call 311 or visit foodhelp.nyc.gov to find nearby food pantries and community kitchens. Access HRA, our mobile app, and our Benefits Access Centers serve as further resources where clients can apply for benefits. I also want to take this opportunity to encourage those clients receiving SNAP to learn more about the DOHMH food access initiatives including: Health Bucks, Half Off Farm Box, Get the Good Stuff, and Groceries to Go. All assist in strengthening a network of healthy food options for New Yorkers.

The Department of Social Services is responsible for administering programs crucial to uplifting food security. The Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) helps approximately 1.8 million New Yorkers access nutritious food. The Community Food Connection (CFC) funds 699 food pantries and community kitchens across the five boroughs. CFC served more than 25.9 million people (duplicated) in FY 2024. The CFC model has created added flexibility for providers

to distribute the mix of foods that best meet the needs of the communities they serve including fresh produce, Halal certified proteins and Kosher certified foods, among many other options.

As highlighted by Mayor Adams earlier this year, DSS is happy to report that we have functionally eliminated the previously reported backlogs of Cash Assistance and SNAP applications that peaked at more than 50,000 combined cases, ensuring low-income New Yorkers can quickly and easily access the federal benefit for which they qualify. Investments in staffing, technology, and process improvements has reduced the backlog of cases by 99 and 92 percent, respectively. In total, DSS processed more than 600,000 Cash Assistance and SNAP applications during this period. Faced with a record number of applications as federal pandemic-related support expired, DSS deployed a robust plan to process outstanding applications quickly and make it easier for low-income New Yorkers to access critical benefits. DSS hired nearly 1,000 new staff since January 2023 to process both Cash Assistance and SNAP applications, doubled down on training for staff, and strengthened remote application processes to make it easier to apply for benefits. This achievement could not have been completed without the hard work of our dedicated staff who service millions of New Yorkers every day.

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 increase SNAP awareness and engagement. In addition, DSS works through various channels 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. OCO 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. New Yorkers can also be connected to a community based organization (CBO) to get help with SNAP enrollment, as well as other benefits, by calling 311 or visiting the HRA website ("Find a Partner Organization" <https://www.nyc.gov/site/hra/partners/find-a-partner-organization.page>). In addition, DSS participates in monthly SNAP Task Force meetings, chaired by Food Bank for New York City, to provide updates and answer questions from participating CBOs.

In 2023, DSS conducted a total of eighty-one trainings, which included 1,730 attendees, in using these tools to submit SNAP and other benefit applications; and provide benefit case management via Access HRA. Training attendees include staff from other municipal agencies and community partner organizations, including older adult center staff. These trainings were also a forum for questions and concerns from providers and advocates working directly with HRA and DHS clients, including older adults.

We must also recognize the challenge of pursuing innovative solutions and approaches in an environment that is severely constrained by stringent federal and State regulations. As the

administrator of multi-billion dollar social services programs, DSS is obligated to adhere to the rubrics set out by State and federal authorities.

One of the more recent and successful collaborations across levels of government has been the response to the theft of SNAP benefits commonly referred to as skimming. Skimming occurs when unscrupulous actors tamper with retail credit card swipe machines and are able to syphon off vital SNAP funds from local clients. In response to the high number of instances stolen funds, DSS worked with our partners on the State and Federal level to create a reimbursement program to assist the clients who rely on these funds. As of May 22nd, 2024, DSS has approved the reimbursement of over 82,000 SNAP claims amounting to more than \$26M in restored benefits. Approved replacement benefits have consistently been added to client EBT cards within 3 days of determination. We look forward to continued collaboration with our State and federal partners to ensure EBT cards are suited with the highest level of security to protect the clients who rely on these benefits. Currently there are proposals to add chip technology to the EBT cards, similar to your average credit card, which will prevent this type of skimming theft. We are supportive of these proposals and are in ongoing conversations with our partners in government to advance this effort.

As the largest social service agency in the nation, it would be criminal of me not to highlight the importance of the federal Farm Bill currently being reviewed and evaluated in Congress. Among several provisions included in this dense piece of legislation, this bill enables the SNAP funds that 1.8 million New Yorkers rely on. Any discussion or entertainment of a cut to the SNAP program would be catastrophic, and put millions at risk of food insecurity including 560,000 children and 530,000 above the age of 60. One in Three New York City renters experience food insecurity. More than half of New Yorkers experiencing food hardship also reported facing health problems. It is essential that this already limited subsidy get maintained at current funding levels or better yet improved. The Adams Administration are actively collaborating with our partners in government as well as the advocacy community to ensure this vital resource is available to New Yorkers in need of food. We encourage the City Council and any other stakeholders to join us advocating for this essential tool in fighting food insecurity.

Shifting to the legislation noticed for this hearing, DSS is reviewing Introduction 28 and is committed to working with our State and Federal partners to improve income and employment verification. We agree on the need to utilize tools to facilitate the process of eligibility determination and client information verification; that is why, presently, DSS engages with external databases and State government partners.

We welcome an opportunity to discuss this legislation with its sponsors further, especially as to what further third-party verification systems or interfaces the bill envisions, and the benefits that would accrue to applicants, clients, and/or the City in using these further third-party verification systems. We stand ready to pursue any additional technologies or tools that facilitate connecting New Yorkers with the benefits and services they rely upon.

Our work as the largest social services agency in the country would not be possible without the generosity, partnership, and commitment of countless fellow New Yorkers. Thank you to the hard working staff at DSS/HRA/DHS and all across government and our community partners who

dedicate their lives to servicing the most vulnerable. Special thanks to the Council and this committee for your support and sustained advocacy on this critical issue.

I appreciate the opportunity to testify and welcome your questions.

Thank you.

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