Human Resources Administration
Department of Homeless Services
Department of Social Services

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Before the New York City Council Committee on General Welfare
Oversight, Hunger and Food Insecurity in New York City Hearing
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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. I am joined today by New York City Human Resources Administration (HRA) Administrator Scott French. We appreciate the Council's continued focus on advancing food security for New Yorkers and the work that DSS and HRA pursue in lifting up New Yorker's 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, Get the Good Stuff, and Groceries to Go. All assist in strengthening a network of healthy food options for New Yorkers.

Food insecurity intersects with many aspects of both individual and community well-being. From poorer school attendance and academic performance to poorer health outcomes including depression, diabetes, heart disease, and other chronic diseases – greater food insecurity results in disparate impacts on low-income communities along multiple important dimensions of our communities' well-being. That is why our City's ongoing efforts to serve as a strong partner in aiding food insecure households matters.

Alongside DSS, our sister agencies and countless community partners serve as part of the safety net to assist food insecure households. Working with colleagues at 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 – we work to tackle the challenges food insecurity presents.

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, including approximately 550,000 children and 545,000 older adults. The Community Food Connection (CFC) funds more than 700 food pantries and community kitchens across the five boroughs. CFC served more than 21.5 million people (duplicated) in FY25 from July 2024 – December 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. Formerly known as the Emergency Food Assistance Program (EFAP), CFC received $57.2M in funding for FY25. From July 2024 through January 2025, CFC has distributed more than 22 million pounds of food.

The Federal Landscape

The federal government is a crucial pillar in advancing the food security of our communities and communities across the country. That is why we continue to monitor developments in Washington DC closely and continue to underscore the importance of the Farm Bill and SNAP. Proposals for federal cuts would have profoundly negative impacts on vulnerable households. The House Plan contemplates eliminating $230 billion from Agriculture funding, which would severely impact SNAP benefits for New Yorkers. Any reduction to SNAP would have a significant impact on New Yorkers who access our and other essential food security programs. To be clear, neither New York City, nor New York state have the budget capacity to replace crucial federal funding.

We encourage the City Council and all stakeholders to speak out on the importance of these crucial tools for fighting food insecurity. These programs need to be retained and augmented. Instead of a conversation centered on cutting these vital programs, we would like the federal conversation to lift up the lived experiences of these vulnerable households. Moreover, understand the multiplier effect SNAP has in our communities. The US Department of Agriculture has estimated the benefit of every dollar used to assist households with SNAP, finding between an additional positive 80 cents impact to $1.79 impact on our communities. That multiplier effect supports employment, helps local businesses, including local supermarkets and bodegas, and contributes to a stronger, more resilient economy.

We would also like to draw the Council's attention to a proposal within the Farm Bill that deeply impacts food insecurity in New York communities. The Thrifty Food Plan, is the model used to determine maximum SNAP benefits, from a holistic approach that accounts for fundamentally important factors in determining benefit levels such as food prices, dietary guideline changes, and purchasing habits. The House Plan proposed doing away with the Thrifty Food Plan. Without a Thrifty Food Plan that includes those components, we lose a crucial pathway for regularly updating SNAP benefits; in addition to the annual cost of living adjustment (COLA), the Thrifty Food Plan provides a key avenue for regularly accommodating the real needs of households. Elimination of the Thrifty Food Plan, would result in $30 billion less in SNAP benefits over 10 years.

We appreciate the Council's partnership in advocating for New York communities and we would like to draw your attention to the timeline of expected federal budgetary action. Foremost on that timeline are the April presidential FY26 budget release, the July House and Senate FY26 appropriations bills release, and the September 30 deadline for Congress to pass FY26 appropriations or a continuing resolution. Your ongoing advocacy is needed to ensure we secure an all-important pillar of protecting New Yorkers' food security.

Outreach

Outreach remains an essential component of our work, upholding our obligation to both make assistance available and make New Yorkers aware that the City serves as 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 2024, DSS conducted a total of eighty trainings, which included 2,123 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.

Legislation

With regard to the legislation being heard today, before the committee are three bills:

- Introduction 245 (Hudson) proposes a report on the feasibility of creating a universal benefits application for local public benefit programs and directive to develop a universal benefits application as determined feasible by the Commissioner of the Department of

Social Services. This bill would also codify Access NYC, which is a screening tool for public assistance programs, direct the incorporation of new and existing programs as deemed possible, and require increased public awareness efforts of such tools.

- Introduction 1028 (Hudson) proposes that the Commissioner of Social Services create a system to automatically enroll individuals in City-created benefit programs, like Fair Fares NYC.

- Introduction 1148 (Cabán) would require DSS to provide an application receipt to any applicant for benefits or services.

We appreciate the goals of easing the benefits application process, reducing the administrative burden placed on applicants, and offering clarity to applicants as to documentation required in a timely fashion. However, DSS is obligated to adhere to the rubrics set out by State and federal authorities governing applications, enrollment, documentation, and timelines. For instance, the USDA Food and Nutrition Service (FNS) has been specific about what our website looks like, and what is permissible and impermissible with respect to application submission (e.g. names, addresses, and signatures).

Next, given the multitude of benefits HRA administers, not to mention other city benefits administered by other agencies, it is difficult to see the nexus between those diverse programs, that would create a common application that is streamlined to support efficient application and assessment. Certain programs, such as Medicaid, may require protected health information to be submitted that is protected by state and federal confidentiality protections. Additionally, the federal government closely monitors and protects the use of information submitted in support of a SNAP application. State and federal privacy laws currently bar us from sharing data across agency databases without authorization; those privacy considerations preclude certain protected information from crossing certain boundaries within DSS, let alone aggregating sensitive information about individuals' residence history, income tax payments, or earnings history on the scale required for automatic enrollment.

Lastly, these bills would substantially impact the processes and workflow DSS uses to assess eligibility, process applications, and make a determination on an application. Providing a receipt and copies of documents submitted may seem like a simple request at first glance – to the extent we can, we are providing receipts. For applicants using Access HRA a receipt which shows the date the application was submitted is made available upon submission of the application. For a client who comes in-person and applies for benefits, a receipt is made available upon request. Our goal is to keep clients informed throughout the application process, this includes when possible making them aware of what documentation is outstanding in Cash Assistance and SNAP applications for instance. In other applications we handle, this receipt and copies mandate is much more complicated, such as for Medicaid applications where a caseworker is conducting a home visit for a client with a medical or mental health condition or disability. The caseworker will not have the ability to print a receipt, nor will they be able to scan and provide copies of submitted

documents while visiting the client in their home. In many cases the documentation would need to be mailed to a client once submitted. There are significant privacy concerns especially as it relates to sending personal health information in the mail; such information could be as varied as Social Security Numbers, lab test results, diagnostic information, notes from health care providers, referral and discharge summaries, prescription details, or information about health conditions. If such documents get in the hands of the wrong person, they could be used for nefarious purposes.

Conclusion

Our work to combat food insecurity, and more broadly as the largest social services agency in the country, would not be possible without the ongoing generosity, partnership, and commitment of countless fellow New Yorkers. Thanks is also due to the tremendously hard-working staff at DSS/HRA/DHS and all across government and our community partners who dedicate their lives to uplifting the most vulnerable. We appreciate the General Welfare Committee and the Council's ongoing contributions and look forward to working in partnership to continue that work.

We also appreciate the opportunity to testify and welcome your questions.

Thank you.

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