

COMMITTEE ON GENERAL WELFARE

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CITY COUNCIL
CITY OF NEW YORK

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TRANSCRIPT OF THE MINUTES

of the

COMMITTEE ON GENERAL WELFARE

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Thursday, April 3, 2025

Start: 10:09 a.m.

Recess: 2:13 p.m.

HELD AT: Committee Room - City Hall

B E F O R E: *Hon. Deputy Speaker, Diana I. Ayala,
Chair*

COUNCIL MEMBERS:

Alexa Avilés

Chris Banks

Tiffany Cabán

Chi A. Ossé

Lincoln Restler

Kevin C. Riley

Althea V. Stevens

Sandra Ung

COMMITTEE ON GENERAL WELFARE
A P P E A R A N C E S

Jill Berry,
First Deputy Commissioner of New York City
Department of Social Services (DSS)

Scott French,
Administrator of the Human Resources
Administration (HRA)

Molly Eckerle,
Policy Associate at the Metropolitan Council on
Jewish Poverty

Joseph Rosenberg,
Executive Director of the Catholic Community
Relations Council

Lakesha Morris,
Division Director for Food and Housing
Stability, Community Outreach Services for
Catholic Charities Community Services

Lynette Brown,
Food Resource Coordinator for Catholic Charities
— Brooklyn and Queens

Shirley de Peña,
Director in the Central Office of Student
Affairs and Liaison to the Campus Resource
Centers and Food Pantries at The City University
of New York (CUNY)

Eric Lee,
Director of Public Policy for Volunteers of
America Greater New York (VOA-GNY)

Rachel Sabella,
Director of No Kid Hungry New York

COMMITTEE ON GENERAL WELFARE
A P P E A R A N C E S (CONTINUED)

Lo Anderson,
Student Engagement Coordinator for CUNY Cares
at The City University of New York (CUNY)

Deborah Berkman,
Project Director of the Shelter and Economic
Stability Project at the New York Legal
Assistance Group (NYLAG)

Naima Dahir,
Arab American Family Support Center (AAFSC)

Kim Moscaritolo,
Director of Communications & Advocacy Hunger
Free America

Nicholas Buess,
Director of Food Bank For New York City

Stephen Grimaldi,
Executive Director of New York Common Pantry;
Representative of The Roundtable: Allies for
Food Access

Anita Kwok,
Policy Analyst United Neighborhood Houses (UNH)

Jeanette Estima,
Director, Policy and Advocacy Citymeals on Wheels

Jenny Veloz,
Policy and Advocacy Associate
Citizens' Committee for Children of New York

Leah Eden,
Executive Director of Equity Advocate

Debipriya Chatterjee,
Senior Economist at the Community Service Society
of New York (CSS)

COMMITTEE ON GENERAL WELFARE
A P P E A R A N C E S (CONTINUED)

Martina Santos,
Board Member of the West Side Campaign Against
Hunger (WSCAH)

Liz Ward, M.P.A.,
Senior Program Assistant, New York Health
Foundation

Angie Vega,
Assistant Director of the Children's Health Fund

Alex Hughes,
Senior Director of Hunger Prevention and Advocacy
at Project Hospitality

Marcus Jackson,
Aging Friendly Community Organizer at Encore
Community Services

Christopher Leon Johnson,
Self

Sharon Brown,
Self

William Flynn,
Director of Government Benefits Unit; Disability
Advocacy Unit; LGBTQ+/HIV Advocacy Project;
Veterans Justice Unit at Legal Services NYC

Adriana Beltran,
Senior Deputy Director of Programs at Woodside on
the Move

Andrew Sta. Ana,
Interim Co-Executive Director at Asian American
Foundation (AAF)

Pernell S. Brice, III,
Vice President of Policy & Advocacy for
Children's Health Fund

COMMITTEE ON GENERAL WELFARE
A P P E A R A N C E S (CONTINUED)

Barbara Hughes,
Executive Director of City Beets Kitchens at
Project Renewal

Jacob Zychick,
Community Advocacy Director at the American Heart
Association

SERGEANT LEWIS: Mic check, mic check, this is a mic check for the Committee on General Welfare. Today's date is April 3, 2025 in the Committee Room – recorded by Walter Lewis.

SERGEANT AT ARMS: Quiet down, please. Good morning, and welcome to today's New York City Hearing for the Committee on General Welfare. At this time, we ask that you silence all electronic devices.

At no time is anyone to approach the dais. If you have questions throughout the hearing, or would like to sign up for in-person testimony, please see one of the Sergeant at Arms.

Chair Ayala, we are ready to begin.

CHAIRPERSON AYALA: [Gavel]

Good morning, everyone, and welcome to today's hearing. My name is Diana Ayala, and I am the Deputy Speaker of the New York City Council and the Chair of the General Welfare Committee.

Today, we holding our annual oversight hearing Oversight Hearing on Hunger and Food Insecurity in New York City.

We will also be hearing three bills:

The first intro, Introduction 245, sponsored by Council Member Hudson, is A Local Law that would

require the Department of Social Services to report on the feasibility and creation of a universal benefits application for local public benefits programs.

Next, Introduction 1028, also sponsored by Council Member Hudson, would require DSS to create a system to automatically enroll individuals in City-created benefit programs, like Fair Fares NYC, and to notify individuals about the system including how to opt out.

Finally, Introduction 1148, sponsored by Council Member Cabán, would require DSS to provide an application receipt to any applicant for benefits of service.

Moving on to our oversight topic for today, every year, the Committee on General Welfare holds a hearing on Hunger and Food Insecurity, recognizing the growing challenges around these issues for too many New Yorkers. We know that poverty and food insecurity overlap, and we also know that people of color, as well as those living with disabilities and chronic health conditions, are more likely to experience food insecurity.

Food costs have grown significantly since 2019. Pandemic era supply chains disruptions, rising labor costs, increased operating costs paired with high inflation have made grocery prices volatile. Wages have not grown in line with inflation, and families are struggling to meet their basic needs including ensuring that they have access to sufficient nutritious food.

Additionally, federal social safety net programs like the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) and Medicaid are at risk of significant cuts, which would make New Yorkers even more reliant on City programs like Community Food Connection.

Already the Local Food Purchasing Assistance Program and the Local Food For School Program, which provide federal funds to food pantries and schools to purchase food from local farms and ranchers has been cut. The LFPA was used to fund the statewide New York Food for New Yorkers Families Program, with organizations running food pantries and soup kitchens in New York City amongst its many grantees now facing a funding gap.

I look forward to hearing from the Administration and advocates today about the challenges faced by

those who are working hard to feed New Yorkers in need, and ways in which we can better collaborate to make sure that no one goes hungry in New York City.

At this time, I well... I would have acknowledged my colleagues, but they're not here yet. I'm sure that they will be here anytime soon.

But I would like to acknowledge the Committee staff who has worked hard to prepare this hearing.

Sahar Moazami, Assistant Deputy Director; Penina Rosenberg, Legislative Policy Analyst; Julia Haramis, Finance Unit Head; Elisabeth Childers-Garcia, Financial Analyst, Anne Driscoll, Data Scientist; and my finally my Chief of Staff, Elsie Encarnacion.

I will now turn it over to the committee counsel to swear in the members of the Administration.

COMMITTEE COUNSEL: Good morning, will you please raise your right hand? Do you affirm to tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth, before this committee, and to respond honestly to council member questions?

FIRST DEPUTY COMMISSIONER BERRY: Yes.

ADMINISTRATOR FRENCH: Yes.

COMMITTEE COUNSEL: Thank you, you may begin when ready.

FIRST DEPUTY COMMISSIONER BERRY: Thank you.

Good morning, my name is Jill Berry, and I serve as the First Deputy Commissioner at the Department of Social Services. I would like to thank Deputy Speaker Ayala and the members of the on Committee on General Welfare for holding today's hearing on Hunger and Food Insecurity in New York City. I'm joined today by New York City Human Resources Administration Administrator, Scott French. We appreciate the Council's continued focus advancing food security for New Yorkers and the work that DSS and HRA pursue in lifting up New Yorkers 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 service further 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 poor school attendance and academic performance to poor 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 community's well-being. This 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 New York City Department of Health 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 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, that's a duplicated number, in FY25 from July 2024 through 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 or EFAP, CFC received \$57.2 million in funding for FY25. From July 2024 through January 2025, CFC has distributed more than 22 million pounds of food.

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, D.C. 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 in 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 U.S. Department of Agriculture has estimated the benefit of every dollar to assist households with SNAP finding between an additional positive 80¢ impact to \$1.79 impact on our community. 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, the 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 ten 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 30th

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 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 conducts targeted outreach campaigns to organizations serving specific populations including older adults, the LGBTQI community, persons with disabilities, and immigrant communities. The Office of Community Outreach 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 City's use of available federal programs to increase the purchasing power of low-income New Yorkers. The Office of Community Outreach 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 one of our Benefits Access Centers. New Yorkers can also be connected to a community based organization to get help with SNAP enrollment as well as other benefits by calling 311 or visiting the HRA website and clicking on the "Find A Partner Organization" section. 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 80 trainings which included 2,123 attendees in using these tools to submit SNAP and other benefits to applications and provide benefit case management via Access HRA. Training attendees include staff from other municipal agencies, 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.

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

Introduction 245, Council Member Hudson, proposes a report on the feasibility of creating a universal benefits app 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, by Council Member Hudson, proposes that the Commissioner of Social Services create a system to automatically enroll individuals in city-created benefits programs – like Fair Fairs NYC.

Introduction 1158, by Council Member 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

1 applicants as to documentation required in a timely
2 fashion. However, DSS is obligated to adhere to the
3 rubric set out by State and federal authorities
4 governing applications, enrollment, documentation,
5 and timelines. For instance, the USDA Food and
6 Nutrition Service, FNS, has been specific about what
7 our website looks like and what is permissible and
8 impermissible with respect to application submission
9 – for example names, addresses, and signatures.
10

11 Next, given the multitude of benefits HRA
12 administers, not to mention other City benefits
13 administered by other agencies, it is difficult to
14 see the nexus between those diverse programs that
15 would create a common application that is streamlined
16 to support efficient application and assessment.
17 Certain programs, such as Medicaid, may require
18 protected health information to be submitted that is
19 protected by state and federal confidentiality
20 protections. Additionally, the federal government
21 closely monitors and protects the use of information
22 submitted in support of a SNAP application. State and
23 federal privacy laws currently bar us from sharing
24 data across certain agency databases without
25 authorization. Those privacy considerations preclude

certain protected information from crossing certain boundaries even within DSS, let alone aggregating sensitive information about individuals' residence history, income tax payments, or earnings histories 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. To the extent we can, 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 varied as Social Security Numbers, lab test results, diagnostic information, notes from healthcare providers, referral and discharge summaries, prescription details, or information about health conditions. If such documents get into the hands of the wrong person, they could be used for nefarious purposes.

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 hardworking 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 test testify and welcome your questions. Thank you.

CHAIRPERSON AYALA: Thank you. I want to acknowledge that we have been joined Council Member Cabán, Council Member Avilés, Council Member Ossé, and Council Member Ung.

And I will now turn it over to Council Member Cabán for her remarks.

COUNCIL MEMBER CABÁN: Thank you, Chair Ayala, for the opportunity to speak today about Intro 1148 of 2024, a bill that I introduced to improve transparency and accountability in our City's benefit application process. This legislation would require DSS and HRA to provide applicants with a receipt whenever they apply for benefits or services.

For years now, chronic underfunding and understaffing under the Adams Administration has left our City agencies inadequately equipped to meet New Yorkers everyday needs. And as a result, when they try to access lifesaving benefits, our residents have struggled with bureaucratic hurdles and systemic

1 barriers that have resulted in unnecessary delays,
2 confusion, and rejections. That's why the Receipts
3 Act would require each applicant to get a receipt
4 with important details such as the date of the
5 application, a list of the documents submitted, a
6 copy of the application, and an explanation of
7 whether the application is complete or if further
8 steps are needed. This simple, but ultimately very
9 important step, would help to ensure that New Yorkers
10 facing some of the most challenging moments of their
11 lives can navigate the process with greater clarity
12 and confidence.

14 The testimony we're going to hear from advocates
15 and organizations today, who serve populations that
16 rely on these services, will demonstrate clearly that
17 this bill is not redundant. It would streamline and
18 expand the mechanisms that currently exist for
19 transparency in the application process. And
20 crucially, this bill would fill important gaps in the
21 application process, strengthening these mechanisms
22 and guaranteeing greater confidence among applicants.
23 Our constituents need this, and I look forward to
24 working with DSS to address their concerns about
25

implementation and make the receipts act work for our community.

This bill is about making sure our constituents can access the basic resources they need to survive. So I hope you'll join me and the two dozen of my colleagues that have already signed on in supporting this important measure, one that will ensure our neighbors are treated with respect and dignity they deserve when applying for critical public benefits. And I hope we'll be able to work collaboratively with the Department to make sure it is implemented effectively and helps plug the existing administrative gaps in our City's essential social welfare system. Thank you.

CHAIRPERSON AYALA: Thank you. Okay, I am going to ask a few questions, and then... I don't know if any of the other council members wanted to a questions? Okay, great.

Good morning. Can you tell us how many providers are currently in the CFC network?

FIRST DEPUTY COMMISSIONER BERRY: We currently have over 700 food pantries and community kitchens in the CFC program across the five boroughs.

CHAIRPERSON AYALA: Are those providers given a set of food grant allowances per month or per year?

FIRST DEPUTY COMMISSIONER BERRY: We do two allocations for six months each. And providers have the flexibility to spend the allocation during that six month period as works for their program.

CHAIRPERSON AYALA: How do you determine how frequently the grant is provided?

FIRST DEPUTY COMMISSIONER BERRY: I'm sorry?

CHAIRPERSON AYALA: So the... you're saying that you give the... The allowance is granted two per every six months?

FIRST DEPUTY COMMISSIONER BERRY: One allowance per provider every six months, so two per fiscal year.

CHAIRPERSON AYALA: Okay. So how do you determine that?

FIRST DEPUTY COMMISSIONER BERRY: So the... we primarily rely on the food, the supply gap analysis that we run that looks at what is the supply of food in the neighborhood and what is the relative need of food in the neighborhood. We have also taken into consideration unemployment rates, the presence of vulnerable populations in particular neighborhoods

such as recipients of SNAP, recipients of cash. For example, we take into consideration the Task Force On Racial Inclusion and Equity Neighborhoods that have been targeted for needs needing additional services. We took into consideration in the last round of allocations the reduction in SNAP benefits. So during COVID, SNAP benefits were set at an elevated level and then they came down at the end of COVID. So we looked at those neighborhoods where populations had a larger loss of SNAP benefits during that time. And lastly, we took into consideration neighborhoods that had large numbers of new emergency shelters that were sited in the neighborhoods and we gave an extra allocation to those.

CHAIRPERSON AYALA: For those communities that don't benefit from brick and mortar locations, do the few organizations that are, you know, in the program, do they receive more funding?

FIRST DEPUTY COMMISSIONER BERRY: All the providers that are in neighborhoods that that have these criteria get slightly more funding than that they're it's weighted a little bit higher to give them more funding when they meet these conditions.

CHAIRPERSON AYALA: Okay. And if the CFC providers need more food than they have been allocated, what is the process and the time frame for them to get an approval to order more food?

FIRST DEPUTY COMMISSIONER BERRY: So any community food provider that needs an additional allocation should reach out to the CFC Program to let us know that that an additional allocation is needed.

We recently had an additional \$2.9 that was allocated through OMB to the food program. Last month we distributed \$2.5 million of that funding specifically to pantries that were in a... still had a high supply gap and had spent all or most of their allocation so far. So I think it was about a third of the food providers got an extra allocation last month.

We still have another \$400,000, plus any other additional unallocated funds that we will reallocate to pantries in need next month. One of the criteria we're looking at is any food pantries that lost federal funding due to federal cuts so far. That has not affected the CFC program yet, but we know it has affected some pantries, and we are going to look to

see what we can do to assist those pantries in particular when we do reallocation next month.

CHAIRPERSON AYALA: So just to get clarity, and thank you for that, what is the timeframe from the moment that the request is made to the time that it is approved?

FIRST DEPUTY COMMISSIONER BERRY: So, we don't... (CROSS-TALK)

CHAIRPERSON AYALA: (INAUDIBLE) I'm assuming it varies, but...

FIRST DEPUTY COMMISSIONER BERRY: Yeah, honestly, that's not... It doesn't typically work that way. We don't typically get a lot of requests from food pantries for additional allocations. They are familiar with our cycle and reallocation process. They know that at the end of an allocation cycle is typically when we do reallocations. So we may hear from a few pantries that reach out to us at that time and say, "Hey, we know it's getting close to the time you do reallocations. Please keep us in mind as you do that." It's not the... I understand what you're asking but it has not traditionally followed that formal process.

CHAIRPERSON AYALA: Okay. Can you tell us what the CFC is doing to connect with and support smaller and newer providers?

FIRST DEPUTY COMMISSIONER BERRY: Sorry? I... the...

CHAIRPERSON AYALA: What is the CFC doing to connect with and support smaller...

FIRST DEPUTY COMMISSIONER BERRY: Ah, yes...

CHAIRPERSON AYALA: with smaller newer providers?

FIRST DEPUTY COMMISSIONER BERRY: Yeah. So we do feel that it is really important to be able to support all types of providers with the CFC Program. We support large providers, medium-sized providers, as well as small pantries.

And the way we support that is we have an open application process. The application process for CFC is always open on a rolling basis. We do keep a small set of funds aside so that we can fund new pantries in the program at any given time. And every pantry application we receive we work with that pantry to try to fund them. One of the... You have to have safe places to store foods. Somebody doesn't have that, we'll do a site visit to talk to them about, you know, "Well, maybe you could put a refrigerator

here," or "There's this other location nearby that maybe could help out."

We also require that CFC not be the only funding source for the pantry. So pantries... CFC is meant to be a supplemental program, it's not funding the full needs of every pantry in the city of New York, but we may work with them to let them know what the New York State application process is so they can apply for both sets of funding at the same time. We can coordinate and ensure that that pantry gets opened.

Really the only reason that we would reject a pantry application is if they're not working with us for one, but that's not typically the case. But if there's already a couple of pantries like on the same block, that might be a reason that we might not fund a particular pantry.

CHAIRPERSON AYALA: Is there a minimum to the amount that you expect an organization or program to have in foundation funds before they can be approved for a grant?

FIRST DEPUTY COMMISSIONER BERRY: No, there's no set minimum amount, but obviously we try to use our best judgment there. A dollar of funding would not be enough, but there is no set amount, because we know

pantry sizes vary, the number of hours that they operate vary, the number of people they serve vary, so we don't want to be too prescriptive in setting a minimum.

CHAIRPERSON AYALA: Yeah. I just worry for this, because the smaller ones may not have the administrative capacity to, you know, dedicate that time or staff to filling out applications. So they may be relying on the food bank, for instance, you know, to bring food. So if they are receiving some supplemental ,you know, program or service through ,like, the food bank for instance would they still qualify?

FIRST DEPUTY COMMISSIONER BERRY: That counts. If they're getting food through the food bank or through city harvest, that absolutely counts.

CHAIRPERSON AYALA: Okay. Does the CFC offer any operational grants or assistance to health providers?

FIRST DEPUTY COMMISSIONER BERRY: Yes, we do. We issue, every year, we have funding for what we call Administrative Grants as well as Capacity Building Grants. So the Administrative Grant process is... that has been our typical process in the past is the Administrative Grants process, where we'll have

unallocated funding from a prior year that we sort of hold aside for this purpose. Pantries submit to us receipts for funding, whether they bought refrigerators or hired some a few staff members to staff a pantry needs for food trucks – they provide us with their receipts, and if they meet the criteria' we will reimburse them.

We've also recently, over the last few years under this administration, in partnership with the Mayor's Office of Food Policy, have established these capacity building grants – which I'm very excited about because I think our Administrative Grants have benefited larger food pantries that can outlay money and then and then we reimburse them.

But this Capacity Building Grant process that we've implemented allows, I think it makes it easier for smaller pantries to get some support for us.

So this process, a pantry applies for what they want to spend the funding on; we evaluate those proposals that we receive, and then we provide pantries with the grant funding, then they can use that money to go out and purchase – let's say a small pantry needs a larger capacity refrigerator, they submit that through our grant process. If they're

awarded, they then have the funds to go out and buy the larger refrigerator, but they don't have to outlay that money themselves upfront.

CHAIRPERSON AYALA: Okay. In FY25 Preliminary Budget Response, the Council called on the Administration to increase and baseline the CFC budget to \$60 million to help combat the high levels of food insecurity in the city, which persists today. As of the Preliminary Plan, the FY25 budget for CFC totaled \$60 million; however, the funding dropped substantially to \$20.9 million in FY26 and in the out years.

This is a critical program for families in need. Will funding be added for this program, and if so, when and how much?

FIRST DEPUTY COMMISSIONER BERRY: So we're really proud that this Administration has more than doubled over the last few years the funding for the CFC program. It's an important program, and that level of investment that the Administration has made over the last several years is unprecedented for the CFC Program. And we continue to work with OMB on FY26 funding for CFC.

CHAIRPERSON AYALA: Okay. What is the actual spending thus far in FY25, and how much was spent in fiscal FY24?

FIRST DEPUTY COMMISSIONER BERRY: Thank you for that question, in FY 24 we spent \$55.6 million on the program. And so far in FY25, through March, we've spent \$29.9 million.

CHAIRPERSON AYALA: The fiscal year runs through June.

FIRST DEPUTY COMMISSIONER BERRY: Yes, these are the... this is based on the receipts that we get from Schrier (phonetic). So there is a bit of a lag in their billing us for the food that they have distributed, and then we reimburse them.

CHAIRPERSON AYALA: Okay. What do...

FIRST DEPUTY COMMISSIONER BERRY: We traditionally allocated and spent all of the funds, and we fully expect to do that this fiscal year as well.

CHAIRPERSON AYALA: Okay. We're looking forward to the Administration baselining those funds so that we're not having this conversation year after year.

We've been joined by Council Member Stevens.

There are currently over 500 listed CFC locations, however many of these are concentrated in

certain boroughs and zip codes. How does DSS ensure that CFC locations are funded in the in the areas with the most need? And how does DSS incentivize or otherwise support CFC providers locations where there may be a mismatch between food access and need?

FIRST DEPUTY COMMISSIONER BERRY: So we... the applications are, as I mentioned earlier, the CFC application is open all the time on a rolling basis for any pantry to apply. So any pantry in any location is can apply. If any council members know of a pantry not currently receiving funds, we do encourage you to have them apply for CFC funding.

But, the way we manage the food going into the neighborhoods, is through the allocation process, looking at the supply gap. So we're really looking at the data of the need in a community and the capacity and ability to meet that need.

CHAIRPERSON AYALA: Okay. So we know that in some neighborhoods they lack available brick and mortar locations, and that prevents providers from operating food pantries and soup kitchens. Does DSS have any idea on how this could be overcome? And how is DSS collaborating with other City agencies, such as Aging or DOE to ensure access to food services?

FIRST DEPUTY COMMISSIONER BERRY: So one of the ways that we are able to meet the need of the lack of the brick and mortar locations for CFC is we do fund some of the mobile pantries in the city. So there's a number of organizations in the city that have mobile pantries, and those pantries can deliver food into neighborhoods that may not have brick and mortar food pantries. And that's an important part of the CFC Program that we will continue to fund.

We also collaborate regularly with DOHMH and the Department for Aging to make sure that... with DOHMH, we work closely on a number of programs — they have a number of programs like Health Bucks, Groceries to Go, Get the Good Stuff that are available that we work in partnership, they make available to people in receipt of SNAP benefits. And for the Department of Aging, we work very closely with them, especially and in particular on SNAP outreach to ensure that older adults who are eligible for, and in need of, SNAP benefits apply for and receive them.

CHAIRPERSON AYALA: I think I'm primarily concerned here about, you know, boroughs like the Bronx where, you know, there aren't very many brick

and mortar locations and that, you know, the mobile pantry sites may not be enough.

So I know that I asked this at the Preliminary Budget Hearing, but I'm really interested in hearing from DSS, what conversations have been had with the Department for the Aging to maybe increase pantry sites in some of their senior centers - or working with the DOE to identify locations within some of the schools to help identify more locations that... Because, I get it, I have a hard time, too, when I'm distributing my food pantry funds in the Bronx. There aren't that many people to give the funding to. So we rely heavily on, you know, certain groups, which is unfair, right? Because, I mean, some of them are already at, you know, a tipping point. But I just haven't heard or seen, you know, what the plan is to address this.

FIRST DEPUTY COMMISSIONER BERRY: So...

CHAIRPERSON AYALA: I like the mobiles. I just don't rely... I don't think that the mobiles are the you know, like, it's complicated. Right?

People need to know, okay, I can go to, you know, to Saint Ann's Church on Thursdays and, you know, Tuesdays and Thursdays, and I'm gonna, you know, be

I mean, my experience is that, you know, they move around a lot. So what has DSS done in the in the Bronx specifically to ensure that we are increasing the number of sites? Because the number of funds that are going into the Bronx are significantly lower than that of Manhattan.

CHAIRPERSON AYALA: And the highest number of poverty and food insecurity.

Just in terms of the mobile pantries, I know that there are certain mobile pantries that specifically go to older adult centers and park outside of older

adult centers on a regular day of the month and do have that partnership.

But you're right, there is more we can do, and I will commit to reaching out to Department for the Aging in New York City Public Schools following this hearing to see what else we can do to increase numbers... to work with them to increase the number of pantries or access to food through mobile pantries.

CHAIRPERSON AYALA: Yeah, yeah, I think it just, you know, we need to be a little bit more creative about how we get food to folks. Because even if we're getting a \$1 million, we got a \$1 million extra, but the \$1 million is going to the same, you know, three groups. I mean the outreach, you're not expanding, right? Because you're... I mean you're still meeting a need, because it's significant, but there may be parts of the borough that are not benefiting from that.

Okay. What is what is HRA doing to streamline the process? Moving over to SNAP – can you tell us what HRA is doing to streamline the process and improve timeliness for public benefits applications,

including SNAP? And what percentage of clients is HRA seeing reapply or reopening their cases after denial?

ADMINISTRATOR FRENCH: Sure, thank you.

So currently, we do not have data on people who are new applicants who then reapply, given there's a variety of different reasons why someone might not have had the application go through the entire process. What we do track is, for individuals who do not recertify, who are currently on benefits, do not recertify, and then rejoin the... reapply within 90 days.

I can say for cash assistance on average, it's about 40 percent of those who do not recertify do reapply. And for SNAP, it's about 25 percent of those who do not recertify will apply within the next 90 days and be found eligible.

The reasons why people might not recertify can be a variety of reasons — they may not return the recertification form, they may not call for their on-demand interview. But the reason, you know, they are off the caseload is because we didn't receive information from them on recertification, not because we found them to be ineligible, and then they were eligible again a little bit later.

So we track that very closely to see if there's any trends that we're seeing as well to try to identify if there's places where we can help streamline the recertification process.

I will say, as it relates to streamline and improving access to benefits, we spend a lot of time on technology, both utilization of Access HRA and ensuring, as much as possible, especially around cash and SNAP, that individuals can really manage their benefits through that portal, as well as offering the on demand interviews. Right? So in essence, individuals don't ever need to come into a Benefit Access Center if they don't want to. They also can and have get assistance both, either using our PC banks, if they don't have a computer at home, we have staff that man those to help people, as well as provide telephones, if someone wanted to call for their on demand interview in the center.

And I can say wait times on average, uh, in January for cash assistance on demand, the average was about 53 minutes and for SNAP it was under 30 minutes.

CHAIRPERSON AYALA: So let me ask you a question, because I hear there's a lot regarding the... hold on

a second. I just want to make sure that I recognize that we've been joined by Council Member Riley.

If a person has started the application process, they have 90 days to complete it?

ADMINISTRATOR FRENCH: No, the application process for timeliness, sorry...

CHAIRPERSON AYALA: Uh-huh?

ADMINISTRATOR FRENCH: for timeliness for if you're an application, in general, there's a 30-day timeline from when someone applies. Right? And in that 30 days, the individual would need to submit all necessary supporting documents and complete an on demand interview. And then we would be required to make a determination within the 30 days on average.

There are instances where we will grant someone more than 30 days for the process. Say someone calls towards the end of the 30 day period for their on demand interview, or they call and they need additional time to actually submit documents. We'll defer that application to give them more time to provide the information we need, so that they don't have to restart the application process all over again.

I can say that for timeliness rates, they have increased quite a bit over the last year, especially as we were able to eradicate the backlogs. So, for SNAP timeliness, for the month of January, that was over 91 percent, uh, cash assistance was at 71 percent. And we obviously continue to stay focused on ways in which we can improve, continue to improve those percentages.

CHAIRPERSON AYALA: The percentages for cash assistance was 70...

ADMINISTRATOR FRENCH: Seventy-one percent.

CHAIRPERSON AYALA: Seventy-one percent?

ADMINISTRATOR FRENCH: Mm-hmm.

CHAIRPERSON AYALA: Okay. I'm trying to figure out... because one of the complaints, and one of things that I see a lot, you know, through our Constituent Services Division, is that people are submitting documents and then being told that the documents were not submitted.

And sometimes my own staff is submitting the documents, so we know that the documents had in fact been submitted, and somewhere in the ,you know, abyss they get lost, right?

1 So then ,you know, it happens pretty often, and
2
3 my concern is that then they would have to start the
4 process again at the 30 mark, because there's no way
5 of determining that the documents were in fact... So
6 if my staff doesn't call and say, "Listen, I have
7 ,you know, I upload them, I sent them myself,"
8 there's no way that a person on their own can kind of
9 prove that they did that. And they're doing it
10 sometimes upwards of five times. And, you know, so
11 there's something, there's a disconnect somewhere.

12 Is there an acknowledgment at least on the DSS
13 part, and some sort of plan to try to figure out what
14 that disconnect is?

15 ADMINISTRATOR FRENCH: Yeah, absolutely. You know,
16 there is a very high volume of, you know,
17 applications and recertifications that come through
18 on a monthly basis. We're averaging about 48,000 cash
19 applications a month, about 36,000 SNAP applications
20 plus recertifications.

21 So I'm not going to sit here and say that our
22 indexing processes are perfect in any way. We
23 continue to look at ways in which we can improve the
24 indexing to ensure that documents that are, you know,
25 submitted are actually connected to the right case.

We are rolling out technologies, starting first on the SNAP side, where we are doing auto indexing so that when someone submits some documents, it can be connected to that case.

Right now, some of the indexing is, you know, a person process and a people process, where there can be, you know, incidents of, you know, documents maybe not being connected to the right case.

Obviously, in instances, you know, where the council members bring those to our attention, we do research to try to understand first what may have happened, and then how we can address that moving forward. Although we acknowledge it is a process that we're continuously looking at given sort of the very large volume of documents that we are sort of managing on a monthly basis.

CHAIRPERSON AYALA: Yeah. I mean, we want to prevent people from losing their benefits and we want to...

ADMINISTRATOR FRENCH: Absolutely.

CHAIRPERSON AYALA: speed up the time frame in which they're able to access them if they need them.

Is there a is there a process within the system that alerts the staff when there's an individual that

has maybe like a legal guardian whenever ,like,
recertification?

So I recently had a constituent case that I
handled myself, and the person has serious mental
health issues and has a guardian that handles all of
their finances. And she was frantic because she
didn't have any money to eat, and ,you know, she had
her food stamp card, and she didn't have any money on
it. And when we called, what happened was that she
lost them because she didn't recertify.

So when I asked who the recertification ,you
know, package goes to, it had gone to her. But she
has a guardian for that very reason. So I'm not sure,
you know, why... does that information get
communicated to you guys? Is there a system where
you're working within the, you know, the networks for
the guardianship program, so that you are aware of
who's... who to pay closer attention to – because
they may have a specific circumstance that prevents
them from filling out the application or recertifying
on their own?

ADMINISTRATOR FRENCH: There is the opportunity
for individuals to have sort of an authorized
representative that works on their behalf. We'd need

to look in that specific case to see what may have happened in that instance.

In most cases, right, the information and such is provided to the individual. You know, we are looking at ways in which we can try to improve that sort of communication or track things.

Those who do utilize Access HRA and have accounts with Access HRA, they are able to see both information on their recertification – when that's due, where that went, as well as documents that they submitted... (CROSS-TALK)

CHAIRPERSON AYALA: No, but we're talking about individuals that have... I'm telling you she has serious mental health issues. And...

ADMINISTRATOR FRENCH: Right.

CHAIRPERSON AYALA: And luckily within, you know, her limitations, she's savvy enough to know that she needs help and come to our office. But I had a similar issue with her – two months prior she was delinquent and rent for like over \$34,000. She has CityFHEPS, the CityFHEPS was about to expire, and she has a guardian that is responsible for all of this. But the information is not getting to the guardian, or the guardian is not communicating with you guys.

network. Like she's not going sign a paper that says,
"Oh, I'm gonna assign x y and z to be my
representative."

ADMINISTRATOR FRENCH: Right. Yeah, in instances
where there is actually a legal guardian for someone,
and happy to talk more about specifics as well on
that, because the legal guardian is responsible for
managing the finances for that individual and making
sure that they have everything, you know, set up and
have access to the information they need.

So would want to definitely look a little bit
further into that, and happy to discuss further ways
in which we can... (CROSS-TALK)

CHAIRPERSON AYALA: Yeah, I would love to be able
to...

ADMINISTRATOR FRENCH: Yeah...

CHAIRPERSON AYALA: to maybe brainstorm a little
bit on how we can figure that out...

ADMINISTRATOR FRENCH: Yeah...

CHAIRPERSON AYALA: so that we're not, you know,
necessarily losing people.

All right, I going to just hand it over to my
colleagues for a little bit, and then I'll be back.

Council Member Cabán?

COUNCIL MEMBER CABÁN: Thank you, I am going to pick up where the chair left off essentially.

So I mean, my first question is, are constituents able to retroactively view submitted documents on the Access HRA mobile app?

ADMINISTRATOR FRENCH: They are able to see documents that they have submitted through their Access HRA account, yes. There is a PDF that is created, connected to an application that would show the documents that they did submit as it relates to that application.

COUNCIL MEMBER CABÁN: And so it shows what the document it is?

ADMINISTRATOR FRENCH: Yes.

COUNCIL MEMBER CABÁN: And the... okay.

So are there any special cases or circumstances in which an applicant might be able to view all of the documents online or on the mobile app outside of that?

ADMINISTRATOR FRENCH: You mean not having an application but still being able to? To utilize Access HRA, individuals do need to have an account.

COUNCIL MEMBER CABÁN: Okay. I mean, obviously, that poses digital divide sort of challenges. And

it's true that ,like, on the app, the documents are categorized, and the apps basically only states what category a document was submitted under, correct?

Right. So it doesn't actually tell them what the specific document they submitted, uh, that qualifies under a category. Correct?

ADMINISTRATOR FRENCH: Correct. We... documents get reviewed and verified...

COUNCIL MEMBER CABÁN: Right.

ADMINISTRATOR FRENCH: through the processing process – as well as through the interview process to identify, is there anything missing from the...

(CROSS-TALK)

COUNCIL MEMBER CABÁN: So, point is that if what they are able to view on this is just the category and not the specific document they submitted to satisfy the category, which is a number of eligible documents, then they're all left wondering, well which document was it? Was it this? What is this? What was it this other thing?

ADMINISTRATOR FRENCH: Mm-hmm.

COUNCIL MEMBER CABÁN: And I think that that's a problem. It's not particularized enough information for it to be really useful.

At what point does the application or the participant receive a receipt or other notice about the status of their application, specifically about documents or next steps?

ADMINISTRATOR FRENCH: Sure. So individuals will receive notification after their interview if there are still documents required for the application to be completed, right? We'll identify what is still needed from them, which is often when we're also deferring application to give someone more time to actually submit all of the full documents – just because, at initial application, individuals often may not have all of the documents that they need to submit at that time. So...

COUNCIL MEMBER CABÁN: Yeah, and also to the Chair's point, there are plenty of instances, which we have many times in our office also – we also submit documents on behalf of our constituents where, you know, the scenario is that we have submitted those documents, and then you all say you don't have them. So that also encompasses what's happening some of the time.

I want to also follow-up on some of the questions around the in-person applicants that the chair was asking...

ADMINISTRATOR FRENCH: Mm-hmm?

COUNCIL MEMBER CABÁN: So why is it that a receipt is only provided upon request? Like, doesn't that put it on the applicant to make sure that they're getting the verification they need? Doesn't SNAP... also doesn't SNAP as a federal program require a receipt by statute?

ADMINISTRATOR FRENCH: So we will... to start a SNAP application, actually an individual only needs to provide their name, their address, and they only have to provide three bits of information, which actually none of which would allow us to actually assess someone's application that is ,you know, under, you know, the SNAP guidelines of what we are required to do. And then we would need to continue that by communicating with the individual on what is needed and through the interview.

So you know, currently we do have it on request. Right? We can look at that...

COUNCIL MEMBER CABÁN: Why? I guess ,like, that doesn't answer my question. Like, why are we sort of

1 shifting the burden here that ,like, if you're
2 meeting the person in person, the only way they get a
3 receipt is if they ask for it? Why are they being
4 treated differently than other folks? Presumably
5 because if they're being seen in person, they have
6 other, you know, barriers that make that the case,
7 which already makes the process... a hard process
8 even harder. And ,like, I'm gonna say, as a person
9 living with a disability, these are the kinds of
10 differences in treatment that are like absolutely
11 infuriating.
12

13 ADMINISTRATOR FRENCH: I hear you on that, and I
14 will bring that back in regards to requiring
15 individuals to ask for a receipt.

16 COUNCIL MEMBER CABÁN: But you don't... you don't,
17 today, have a reason or a rationale why that burden
18 is shifted to individuals who are getting services at
19 home?

20 ADMINISTRATOR FRENCH: I do not.

21 COUNCIL MEMBER CABÁN: Okay. That's...

22 ADMINISTRATOR FRENCH: I will... I understand you
23 as well... (CROSS-TALK)

24 COUNCIL MEMBER CABÁN: a problem... (CROSS-TALK)
25

ADMINISTRATOR FRENCH: I will also say, you know, an overwhelming majority of individuals are applying through Access HRA, where they do get receipts either on their own, or we encourage people to actually come into the centers to utilize our equipment as well.

But I hear you on that instance. So, I will look into that... (CROSS-TALK)

COUNCIL MEMBER CABÁN: Yeah, some people can't do those things! It's just... and, then, so you're taking people who are on the margins of eligibility in terms of need, and making it even harder. And I think that's a real problem.

I want to ask also, this is a little bit about... Oh, and following up on that, at what time in the application is the PDF you talked about made available to applicants? Like, you talking about the ability to review the application at the very, uh, at the very end before, like, before it's being submitted?

ADMINISTRATOR FRENCH: The PDF, and the sort of receipt of it all, will be after someone has submitted those documents. That's where...

COUNCIL MEMBER CABÁN: Not when...

ADMINISTRATOR FRENCH: it would be created.

COUNCIL MEMBER CABÁN: So, not before, after?

ADMINISTRATOR FRENCH: Currently, yes.

COUNCIL MEMBER CABÁN: Okay, I am also thinking about some of the testimony that you gave, and I have a couple of questions based on that.

ADMINISTRATOR FRENCH: Mm-hmm?

COUNCIL MEMBER CABÁN: How does DSS currently receive documents? And this is just... I just want to get a lot of detail on the record about this.

So how are you receiving the documents from clients who are homebound or providing that verification when they do request the receipt?

And then my follow ups to that, because I know I'm running out of time, are, like, couldn't DSS scan the documents there and provide a paper receipt?

I can't stress enough that these are our most vulnerable clients who don't have the capacity to do some of this online (TIMER CHIMES) submission or submit the documents in person or by mail.

And I think that there are absolutely ways to work around the privacy concerns that you have. I worked as an attorney for a very long time. I had to deal with HIPAA for a lot of my clients, and things that actually... and we would get would get excuses

of, like, well, we can't do this, we can't give you this because of HIPAA. And a lot of times it's, like, no, I'm not asking for the information that falls under HIPAA. I'm asking for general information that would be useful without betraying that that privacy.

So yeah, I mean, that's my question. How are you doing this? Why can't you do... scan it another way?

I'm curious to hear what you think, and I'd to sign up for a second round, too.

ADMINISTRATOR FRENCH: Certainly. So first also, I meant to say we, as an agency, are committed to working with you on the bill and working through some of the concerns we have to improve the ways in which we can absolutely make people aware of what they've submitted and where they are in the process. Right? That is a goal of ours. It is a large system, and it's an iterative process, but that is definitely a goal of ours, even with the concerns we have about the bill.

And, you know, as it as it relates to homebound requests, it sort of depends on each individual request. Right? You know, I can get back to you on specifics for, you know, each of the different

benefits that we have — just because we do some different things with different folks.

But we hear you on, you know, the improving voices... (CROSS-TALK)

COUNCIL MEMBER CABÁN: But why can't you scan on scene is, again, my question?

ADMINISTRATOR FRENCH: We could. I mean, the mobile app could be utilized on scene by individuals, right, to upload documents in that way. So that is something that we can do to upload the documents. Depending on if, you know, people can upload the documents, uh, not necessarily utilizing an Access HRA account, right? So those would need to be connected to an individual's account. So it's not always going to be connected, but there are ways, in home, to upload documents.

COUNCIL MEMBER CABÁN: And so just based on your testimony that you gave just now, it actually... it isn't the case then, as you said in your written testimony, that it would be impracticable, impossible, to provide receipts during for... these home visits?

ADMINISTRATOR FRENCH: It... I think the thing wasn't always just about receipts. I think it was

also about copies of the documents. Right? I believe that might have been part of it, but we can follow-up. Each... (CROSS-TALK)

COUNCIL MEMBER CABÁN: So, yeah, (INAUDIBLE) again (INAUDIBLE)... (CROSS-TALK)

ADMINISTRATOR FRENCH: Each one would be different, right? A cash application... (CROSS-TALK)

COUNCIL MEMBER CABÁN: I mean, you should (INAUDIBLE) right now... (CROSS-TALK)

ADMINISTRATOR FRENCH: is different than a Medicaid document... (CROSS-TALK)

COUNCIL MEMBER CABÁN: Is that they could potentially be scanned in a person's home, through some means...

ADMINISTRATOR FRENCH: Mm-hmm, potentially... (CROSS-TALK)

COUNCIL MEMBER CABÁN: (INAUDIBLE) it's not (INAUDIBLE)... (CROSS-TALK)

ADMINISTRATOR FRENCH: that we would... we... (CROSS-TALK)

COUNCIL MEMBER CABÁN: said in the written testimony... But, I just want to... I just want to... (CROSS-TALK)

ADMINISTRATOR FRENCH: We would need to work...

(CROSS-TALK)

COUNCIL MEMBER CABÁN: (INAUDIBLE)... (CROSS-TALK)

ADMINISTRATOR FRENCH: We would need to work through it, so there are nuances and complications, but, again...

COUNCIL MEMBER CABÁN: Yeah...

ADMINISTRATOR FRENCH: We're committed to working with you to...

COUNCIL MEMBER CABÁN: Would love, love, love to do that... (CROSS-TALK)

ADMINISTRATOR FRENCH: work through those things... (CROSS-TALK)

COUNCIL MEMBER CABÁN: Thank you, uh, yeah.

CHAIRPERSON AYALA: Council Member Stevens?

COUNCIL MEMBER STEVENS: Hello, good morning. I just has a couple of follow-up questions from when the Chair was asking... she was asking about the mobile pantries. Because, I just wanted some clarify around... And we can say specifically in the Bronx because that's my borough — and even more specifically, my district.

ADMINISTRATOR FRENCH: Yes.

COUNCIL MEMBER STEVENS: Where are these mobile locations that you guys deploy the food pantries from?

FIRST DEPUTY COMMISSIONER BERRY: The mobile pantries themselves, it's the organization that gets funded... (CROSS-TALK)

COUNCIL MEMBER STEVENS: (INAUDIBLE)...

FIRST DEPUTY COMMISSIONER BERRY: (INAUDIBLE) the mobile pantries go to... (CROSS-TALK)

COUNCIL MEMBER STEVENS: Yeah... Yeah, which ones are you funding? Because, I am asking because the only mobile pantries that I've seen in my district are the ones that I fund.

So I am trying to find which ones you're funding and where they're located. Because I literally only... the ones that I've been funding, that's the only time I've seen the mobile pantry in my district. So I'm trying to get an understanding of, in the Bronx, where those organizations funded? And where are you deploying them or requesting them to be deployed?

FIRST DEPUTY COMMISSIONER BERRY: So I know we fund a Council mobile food pantry. I don't know off

the top of my head all the organizations that have mobile food pantries that we do fund.

COUNCIL MEMBER STEVENS: Well, I'm just telling you in my district, 16 in the West Bronx, the only mobile food pantry that we have is mine – the ones that I fund specifically through the Council funding. And that's a problem for me, especially because my district has little to no access to healthy and fresh foods. So how are we going to the places where people need it?

I know the Chair talked about how it's really hard to find people to fund, even in my district, for this, because there's just... we don't have a lot, and even in the areas that need to be funded. Right?

So when I'm thinking about like Highbridge, there's a vacuum. There's nothing there.

So I would love to see a mobile food pantry there, which I fund, because it is one, because I was like, this is crazy.

Would love to see that, and how are you evaluating the information to make sure that you're hitting areas that have issues with access to food and also have high poverty numbers? What is the evaluation process for that?

FIRST DEPUTY COMMISSIONER BERRY: So we do recognize and understand that there are communities in the city that do not have enough brick and mortar pantries. We do fund some mobile pantries as a result of that, but we... (CROSS-TALK)

COUNCIL MEMBER STEVENS: So my question is -- so when you're thinking about the shelter placements, because my district is also overrun with that, how are you then countering that to make sure that they have the support that they need?

FIRST DEPUTY COMMISSIONER BERRY: Currently what we're doing is we're giving additional dollar allocations to the pantries that are in those locations that are participating in the CFC Program.

COUNCIL MEMBER STEVENS: So that's a problem. You guys are over saturating, specifically the Bronx, with these things, and then not looking at how to evaluate to make sure you're off setting the needs.

And this is one of the things I talk about a lot, is that we're... it's not that we don't want them there, you guys don't give us the support to be able to handle the amount of things you're putting there.

So I think that this is something you need to really take back, and really be evaluating of, like,

1
2 okay, we already have communities that have such high
3 needs – and then we're oversaturated with more people
4 who have high needs – and then we're not giving them
5 the services, and we're kind of left to figure it
6 out.

7 And I guess my question, even around the Health
8 Bucks, too, know you guys were talking about Health
9 Bucks and partnering with DOH, and you are giving...
10 and you are giving Health Bucks to organizations...
11 Because the only Health Bucks I've also seen in my
12 districts, are the ones that I fund.

13 So I'm trying to get an understanding of where
14 the ones you're funding are, and how do my residents
15 get access for that? Because they're only the ones
16 that I fund that I've seen in my district.

17 FIRST DEPUTY COMMISSIONER BERRY: We'll have to
18 get back to you. Because DOHMH is the agency that
19 gives out the Health Bucks. We partner with them to
20 make sure that the SNAP recipients have access to
21 them, but we can talk to DOHMH about how they...

22 (CROSS-TALK)

23 COUNCIL MEMBER STEVENS: Because I would love to
24 know what that looks like. Because, again, in
25 District 16, the only Health Bucks that are given

1 out, are the ones that I allocate from my funding.
2 And if they're supposed to be able to get access to
3 the Health Bucks, I want to make sure that my
4 residents also are able to have access to these
5 Health Bucks. Because they love them. And I get
6 yelled at all the time because I can't give out
7 enough... last year. You know, if you go to the
8 farmers market, everything is super expensive. And
9 ,you know, typically we can only give out anywhere
10 between \$15 and \$20. And they are, like, I can only
11 get a bunch of carrots.
12

13 So I would love to know if there is a place that
14 I can recommend for them to go to support what I'm
15 doing. But, at this time, in the era of food
16 insecurity, my district is super overburdened with
17 it. And I feel like I'm drowning over here, because I
18 am the one trying to pick up the burden. And if there
19 are things that they should be able to get access to,
20 I would love for my district to be able to get access
21 to it.

22 And I guess my last question is, one of the
23 things... one of the issues we have a lot with the
24 Constituent Services is folks coming in and them
25

being, you know, maybe \$5 over the limit for SNAP benefits and not being able to get any benefits.

What are some of the solutions that you guys give to them? Because I know a lot of times they come to our office, (TIMER CHIMES) obviously we give them, you know, a list for like food pantries or whatever, but is there any other support? Because that's been a huge thing where we have, you know, families who do have jobs and working, and they have a number of children, and they're maybe like \$5 over. So they're not qualifying, and now they're struggling.

So are there any other options that they might have?

FIRST DEPUTY COMMISSIONER BERRY: Yeah, I mean, you raise a really good point that there is definitely a benefits cliff for most of our benefits. Unfortunately, we don't set the eligibility rules for most of our programs, including the SNAP program. They are set by the federal government, and we have very limited tools when somebody is just \$5 over, for example, the eligibility limit for SNAP, other than providing them with information about food pantries and community kitchens.

CHAIRPERSON STEVENS: I definitely... yeah, I know we don't set the eligibility for it, but my question was are there other options? Right? So obviously I think that this is something we do need to address, especially with the price of inflation and things going up. It's making it that much harder, because people have less money for food, especially when rent is additionally so high.

I mean, and just so fitting, my staff as I'm sitting here, we're in the midst of Participatory Budgeting, and on one of our ballots one of our young people just wrote, "Please give us money for food." So this is a real issue, specifically in my district, and this is at one of my high schools right now as they're collecting petitions.

So this is serious for me and it means a lot. And, like I said, if there are things that my district is supposed to be getting, I have not seen them, and I would love to get more information on what that looks like to make sure that we can have access to it, too. Because I have not been seeing it or feeling it in District 16 at all.

I feel like I've really been carrying the food pantry burden on my own. So I definitely would love some support and resources. Thank you.

CHAIRPERSON AYALA: Thank you. And she's entirely right, I mean, when we're when we're trying to fund these organizations, these groups, like you have to search. And ,you know, oftentimes when I represented parts of Council Member Stevens' district, like, I would have to fund pantries that were outside of the borders of my own district, because I didn't have any in that ,you know, particular area. And I don't know that the people in my district knew ,you know, to go that far off to be able to access it.

So it's just... it's... yeah, it's just ,you know, we can work together to try to identify ways to make it better, but that conversation definitely needs to be had.

I want to recognize we've been joined by Council Member Banks, and I believe he has a couple of questions as well.

COUNCIL MEMBER BANKS: Thank you, Madam Chair, and to the Administration, thank you.

Quickly, just want some clarification on the SNAP program and the fraud issues that have come up. I

1 know particularly there was a notification that went
2 out that SNAP benefits wouldn't be, uh, if there was
3 fraud or somebody's card was breached, that they
4 would have to wait a whole month to get back their
5 benefits on their card. And I wanna know what's being
6 done. I had two seniors whose cards were compromised
7 and they had no food. Their card was compromised the
8 first day of the month when their benefits were
9 supposed to go on their card, and we had to basically
10 run around to other food... to food pantries to get
11 them food.
12

13 So what is being done by the Administration to
14 fill that gap, especially when we're talking about
15 food insecurity? This just adds more trauma,
16 especially on a person...or anyone, they shouldn't
17 have to go through this.

18 So what's being done to address this issue?
19 Understanding that the benefits won't be on the card
20 until a month later. Who fills that gap?

21 FIRST DEPUTY COMMISSIONER BERRY: Yeah, so thank
22 you for that question. And it is really unfortunate
23 that there are a number of bad actors that are
24 preying on low-income New Yorkers in receipt of cash
25

assistance and SNAP benefits and skimming those benefits from individuals' cards.

Unfortunately, December on 20, 2024, we lost the ability to replace SNAP benefits altogether. The federal government did not extend our ability to replace skimmed SNAP benefits after December 20th.

COUNCIL MEMBER BANKS: I'm aware of that. My question is filling that gap, what are you doing to help fill that gap? Are you allowing them to go hungry? Is there any effort by the Administration to assist these folks?

FIRST DEPUTY COMMISSIONER BERRY: So the efforts that the Administration are making are to, number one, advocate with the State to get... to change the EBT cards to have chips in them. Because that is the main way to protect needy New Yorkers from having their benefits skimmed in the first place...

COUNCIL MEMBER BANKS: What's the timeline for that to be accomplished?

FIRST DEPUTY COMMISSIONER BERRY: We encourage you... we support the State legislation that would require the state to enable chip cards. That's Senate Bill 1465 and Assembly Bill 699. We support those bills. We encourage everyone to support those bills

as well so that the State will implement EBT cards... chips on EBT cards.

COUNCIL MEMBER BANKS: Are there any agency workers who reach out, so if the individual says, "My card has been compromised, I have no food," does the... Is there an agency rep that reaches out to provide them with resources or give them information as to where a pantry may be? I mean, in reality, a lot of... there are folks that call their elected officials' office, and there are folks that don't. And we don't want folks suffering in silence.

So what proactive steps are you taking to help fill that gap while you are also dealing with ,you know, waiting for the legislation to take place? We're talking about ,you know, we don't want to add to folks' food insecurity and continue to traumatize folks. I want to know what steps are being taken to fill that gap?

FIRST DEPUTY COMMISSIONER BERRY: And I understand your question, and there is, unfortunately, very little we can do other than to let people know about... to first of all, protect their cards and try to prevent their benefits from being skimmed in the first place – providing outreach materials and other

materials to prevent it in the first place. When SNAP benefits are skimmed, if it happens after December 20th, we are unable to replace those benefits. And for some individuals, food pantries and community kitchens are what is going to be able to back them...

(CROSS-TALK)

COUNCIL MEMBER BANKS: But I am not happy with the response of the Administration on this. There needs to be... You need to be much more proactive when we're talking about food and putting food in folks' mouths, especially, when their card has been compromised. This is through no fault of their own. And they are going without food. The Administration needs to step up. And in that mean time, while their card is compromised, there needs to be information about where they can go to the nearest food pantries – even if it's a door-to-door outreach that's being done where they're door-knocking and they're doing another assessment to see what that particular individual's needs are.

But I am not satisfied with the response of the Administration on that. And I would urge you to (TIMER CHIMES) do much more. Thank you.

CHAIRPERSON AYALA: I want to just piggyback off of that a second, because... so in terms of like providing, you know, extra additional funds that is, you know, that's complicated. We get that. However, nothing prevents the caseworkers assigned to specific cases where skimming has occurred, to inform and provide those individuals with information to local pantries and places where they can get food. And I think that that is something that is pretty practical and doable, but it doesn't happen.

FIRST DEPUTY COMMISSIONER BERRY: Yeah. And I do think that that is reasonable, and things that I can take back and make sure that, if we're not already doing it, to make sure that our skimming website and any skimming denial forms include information about how to access food pantries and community kitchens.

CHAIRPERSON AYALA: Yeah, I mean, because, it's...

(CROSS-TALK)

FIRST DEPUTY COMMISSIONER BERRY: Again, we may... That information may already be there, but if it's not...

CHAIRPERSON AYALA: Yeah...

FIRST DEPUTY COMMISSIONER BERRY: We can make sure that it is.

CHAIRPERSON AYALA: In most cases, it's not preventable, because people are going to the same supermarket that they've always gone to and having their benefits stolen. When I go... When I use my debit card at ATM, I ,you know, I move it all around ,you know, I'm making sure that there's nothing in there. Because ,you know, I've learned that through my precinct council meetings. But these are individuals that are actually going to their local supermarket, the same supermarket they go to every month to buy the same food. And then they're ,you know, they look and they have absolutely nothing. And ,you know, they're very low on food – if they have any. And it's an emergency. And I get that... I've got a follow-up question on the State part, but I would like to recognize Council Member Ung.

COUNCIL MEMBER UNG: Thank you, chair.

I just want to follow-up on this EBT card scam as you see, it affects a lot of our districts.

Is there any proactive steps that HR is taking, to tell their clients about ways to prevent that? You know, I know there's a way to freeze/unfreeze the app. And I know this is not the easiest for many people to use, but is... and is there, you know, and

1 teaching also the clients when you go to the
2 supermarkets to look out for these skimmers?

3 So what proactive steps are you taking for the
4 clients to make sure that, you know, this you know,
5 this stops happening month to month?

6 FIRST DEPUTY COMMISSIONER BERRY: Yep. So we have,
7 in particular this year, since we are unable to
8 replace the skimmed SNAP benefits, we have re-upped
9 our flyers, made flyers available to community based
10 organizations. All of our outreach and work in
11 collaboration with the community based organizations,
12 through our New York City Benefits Program, and
13 through newsletters, communications to others, we're
14 making sure that we are providing flyers on the
15 information. We're also working on some videos on how
16 to use the EBT Edge app and how to look for and
17 identify skimming.

18 COUNCIL MEMBER UNG: Thank you. Can you, you know,
19 are the videos done yet or hasn't... it's not... it's
20 still in progress?

21 FIRST DEPUTY COMMISSIONER BERRY: I believe we're
22 still working on those.

23 COUNCIL MEMBER UNG: If you're doing those videos,
24 It'll be great to have them different languages.
25

FIRST DEPUTY COMMISSIONER BERRY: Understood.

COUNCIL MEMBER UNG: Thank you.

CHAIRPERSON AYALA: Are you able to tell at this point? I mean, we've been discussing the skimming situation for a number of years now. Is there a way to be able to determine where the original skimming occurred? So if it happened at a local, you know, at a I don't know, whatever supermarket of your choosing, and it happened there multiple times, are you able to tell that? Or are you just able to tell that a new card, you know, where the funding was used?

So if it was used in another state or if it was used, you know, Upstate New York or whatever — that part you can tell, but are you able to determine where the skimming occurred?

FIRST DEPUTY COMMISSIONER BERRY: The EBT information that we have access to is very limited. This is a contract that's held by the state and the data is held by the state. So we have some limited access to the data, but we do not have access to all of the data.

And the skimming doesn't always happen at the physical location where the person is using their

card with a skimming device. Some of it is happening through, unfortunately, spoofing campaigns, phishing campaigns, where people might be inadvertently providing information to bad actors that allows those bad actors to take their benefits.

And in some cases it might just be a coincidence that people are using the same grocery store over and over again. And that may not be how the bad actors are getting access to the data.

CHAIRPERSON AYALA: Wow. You mentioned that the DSS has been working with the state on, you know, supporting these pieces of legislation. I mean, how aggressive are those conversations? Because the State can hold a bill for years.

FIRST DEPUTY COMMISSIONER BERRY: We have communicated regularly with OTDA (Office of Temporary and Disability Assistance), and we can continue to communicate regularly with OTDA about the importance of the need for chip cards. We're not just working through the New York State legislation.

CHAIRPERSON AYALA: Okay. Are those conversations fruitful? Like, are they... have they been receptive?

FIRST DEPUTY COMMISSIONER BERRY: I think that our partners at OTDA definitely agree with us that the

chip cards are necessary to protect benefits for clients.

CHAIRPERSON AYALA: I mean, I think we all agree that those are necessary. I'm just trying to figure out where the sense of urgency is in rectifying this. Because it's probably more cost effective to just replace the cards than it is to have to replace the benefits.

And it's inhumane to, you know, remove that funding from the state budget while we still have not rectified the problem to begin with. So we're like the dog chasing his own tail you know at this point.

I'm trying to figure out where we can be helpful in pushing — and I'm happy to ,you know, to submit and to speak to my colleagues at the State. But I'm trying to decipher whether or not the conversations that DSS has been having, you know, with (INAUDIBLE) you know, separately have been, you know, positive and do you feel confident that we're moving in the right direction to, you know, address this issue as soon as possible?

ADMINISTRATOR FRENCH: Yeah. I do feel that the conversations we've had with them have been positive in understanding this is the way in which we need to

1 go. Just like at the City level, at the State level,
2 agencies need to work through their processes as to,
3 you know, how those things are approved and move
4 forward. But we are not getting any sort of pushback
5 on the need to be able to moving towards the chip,
6 you know, technology, and that that is actually the
7 answer to really address the skimming issue for
8 everyone across the state.
9

10 And I can say we're not the only locality
11 advocating for this. You know, all of the social
12 services districts are equally advocating for a
13 transfer to the chip technology to protect
14 individuals and their benefits.

15 CHAIRPERSON AYALA: I mean, with all of the
16 technology that we pay for and, you know, this is
17 2025, uh, I would assume that that would be something
18 so simple.

19 I'm going to allow Council Member Cabán a couple
20 of more questions.

21 COUNCIL MEMBER CABÁN: Thank you, I only have a
22 couple more I promise – maybe three, four.

23 I want to ask again about the accessing the PDF
24 in the application digitally. Where can that PDF be
25 accessed? Is it... when you're doing it digitally, is

it under the "My Uploads" tab or is it under the
"Case Records" tab or is it somewhere else?

ADMINISTRATOR FRENCH: I will have to go back to
you, because I'm not an expert on the system, so I
don't wanna misspeak as to where it is in the system.

I'm also happy to set up a time for our teams to
sit down with you and walk through the system to show
exactly where everything is.

But I don't wanna misspeak as to where it is or,
you know...

COUNCIL MEMBER CABÁN: Okay.

ADMINISTRATOR FRENCH: Okay?

COUNCIL MEMBER CABÁN: I will say also that, you
know, my team has sat down with y'all. It's actually
how this piece of legislation was born because of
countless number of cases, countless number of
meetings between our office and the agency, and there
still was a real gap that we were seeing.

I also want to ask how long it takes for
documents submitted by an applicant or a participant
to become part of the case record? And also, to that
end, does the length of time depend on how the
documents were submitted to HRA?

ADMINISTRATOR FRENCH: So when we have documents that we are attempting to index, our goal is to index those as quickly as possible, oftentimes trying to do it within, you know, 48 hours.

Sometimes it takes longer because of the volume of documents. So I don't want to, you know, say there's a specific... because certain months will be a much higher volume than other months. But our goal is to turn that over and connect it to cases as quickly as we can... (CROSS-TALK)

COUNCIL MEMBER CABÁN: So, best case scenario, you can do it within 48 hours. But ,like, what are you also seeing as part of the practice in terms of the longer end of those becoming part of the case record?

And again, that second question is, does it make a difference how the documents are submitted to HRA in terms of the length of time it takes for that to become part of the case record?

ADMINISTRATOR FRENCH: I mean, someone, you know, who submits through Access HRA, those documents could get to our indexing site, you know, probably quicker than someone who does a paper document.

But, you know, I will say we monitor very closely, if there's a number of documents that we're

seeing where the number is increasing, and we'll redeploy resources to address that as quickly as possible... (CROSS-TALK)

COUNCIL MEMBER CABÁN: And you testified what the earlier end is. What is the longer range of how long documents may be taking to become part of the case file?

FIRST DEPUTY COMMISSIONER BERRY: I mean, I don't... I have not looked at all the data, but I do look at the data regularly. And I have not seen it go longer than maybe four or five days at the very longest. I'm not saying that is the longest, but I do look at the report fairly regularly and that is...

COUNCIL MEMBER CABÁN: Okay.

FIRST DEPUTY COMMISSIONER BERRY: the outside.

COUNCIL MEMBER CABÁN: How if documentation is missing or unusable for some reason, right? Like and example I'll give are — if it's illegible or it's blurry for some reason, how does the agency notify the applicant or the participant?

ADMINISTRATOR FRENCH: Well, in reviewing documents when someone is doing their interview, we will identify at that point if a document is not

usable or they will be notified through, you know, a notice that we require another version of a document.

COUNCIL MEMBER CABÁN: Okay. And when you aren't with them in person and you're sending out a notice, does... do you explain why... exactly why that submitted documentation is insufficient?

ADMINISTRATOR FRENCH: The notice would indicate that it as needed, but I don't know that it would... I don't believe it would necessarily provide the specific reason as to why.

UNKNOWN: (INAUDIBLE)... (CROSS-TALK)

COUNCIL MEMBER CABÁN: I know, and that's a problem. I mean, I just, again, if they're not coming through our office and we're trying to figure it out together or we're keeping our own records about what they've submitted, you've got a person getting a letter saying your submitted documentation is insufficient, and they have no idea why. They don't know if it's because that document is the wrong document entirely. They don't know that it's simply they sent a blurry copy of the document. They don't know if like... it just... those are just like really, really simple things that would cut down the length of time between getting an application

approved, which to the stories that we've heard today, is like the difference between eating and not eating, the difference between keeping your home and not keeping your home.

And these are just, I mean, to hear these reasons, which seem, you know, like they could be pretty easy fixes, are ,like, (PAUSE) when we have to tell our constituents who walk in the door that this is what's happening, (TIMER CHIMES) it's devastating. And it's hard... it's hard to do. And it shouldn't happen.

I want to ask one more question if that's all right.

So the there was data reported for Local Laws 168 and 170 that showed that a lot of case rejections or closures for both cash assistance and SNAP benefits were due to a failure to provide verification.

So for example, in quarter two of FY25, that's the October to December of 2024, the data shows that 5,452 cash assistance cases were rejected because of failure to provide verification. And so this accounts for 16.5 percent of all of the rejections in that quarter.

1 Have you guys reviewed this category of
2
3 rejections to evaluate whether there are systemic
4 fixes that can be implemented to decrease the number
5 of those rejections?

6 ADMINISTRATOR FRENCH: We do peer... we review the
7 data as is to identify trends where we see things may
8 be growing larger than we have seen them in the past
9 to identify systemic trends.

10 So I would have to get back to you on specifics
11 as it relates to that specific data for that specific
12 period of time. But we are consistently looking at
13 where we see rejection rates or specific codes that
14 maybe are all of a sudden becoming larger to try to
15 identify what might be happening there – Especially
16 if it's something that's happening on our end, we
17 definitely want to fix this. Right?

18 We similarly take our jobs and our
19 responsibilities to New Yorkers extremely seriously
20 and certainly don't want to create challenges and
21 difficulties for folks. You know, our system is large
22 and complicated, and there are definitely places
23 where we can improve. And we're committed to
24 improving and continuing to talk with you about where
25 there are places we can improve the way we provide

documentation to individuals and inform them of what's happening with their application.

COUNCIL MEMBER CABÁN: I would certainly love a follow-up on what sort of conclusion y'all are drawing from, again, that as a specific example.

ADMINISTRATOR FRENCH: Mm-hmm, sure.

COUNCIL MEMBER CABÁN: Because when I read that, what I am concluding is that there's a lot of people being rejected because they aren't able to verify the information they're providing in their application. That's a huge number of rejections. So I would hope to get a response on that. And, thank you, Chair.

ADMINISTRATOR FRENCH: Sure.

CHAIRPERSON AYALA: I want to recognize that we have been joined by Council Member Restler.

Yeah, I see, I mean, I see a lot of today's line of questioning as an opportunity to really work together a little bit closer to try to identify.

I mean, listen I get it, like, DSS is a big agency, and there are a lot of people that we're servicing, and there's a lot of opportunity to miss the mark. I don't think that it's intentional, but I think that it's really important that when we are hearing the consistency in where the we're dropping

the ball, that we're looking more closely at those areas.

And ,you know, but I also want you to you know to see us as partners, right? We're not just here to, like ,you know, wave the finger. We're trying to better understand the system and where those discrepancies lie, so that we can try to alternatively figure out legislative ways, fiscal ways that we can be helpful. But we need to a better job of maybe working together, you know, outside of the council to try to figure out... because every community is also very different, know, there are language issues. I really want to figure out this whole older adult, you know, issue where you have a guardian, a legal guardian, and, you know, make that process a little bit more seamless - individuals with disabilities, you know, like that should all be flagged.

ADMINISTRATOR FRENCH: Absolutely, and we agree as well. We are always looking to improve. And, as I say to all of my staff, at the same time as well, at the end of the day, everyone in this room has the same goal, and that's to serve New Yorkers.

CHAIRPERSON AYALA: Yeah.

ADMINISTRATOR FRENCH: So if there's ways we can work more closely, or there's something we're not seeing in the same way you are, we definitely want to sit down and talk about it and see where we might be able to improve.

CHAIRPERSON AYALA: Yeah, we're problem solvers, and we are very passionate about that.

But ,you know, we've also been on the receiving end of food insecurity and having lived that and knowing what it's like ,you know, to not have food that day. And when I go home at night, and I have a constituent that is telling me that their benefits were stolen, and now I have to tell them there's nothing I can do. I can't sleep that night. Because I know I'm going home, and I'm eating, and I can't... I'm thinking about it and it's horrible. Right? And I get it, there are a lot of things that prevent us from being able to act a little bit more expeditiously.

But it just seems like there's some things that common sense it will tell you that, you know, we need to do something today. Like we can't wait, you know, for anybody to come save us. Like, we have to figure out what the solution is.

And wherever we can be helpful on that end, you know, you can see we're pretty much... we're the biggest pain in the butt, so we can (LAUGHS) we'll sic Council Member Cabán on them.

(LAUGHTER)

CHAIRPERSON AYALA: She likes it, she likes it.

All right. So I want to talk a little bit about the food access and affordability issues.

So the cost of food has continued to rise across the country and many New Yorkers struggle to afford groceries. How is the DSS supporting New Yorkers facing this affordability crisis? And what kind of outreach does the City do to ensure that New Yorkers are aware of the services and support that they may be eligible for?

ADMINISTRATOR FRENCH: Certainly. So we, too, are very concerned about the cost of food prices and how they're increasing. We're equally concerned with parts of the House bill that not only would result in potentially \$230 billion in cuts to SNAP over ten years, but also the proposal to do away with the Thrifty Food Plan, which is, you know, the a plan that really allows for SNAP benefits to be adjusted — not just for cost of living adjustments, but also

when food prices change, when dietary restrictions change, as well as preferences.

And all of those are very much at risk right now, which makes us extremely concerned. I will say when it comes to access to SNAP though, New York City is really far and ahead of many other places around the country. The USDA has an indicator called the Program Access Indicator, which measures what percentage of individuals at or below 125 percent of the federal poverty level are accessing SNAP.

For 2023, which is the most recent data, New York City's rate was 94.9 percent, which is the highest we've ever had. And it was well ahead of the State's, which was 85 percent, and the nation overall which was 80 percent.

So while there's always more we can do, and we're always looking to identify ways in which there are communities we might not be reaching to the best of our abilities, I think it's also important to really highlight what amazing work New York City is doing. That's not just the work of HRA, it's the work of the Council, our community partners, and all of those.

So those are very much ways in which we feel like we are doing well. But we continue to try to amplify

those pieces, definitely also utilizing our partnerships with the 36 NYC benefit partners, who really are, within the communities in which they operate is where, you know, they serve. And they are also best attuned to really identify what might be specific outreach activities that would resonate best in that community. So we rely and partner with them quite a bit as well.

CHAIRPERSON AYALA: Does rent get factored in to a person's monthly expenses as a means of determining how much an individual should be receiving? What other... Because I mean, we have a lot of people that are working, working poor, and they're paying a lot of their income on rent. They may not have enough, you know, to purchase food, but their income makes it so that they're not necessarily eligible. Do you factor in the rent as a...

FIRST DEPUTY COMMISSIONER BERRY: We are unfortunately unable to factor in the full amount of the rent. The amount of rent that we are able to calculate as part of the standard of need for cash assistance and SNAP benefits is capped at the shelter allowance amount, which we all know is inadequate.

CHAIRPERSON AYALA: What is that amount?

FIRST DEPUTY COMMISSIONER BERRY: So for an individual it's \$215 a month. That is the most of the rent expense that we're actually able to calculate when we are determining SNAP and cash eligibility.

CHAIRPERSON AYALA: That's horrible, that's horrible.

It's almost the same thing with Section 8 and any subsidized housing. Like, we're asking folks to pay 30 percent of their income. But instead of asking them to pay 30 percent of their net income, we're asking them to pay 30 percent of their gross income. And for some people, that means an entire check. You know, that's just horrible.

When a person enters a shelter without any source of income, what support does HRA provide to help them access food and other benefits? And where in the process of entering the shelter does that occur?

FIRST DEPUTY COMMISSIONER BERRY: So the first thing we try to... that we do – and we have been doing a lot of work with the shelter providers recently – is to connect people who are eligible for benefits to benefits. And we've been providing shelters with a lot of information about Access HRA and the provider portal so they can support clients.

We're also providing shelters with a lot more information about who in their shelter is in receipt of benefits already and who is not in receipt of benefits, so they know which of their shelter residents to target for benefits applications.

And we're going to start looking at which shelters are doing better jobs than others. And those shelters that have higher numbers of people who may be eligible for benefits and not in receipt of them, we can provide additional training for those shelters.

CHAIRPERSON AYALA: How will you be doing that, and when will you be beginning that process of determining which shelters are doing it and not doing it? Is that like via a survey, or?

FIRST DEPUTY COMMISSIONER BERRY: No we are able to connect our information that we have on who is in receipt of cash and SNAP benefits with the shelter information.

So we provide that information...

CHAIRPERSON AYALA: Okay.

FIRST DEPUTY COMMISSIONER BERRY: directly through the care system, so they know who is in receipt of benefits and who is not in receipt of benefits.

CHAIRPERSON AYALA: Yeah. The question I'm asking, I mean, a lot of the questions that we ask ,you know, are born from conversations that we have with our own constituents. But, in this case, I had a woman that entered shelter, they put her in a temporary site with a kitchen – which is great because she has children – However, she didn't have any money. She had no income, so she couldn't purchase food. And because she has a kitchen, that means that that site is not supplying families with prepared meals. But she also had been there for two or three days already, and nobody had spoken to her about it or asked her if she had access to funding for food. So I had to coach her to go look for whoever the case worker was on-site and make that request.

So I'm just trying to figure out, is there supposed to be a process by which when a person comes in, and they're we're asking them a gazillion questions about their personal life and ,you know, where they live, and if they're married and ,you know, who they're married to – is there a question that says like, what type of income do you have right now? And when they say, "Well I have no income," does a bell ring, to say, "Okay, well you can go to HRA

tomorrow and access emergency food assistance. And they'll help you fill out an application or we can help you fill out application."

Is that supposed to happen or is that not a policy?

FIRST DEPUTY COMMISSIONER BERRY: Absolutely. Shelter providers should...

CHAIRPERSON AYALA: They should have...

FIRST DEPUTY COMMISSIONER BERRY: absolutely be doing that. And in addition, they should be maintaining an emergency pantry on-site to provide food for that day that they arrive if somebody is hungry. And they should have information about nearby community kitchens and food pantries that the families can also access. That is what should happen.

CHAIRPERSON AYALA: So are all sites, temporary sites, outfitted with a with a food pantry, or is it just them?

FIRST DEPUTY COMMISSIONER BERRY: Not every shelter is going to have the space or adequate facilities to maintain an emergency food pantry. But that is generally expected of family shelters— in particular that have kitchens on-site — that they do maintain some emergency pantry supplies.

CHAIRPERSON AYALA: Yeah. So how do we make it so that it is a mandatory part of that conversation? So that we're not waiting until day two, three, or four to realize that you know the family's struggling?

Because ,you know, I get it, on in paper it looks really good. In practice, it's not as... it's not as nice and rosy as ,you know, as we paint it.

I've been in shelter a couple of times, and ,you know, it's been it's been a minute, so I'm hoping and assuming that a lot of things have changed. But based on my conversations with a lot of my constituents, it doesn't look like a lot has changed. And it seems like a lot of the staff is very overwhelmed or not necessarily informed — that they don't have the experience, right, in in making these determinations or... I used to do psychosocial. I worked with older adults that were homebound, and that really helped me, because I got to know the entire person. I didn't make any assumptions. I just, you know, I listened and I had specific questions that I had to ask that were not, you know, too intrusive, but allowed me to gauge where the person was.

And a lot of the times, know, we're not necessarily...we don't have the resources to employ

1 social workers in, you know, in these facilities.
2 Right? That's a funding problem. I get that. But I
3 think that if we give them a set list of questions
4 that are mandatory, you have to ask this, right, you
5 have to... and if this is a yes, then this is what
6 you do ,you know, this is where you go next. I think
7 that that would be really helpful.

8
9 FIRST DEPUTY COMMISSIONER BERRY: Yeah, and it...
10 many of those are mandatory as part of the completing
11 the Independent Living Plan.

12 CHAIRPERSON AYALA: Yeah.

13 FIRST DEPUTY COMMISSIONER BERRY: Especially
14 information about income and benefits and all that.

15 CHAIRPERSON AYALA: Yeah. I just... I'm trying to
16 figure out, how do we do this? How are we proactive
17 in a situation where we don't have much control over
18 who is providing the service and who is interfacing
19 with the client at the moment?

20 So sometimes ,you know, we make it a little bit
21 easier by putting these practices in place and
22 ensuring that, you know, that the providers are
23 complying.

24 Okay, Council Member Restler, did you have any
25 questions?

COUNCIL MEMBER RESTLER: (UN-MIC'D) Not this second. (INAUDIBLE)

CHAIRPERSON AYALA: Okay.

So could you tell us what the actual spending... wait, I don't I don't wanna move too far, because I think I skipped something.

Okay, the American Relief Act of 2025, signed into law on December 21st of 2024, extended the 2018 Farm Bill which included funding for SNAP through September 30, 2025. Rhetoric from the current federal administration, especially in relation to cutting government spending, has caused concerns about whether SNAP funding will be maintained after the Farm Bill expiration.

If SNAP were to be cut or eliminated, has HRA estimated a potential impact on City residents? And what advocacy is the City undertaking to help protect SNAP benefits for New Yorkers?

ADMINISTRATOR FRENCH: Certainly. So, yes, we're extremely concerned about the Farm Bill and potential cuts.

As I've mentioned before, we've estimated that there could be up to \$230 billion in cuts to SNAP over the next ten years. We estimated that that would

1 result into potentially \$870 million in annual
2 funding in SNAP that New York City – and more
3 importantly New York City residents – would lose from
4 their benefits. That would, for a family of three,
5 result in about a \$130 less each month, about \$1,560
6 over a year, which are very real dollars.

7
8 And cuts of that magnitude is not something the
9 City or the State will be able to step in and fill
10 the gap on that. So we're very concerned. We are
11 doing an immense amount of advocacy at the federal
12 level around, you know, these and trying to really
13 highlight the human impact of these types of cuts
14 that they're not numbers, they're people. So we
15 encourage and welcome the Council's partnership, but
16 we are concerned because the estimates we've done are
17 very real and very significant.

18 CHAIRPERSON AYALA: Yeah, I mean...

19 ADMINISTRATOR FRENCH: Along with a variety of
20 other benefits potentially as well.

21 CHAIRPERSON AYALA: Yeah, the Administration is
22 really good at poverty shaming and making people feel
23 like it's their fault that they were born into
24 circumstances beyond their control. And also it does
25 not factor in that we have a number of SNAP

recipients who actually have jobs and have to rely on government aid, because they still can't make ends meet.

So, it really upsets me that we're even having discussion, because I think, when we're on the scale of things, like we're paying for wars that are not even ours, and we're having a discussion about cutting public dollars for people that live in this country, that rely on those benefits to be able to live, it's horrible. It's horrible. And I don't know how the churches don't crumble when they walk in. I digress. It gets me so upset.

The Mayor's Office for Food Policy published *Food Forward NYC: A 10-Year Food Policy Plan* in September of 2022. The most recent progress report was published in July of 2023. One of the plan's long term goals was the establishment of a Food Justice Fund to allocate funding to community driven food projects.

This was slated to start in 2025. Has there been any progress on this goal? And what is the City's plan going forward?

FIRST DEPUTY COMMISSIONER BERRY: I'm sorry what was to be implemented in 2025?

CHAIRPERSON AYALA: All right, the Food Justice Fund, establishment of a Food Justice Fund to allocate funding to community driven food projects.

FIRST DEPUTY COMMISSIONER BERRY: Yeah, I would have to reach out to the Mayor's Office of Food Policy to understand what that is in reference to.

CHAIRPERSON AYALA: Okay. And regarding the budget, what is the actual spending thus far in 2025? I think I asked that... No, that was for the Food Connection program. This is for overall spending on SNAP benefits, I believe.

ADMINISTRATOR FRENCH: I can say in the last fiscal year, the overall spending was about \$5 billion.

CHAIRPERSON AYALA: Five billion? Okay.

So with the EBT card fraud issue, does the federal government give any funding for reimbursements for victims of card skimming?

FIRST DEPUTY COMMISSIONER BERRY: The SNAP benefits were reimbursed through the federal government. Only the federal government has the authority to allow for reimbursement of skimmed SNAP benefits.

CHAIRPERSON AYALA: Okay. And those still haven't been raised... (CROSS-TALK)

FIRST DEPUTY COMMISSIONER BERRY: The cash SNAP skimmed benefits are authorized by the state, and those are... We still have the ability through the state to replace skimmed cash assistance benefits.

CHAIRPERSON AYALA: Okay... Oh, you do?

FIRST DEPUTY COMMISSIONER BERRY: Absolutely.

CHAIRPERSON AYALA: Okay.

FIRST DEPUTY COMMISSIONER BERRY: Absolutely.

Unfortunately, it is the SNAP benefits that tend to be skimmed far more frequently than the cash assistance benefits.

CHAIRPERSON AYALA: Mm-hmm.

FIRST DEPUTY COMMISSIONER BERRY: But it is only the federal government that has stopped the ability for us to replace SNAP benefits. The state still allows us to replace stolen cash assistance benefits.

CHAIRPERSON AYALA: Hmm...

ADMINISTRATOR FRENCH: And I just wanna clarify the \$5 billion was calendar year 2024.

CHAIRPERSON AYALA: Okay.

(PAUSE)

CHAIRPERSON AYALA: Okay, I have two questions on Council Member Hudson's bills.

Intro 245, the universal benefits application, what does DSS believe the creation of this application will cost and how did it come to that determination?

ADMINISTRATOR FRENCH: So for 245, the estimate is the primarily technology that would be required to create an application do universal and then all of the things needed in the back end. That would be approximately \$30 million. And the estimate is based on similar projects.

FIRST DEPUTY COMMISSIONER BERRY: Right, it's based on similar costs to add programs and develop the Access HRA common application.

CHAIRPERSON AYALA: Does DSS believe that there are City benefit programs for which applications can be combined?

ADMINISTRATOR FRENCH: I think we would want to do a further sort of assessment, but, you know, the primary benefits that people come to us for would not be able to be combined into a universal application such as cash assistance, SNAP, Medicaid.

1 So we would need to look at the other benefits
2 that are both HRA and also provided by other agencies
3 to determine that. Where we can, we have tried to
4 simplify the application processes. So for
5 individuals who apply for cash, they also are
6 automatically applying for SNAP and Medicaid, because
7 in most instances, if you're eligible for cash,
8 you're eligible for those two benefits as well and
9 you'll be enrolled. If for some reason you're not
10 eligible for cash, we'll automatically do a separate
11 determination for SNAP and Medicaid separately to
12 determine if individuals are eligible for that.

14 We also utilize SNAP applications to determine if
15 someone may be potentially eligible for Fair Fares.
16 And if someone is, that we've determined they meet
17 the income requirements, we will actually fast track
18 those individuals where we will inform them that they
19 are eligible for this benefit. They would just need
20 to agree to the terms and conditions, and we'll
21 automatically enroll them in that.

22 And we try to do a similar thing with HEAP, which
23 is the state heating benefit for individuals who
24 apply for cash and SNAP. We'll determine if we think
25 they may be eligible for the heating benefit, and if

they are we would auto enroll them. That's usually for most people a one-time benefit of \$25 to \$50.

Those are things we've been able to do within sort of the state and federal requirements we have in working closely with our state and federal oversights to get agreement. We do have concerns about trying to create a much broader universal application, but also happy to sit down and discuss further through that and...

CHAIRPERSON AYALA: Isn't that what Access NYC does though? I mean, I haven't gone on the site...

ADMINISTRATOR FRENCH: Right.

CHAIRPERSON AYALA: in a while, but isn't the objective of Access NYC that a person puts all of their information and then it determines the what a person qualifies for or not?

FIRST DEPUTY COMMISSIONER BERRY: It determines what you may or may not be eligible for, yes, but then an individual has to reenter all of that same information into the actual application for those individual programs. It doesn't automatically transmit or result in an application. It's just a screening tool.

CHAIRPERSON AYALA: Okay. I mean, I would think that that would be a little bit easier and faster, because you're killing a whole bunch of birds with one stone. How long... the animal rights people, do not come at me for that. Sometimes I just say things.

The bill also calls for a report on... Well, first question, if assuming that something like this were able to be done, how long do you estimate it would take to create a universal application?

ADMINISTRATOR FRENCH: I think I can talk about the assessment piece first and then the technology behind it.

But to do an assessment piece of that could be a significant piece of time. Because estimating it will require us to really look at the specific additional regulations or statutes that govern it – and to determine instances where the City could maybe do something on their own, which is going to be few and far between, versus where we're going to need to partner with the state and federal government. So it's it could be an extensive period of time depending on the benefits themselves.

I will say, especially at the federal level, anything that relates to SNAP, the USDA is very, uh,

they have a lot of parameters around what data can and cannot be used that's submitted for SNAP that could also be utilized for other things.

CHAIRPERSON AYALA: All right. The bill also calls for a feasibility study that would help us understand if it's even possible to create a universal benefits application. Are you supportive of that?

ADMINISTRATOR FRENCH: We are open to doing, you know, a feasibility study and discussing with the Council – we'd be happy to sit down with the Council and the sponsor to talk a little bit more in depth about specific benefit programs and what our initial estimates would be on those to see what potentially came from that in regards to identifying other steps.

CHAIRPERSON AYALA: Okay. The bill also codifies Access NYC, does DSS support that?

FIRST DEPUTY COMMISSIONER BERRY: Yeah, It's a screening tool, but it is a good screening tool that does provide people with a lot of good valuable information about the benefits they may be eligible for.

CHAIRPERSON AYALA: Okay, now, 1028 the auto enrollment for city programs bill, I understand that the agency is concerned about automatic enrollment as

How could this bill better meet your concerns about choice?

ADMINISTRATOR FRENCH: I think first, you know, as we sort of said about Access NYC, that is a screening tool that does identify for individuals what they may be eligible for. You know, actual applications for specific benefits are very sort of controlled depending on the benefits. So we don't have a lot of freedom there, as well as we don't really have a lot of flexibility around sort of auto enrolling people in specific benefits. You know, we're happy to discuss it more, but there are also instances where someone may be potentially eligible for a benefit, but for a variety of reasons we are not aware of, they're not interested in accessing that benefit or applying for that benefit, but we'd be happy to discuss further with the sponsor and the Council. But there are very real limitations beyond what I had

sort of highlighted before in regards to just us being able to automatically enroll people into benefits.

CHAIRPERSON AYALA: My final question is what data does DSS not have access to that it would need to determine automatic enrollment? And what agencies do you believe have this information? How could we ensure that you receive it to administer an automatic enrollment program?

ADMINISTRATOR FRENCH: That would really depend the specific benefits that we're looking at. But, again, many of our bedrock benefits are very much guided by state and federal regulations in regards to how we receive the information – applying for those benefits – and what we are or are not able to do with that information outside of the specific benefit someone is being considered for.

CHAIRPERSON AYALA: Okay. Any questions from my colleagues? Yes?

COUNCIL MEMBER RESTLER: How are you?

ADMINISTRATOR FRENCH: Good, how are you?

COUNCIL MEMBER RESTLER: Good to see Administrator French.

ADMINISTRATOR FRENCH: You, too.

COUNCIL MEMBER RESTLER: First slightly, relatedly, I just was wondering if you had any further updates on the timeline for the work requirements to take effect for a public assistance recipients? Do we have any additional updates?

ADMINISTRATOR FRENCH: Certainly. Yes, so ,you know, the rollout will happen in waves, not everybody is going to start at the same time.

COUNCIL MEMBER RESTLER: Right.

ADMINISTRATOR FRENCH: The first wave will begin in mid April where a group of people will be...

COUNCIL MEMBER RESTLER: Any sense of the scale of that first wave?

ADMINISTRATOR FRENCH: I can get back to you on that. They were sort of looking at the numbers of those things. But we are trying to do it intentionally. Right? And not overwhelm the system or overwhelm people. This is something we're restarting it after several years of not doing it. So, we want to be very thoughtful. And it is also a combination of individuals currently on the caseload, as well as new individuals coming into the system. So people coming into the system will be automatically put into

the process, as well as we are now going to be able to be reengaging with...

COUNCIL MEMBER RESTLER: How frequently, uh, what is the cadence of these waves?

ADMINISTRATOR FRENCH: They will be monthly through, right now, the end of the year.

COUNCIL MEMBER RESTLER: So over the course of about seven-eight months, we'll go from zero to 60?

ADMINISTRATOR FRENCH: In a nut... yeah, most of... (CROSS-TALK)

COUNCIL MEMBER RESTLER: (INAUDIBLE) a population of public (INAUDIBLE) this... this is...

ADMINISTRATOR FRENCH: Most... Most... The goal is to have engaged almost all of the populations we need to.

COUNCIL MEMBER RESTLER: And could you just, if you would, if you happen to have this at your fingertips, my understanding is that failure to comply with this federal requirement would lead to the city and state losing out on significant federal funds. Can you speak to the scale of the funding that we would lose if we did not comply with the work requirements?

ADMINISTRATOR FRENCH: I can't speak specifically to the scale just because we haven't experienced this before. And this is not something the federal government has really been implementing that much. So there isn't a lot for us to specifically look at. But what I can say, it is a requirement; the requirement is actually connected to the Work Participation Rate the State is meant to get for individuals on TANF (Temporary Assistance for Needy Families). That's almost exclusively families with children. And those rates are set at the federal level. And missing those rates will incur fiscal penalties. My understanding is that the penalties could be on a sliding scale depending on how close or far you are from the rate you were supposed to meet. But, the details of that, we don't fully have, but we expect it to be potentially in the tens of millions of dollars or more.

COUNCIL MEMBER RESTLER: Right.

ADMINISTRATOR FRENCH: But we don't have specifics on it...

COUNCIL MEMBER RESTLER: In your...

ADMINISTRATOR FRENCH: But it's significant.

COUNCIL MEMBER RESTLER: And your current modeling is that you are anticipating 40,000 additional public assistance recipients will take advantage – will need, I should say – child care vouchers...

ADMINISTRATOR FRENCH: Mm-hmm.

COUNCIL MEMBER RESTLER: to be able to manage the work requirements. That's right?

ADMINISTRATOR FRENCH: That would, uh, will need and will be eligible. Right? There's a couple of things going on – I will say, pre-COVID we averaged about 41,000 in cash assistance clients accessing child care. So that was sort of the pre-COVID baseline. Currently we are at about 23,000, and we do expect for that to increase to about 63,000 between now and January of 2027, where we think it would stabilize. So ,you know, the increase we expect is due to a couple of things – A, the caseload of cash assistance is much larger than it was 2019. And there was also a change in child care certification periods. So individuals are certified for 12 months, and they can remain... have that child care for 12 months...

COUNCIL MEMBER RESTLER: Right.

ADMINISTRATOR FRENCH: even if at some point an individual dropped off the caseload, say for noncompliance. So there are a couple of things going on in our model that result in the increase in need we see.

COUNCIL MEMBER RESTLER: And just for our benefit, as these state budget negotiations are unfolding in real-time, are you able to share with us updates on a monthly basis on people that are taking advantage of child care vouchers, mandates vouchers? Is there an interval of updates that can be shared with the Council so that if your modeling was more or less, was higher or lower than anticipated that we can adjust accordingly and think creatively as... I imagine that this is going to be... depending on how they navigate this in Albany, this will be an important conversation for the city budget as well.

ADMINISTRATOR FRENCH: Absolutely, we can look at what would be the right interval to update on utilization as it relates to child care... (CROSS-TALK)

COUNCIL MEMBER RESTLER: Do you think...

ADMINISTRATOR FRENCH: We will be tracking it very closely to see...

COUNCIL MEMBER RESTLER: Perfect...

ADMINISTRATOR FRENCH: if your trends analysis and sort of model is on the mark, under the mark, above the mark, so that can be... (CROSS-TALK)

COUNCIL MEMBER RESTLER: Do you think we could anticipate (TIMER CHIMES) like April and May and June updates to inform budgetary decisions? Is that a... I mean, I don't mean to put you exactly on the spot, but...

ADMINISTRATOR FRENCH: Right.

COUNCIL MEMBER RESTLER: on an interval of the updates or whatever. But do you think we will be getting data updates from you this spring that can inform budget decisions?

ADMINISTRATOR FRENCH: I think that we anticipate seeing significant start of shifts in this probably in June as we sort of start... The way in which the system works out mostly is because have time to determine if they need or access or child care through the application process. So someone who applies say in April, and has a mandatory requirement, has that 30 days and potentially we could give them more time if they say they need child

care but have not been able to find it yet. So we need a couple of months to actually... (CROSS-TALK)

COUNCIL MEMBER RESTLER: So you have the...

ADMINISTRATOR FRENCH: (INAUDIBLE)...

COUNCIL MEMBER RESTLER: So just to just to reality say...

ADMINISTRATOR FRENCH: I don't...

COUNCIL MEMBER RESTLER: You don't think we are going to have much data that's going to tell us much by June?

ADMINISTRATOR FRENCH: I don't think that would be able to inform budgetary negotiations, I don't.

COUNCIL MEMBER RESTLER: That's helpful to understand. Thank you for the chance to raise a slightly germane, but not exactly on-topic question. Thank you for the answers.

CHAIRPERSON AYALA: He just had a baby so he's very dedicated.

I don't have any further questions. I just want to add that I am really serious in terms of partnering with DSS to try to... We need to... This is a very difficult year, and with all of the threats that are coming from the federal government that will trickle down to our state budget, that will then

1 trickle down to the city budget, we need to be as
2 aggressive as we can. So please utilize us - letter
3 writing campaigns, calls, go and sleep ,you know, in
4 front of the White House, whatever you want to do, we
5 are there. But I think this is a time to really show
6 a united front that this is the time. We cannot
7 afford to lose a single cent here in New York City.
8 Too many people rely on those services, and they rely
9 on us to make sure that they have them readily
10 available.
11

12 Thank you so much for being here today. And I
13 look forward to hearing more during the Executive
14 Budget cycle. And, definitely, please ask for
15 whatever it is that you need, realistically.

16 FIRST DEPUTY COMMISSIONER BERRY: Thank you.

17 ADMINISTRATOR FRENCH: Thank you very much.

18 FIRST DEPUTY COMMISSIONER BERRY: We appreciate
19 it.

20 CHAIRPERSON AYALA: Thank you.

21 We are going to take a five minute break, and
22 then we are going to start with the panel
23 discussions.

24 (PAUSE)
25

CHAIRPERSON AYALA: I now open the hearing for public testimony. I remind members of the public that this is a formal government proceeding and that decorum shall be observed at all times. As such, members of the public shall remain silent at all times.

The witness table is reserved for people who wish to testify. No video recording or photography is allowed from the witness table. Further, members of the public may not present audio or video recordings as testimony, but may submit transcripts of such recordings to the Sergeant at Arms for inclusion in the hearing record.

If you wish to speak at today's hearing, please fill out an appearance card with the Sergeant at Arms and wait to be recognized. When recognized, you will have two minutes to speak on today's hearing topic: *Hunger and Food Insecurity in New York City* – or any of the three bills that we are hearing today.

If you have a written statement or additional testimony you wish to submit for the record, please provide a copy of that testimony to the Sergeant at Arms.

You may also email written testimony to testimony@council.nyc.gov within 72 hours after the close of this hearing. Audio and video recordings will not be accepted.

We will now call the first panel: Lynette Brown, Lakesha Morris, Molly Eckerle, and Joseph Rosenberg.

Hello, either one of you on either end, you want to begin? Okay, just make sure that the mic is on.

MOLLY ECKERLE: Good afternoon, Chair Ayala, and fellow committee members, thank you for holding this hearing today. My name is Molly Eckerle, and I'm the Food Policy Associate at the Metropolitan Council on Jewish Poverty.

I'm here today on behalf of Met Council's food programs. We operate the largest Kosher food pantry network in the country providing Kosher and Halal observant food assistance to 200,000 New Yorkers annually regardless of religious observance.

It's on behalf of those we serve and all New Yorkers that we and our partners, Catholic Charities and Hispanic Federation, urgently request that City Council allocate \$20 million in discretionary funding for emergency funding for food pantries.

During the pandemic, at the height of need and uncertainty, New York City wisely created a special fund for emergency food, allowing us to deploy needed resources to areas with limited pantry and social service infrastructure, to communities with religiously informed or culturally nuanced diets, which are often left out of the emergency food system, and to programs that facilitated increased access to emergency food. Due to the success of this initiative, we're urging City Council to commit \$20 million to continue and expand the important work that has been done.

Additionally, we want to express our support for the Council's decision to call on the Administration to baseline fund Community Food Connection at \$100 million and reiterate the importance of this program.

New Yorkers observing religiously informed diets will go without food if the emergency food system does not provide appropriate products. CFC provides flexible funding that allows Met Council to purchase the products that clients want and need. Because of this incredible flexibility, City Council must continue to invest in programs like CFC that meet the needs of all hungry New Yorkers.

The decisions made by this committee will impact the lives of millions of our neighbors. Allocating \$20 million in discretionary funding for food pantries and funding CFC at a baseline of \$100 million, this committee can benefit all food insecure New Yorkers, including those with religiously informed dietary restrictions.

We thank you for your time today, and we hope to continue to work with this committee and City Council to fight food insecurity.

JOE ROSENBERG: Good afternoon, Chair Ayala, I'm Joe Rosenberg, the Executive Director of the Catholic Community Relations Council. Thank you for holding this hearing. Its focus could not be more timely. And thank you for being such a tremendous supporter of all of our food pantries.

Catholic Charities of the Archdiocese of New York and Catholic charities of Brooklyn and Queens have been providing shelter, food and clothing to New Yorkers for more than a century. These two charities combined, along with parishes in both dioceses, operate over 80 food pantries throughout the five boroughs, and serve more than 80 million meals annually.

Both organizations, as well as other nonprofit human service providers, have faced many challenges feeding hungry New Yorkers over the years. Right now, this challenge is at a crisis level due to several factors – these include the increasing poverty rate of New Yorkers; the dramatic increase in rents, including the rising percentage of households who are rent burdened and paying over 50 percent of their income on rent; and even more significantly, the uncertain status of federal programs such as SNAP and the Emergency Food and Shelter Program that provide essential funding to address food insecurity for vulnerable Americans.

Non profit providers have seen the number of clients at pantries increase significantly. We are not just assisting more working families, seniors and children at our pantries, newer clients include college students; recent college graduates who are either unemployed or underemployed; youth aging out of foster care; and new migrants, many of them with infants.

The plight of hungry children is particularly heartbreaking with more than one in four now city living in poverty. That is why with more New Yorkers

going hungry, we urge that \$20 million in emergency food for pantries be included in the FY26 New York City Budget for both Catholic Charities as well as our partners, Met Council and the Hispanic Federation.

Spurred on by rapid food inflation, clients as well as the pantry serving them, have been negatively impacted financially. As a result, we have difficulty providing as much fresh food to clients as in previous years due to these costs. With more New Yorkers relying on pantries, we are forced to distribute dry goods and canned and jarred products rather than fresh produce to ensure that our clients do not leave hungry. Our mission is to serve needy New Yorkers and help stem their hunger while providing them (TIMER CHIMES) with the healthiest food options possible.

Our city faces daunting challenges, but few would disagree that our most important priority would be to ensure that New Yorkers do not go hungry. We therefore call for your support including this essential \$20 million in the City Budget. Thank you.

LAKESHA MORRIS: Good afternoon, Chair Ayala, my name is Lakesha Morris, and I am the Division

Director for Food and Housing Stability at Catholic Charities Communities Services.

Catholic Charities is committed to serving vulnerable populations, providing assistance to those in need across the Bronx, Manhattan, and Staten Island. Just last year we served over 5.8 million meals to over 58,000 unique households of a total of 650,000 individuals. Rising demand and challenge that we are seeing today is about 25 percent increase in the number of people that are food insecure coming to our pantries and that's due to the lack of SNAP benefits, food inflation costs, and lack of income.

As donations decrease and food costs rise, it's especially essential needs like eggs, meat, fresh produce that many of our community members need. The demand has grown but the resources are dwindling at this point. Funding shortages with the federal and city level is really crippling our ability to make sure that every household that is in need of food is able to access it.

What we're asking for is to consider funding \$20 million in the City funding to allow us to be able to do the vital work that needs to be done to serve our community members so no one goes hungry. In addition

to that, we are asking that we restore and increase CFC funding, make it stable, so we don't have to sit here every year wondering how we're going to feed our New Yorkers in need.

And in addition to that, we would really appreciate your support in our state ask as it relates to SNAP and food assistance funding – like FSAP for instance – that is on hold today, (TIMER CHIMES) that has crippled many of our pantries, and I thank you for your time.

LYNETTE BROWN: Good afternoon, Chair Ayala, and fellow committee chair members. I am Lynette Brown, Food Resource Coordinator for Catholic Charities Brooklyn and Queens. I have worked within our network of 61 food pantries throughout Brooklyn And Queens since 2023. Before that, I was a volunteer at an at our network pantry, Benedict the Moor in Jamaica and Our Lady of Mercy in Brownsville. I'm happy to be here today as the subject of food and hunger insecurity in New York City is close to my heart.

Since the pandemic, many of our pantries have seen an increase in attendance of 1,000 percent or more. Small parish pantries that fed 25 to 30 people each week started seeing 400 to 500 clients. Things

1 started to level off in 2021, and while we never went
2 back to pre-pandemic numbers, things became more
3 manageable. By 2023, our network of 61 pantries was
4 feeding an average of 25,000 people a month. But we
5 have seen a steady increase in the number of people
6 needing food, and it is a diverse population that
7 spans from young adults to elderly, working families,
8 college students, and the underemployed.

10 Our pantries in Southern Brooklyn, especially Our
11 Lady of Miracles in Canarsie, have seen an influx of
12 newly arrived Haitians and Ukrainians.

13 We are seeing more and more young people come to
14 us for help. Last year, we opened a pantry at Our
15 Lady of Sorrows in Corona. Many of the clients, have
16 families with young children or they're helping
17 support their parents.

18 Our pantries in Long Island City and Woodside
19 Queens are seeing larger number of people than ever
20 before. Since the fall of 2024, we are feeding a
21 total average of 37,000 people a month throughout all
22 of our food pantries in Brooklyn and Queens.

23 The price of food is rising and funding is
24 becoming more difficult. As hard as last year was,
25 this year is proving even more difficult. The

uncertainty of what lies ahead for federal government has everyone nervous. (TIMER CHIMES) The price of staples such as eggs, butter, milk, fresh fruit, and vegetables has surged. These increases have forced us to change our food distribution.

Please support our continuing efforts to feed hungry New Yorkers by providing \$20 million in emergency food pantry monies in the fiscal year 2026 New York City Budget. Thank you.

CHAIRPERSON AYALA: Thank you. I was going to ask a question, Lynette, about the increase but you spoke very eloquently about that.

LYNETTE BROWN: Yes.

CHAIRPERSON AYALA: But my question, Joe, think is the around the \$20 million ask. Is that consistent with the funds that we were able to get allocated throughout the pandemic when we saw, you know, the need for more resources at our local pantries grow?

JOE ROSENBERG: I'm sorry, could you repeat that?

CHAIRPERSON AYALA: The \$20 million, is that comparable with funding... with the funding that was provided during the pandemic, the onset of the pandemic, the additional funding that was given to

1 food pantries to make up the difference for the
2 increase in population?

3
4 JOE ROSENBERG: It's helpful. I mean, I think the
5 \$20 million was basically chosen because we're all
6 suffering such need. It wasn't particularly
7 quantified, but you were obviously indispensable in
8 helping to provide the \$1 million which each of us
9 has \$250,000 with from last fiscal year.

10 But things have deteriorated, prices have
11 increased, references were made to the emergency food
12 and shelter program, and both Catholic Charities have
13 sustained loss of \$800,000 each in this program. And
14 that doesn't even include the \$230 billion that
15 Congress appears to be poised to reduce and SNAP.

16 So, the \$20 will be absolutely indispensable.
17 Will it offset what is coming in our direction from
18 the feds? Unlikely. But it will prevent people from
19 going hungry.

20 CHAIRPERSON AYALA: I appreciate it. And I
21 appreciate all of you and the work that you do each
22 and every day. And we will continue to support those
23 efforts as well. Thank you so much for your testimony
24 today.

25 PANEL: Thank you.

CHAIRPERSON AYALA: Our next panel is Eric Lee, Rachel Sabella, Lo Anderson, and Shirley de Peña. Whoever wants to begin first on either end? You want to begin first? Just make sure that the light is red.

SHIRLEY DE PEÑA: I submitted written testimony, so I'm just going to give highlights, briefer highlights.

Good afternoon, Chairperson Ayala, and members of the General Welfare Committee. My name is Shirley de Peña, and I serve as a Director in the Central Office of Student Affairs and the Liaison to the Campus Resource Centers and Food Pantries at CUNY.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify. I begin by expressing my sincere gratitude for your support of CUNY's food security initiatives. Food insecurity is one of the most urgent challenges facing CUNY students today. When students struggle to afford food, they often face increased stress, difficulty concentrating in class, and a greater likelihood of dropping out. Many of our students are already balancing coursework with jobs, family responsibilities, and financial hardships.

CUNY has food pantries operating at 18 undergraduate colleges and two professional schools.

Our students can visit any food pantry, regardless of their campus of attendance. These food pantries do more than just provide groceries. Many pantries are located within Campus Resource Centers where staff assist students in applying for SNAP, emergency financial aid, and connecting with other critical services such as housing assistance and mental health counseling.

The need for these services has grown at an alarming rate. In 2024 alone, CUNY food pantries recorded more than 206,000 visits, an extraordinary increase from 58,941 visits in 2022, and 146,544 visits in 2023.

Beyond food pantries, City Council funding has allowed CUNY to implement the Fresh Food Bag Program, providing students with fresh produce, bread, eggs, and culturally appropriate food options, helping to alleviate hunger, while also creating opportunities for students to connect with vital support services on campus.

(TIMER CHIMES) Despite the success of these initiatives, demand continues to outpace available resource. CUNY students are hard working, resilient, and deeply committed to their education, but no

1 student should have to choose between paying for
2 textbooks and putting food on the table. If we want
3 our students to succeed, we must ensure they have
4 access to fundamental resources they need to thrive.
5

6 I urge the Council to continue and expand its
7 investment in food security programs at the cost of
8 \$1.125 million at CUNY. With additional resources, we
9 can sustain and grow our food pantry operations,
10 expand the Fresh Food Bag Program, and enhance the
11 critical support services that help students. Thank
12 you for your time.

13 ERIC LEE: Hi, good afternoon. Thank you, Deputy
14 Speaker Ayala, and members of the Committee and
15 central staff for being here today and allowing me
16 the opportunity to testify.

17 I am Eric Lee, Director Of Public Policy for
18 Volunteers of America Greater New York, a 129-year-
19 old anti-poverty organization which seeks to end
20 homelessness in the Greater New York area through
21 housing, health, and wealth building services.

22 I submitted written testimony which I will
23 summarize given the time.

24 Thank you, Deputy Speaker Ayala and members of
25 the Committee for your steadfast commitment to

protecting the human services safety net. Hunger and food insecurity for low-income households is already far too common and, unfortunately, it's only going to get worse.

With regards to federal cuts, we urge the Council to use your voice to call on Congress to maintain and increase funding for SNAP as commissioner Park estimates that 1.8 million New Yorkers rely on this critical lifeline and could cost the City up to \$900 million per year if Congress does not back away from proposed cuts.

We also urge the Council to call on Congress to restore funding to the Emergency Food and Shelter Program or FSAP, which was testified by others today.

VOA-GNY utilizes this funding to feed survivors of domestic violence within our seven DV programs. And FEMA halted \$3.9 million in congressionally approved funding to us and 96 other FSAP recipients in New York City beginning on January 27th.

Given these federal cuts, we urge the Council and Administration to double down on local resources to keep New Yorkers fed. VOA-GNY greatly appreciates the Brooklyn Delegation's current support for our food pantries program, which is utilized to create food

pantries within our SRO supportive housing sites, as well as offer culturally appropriate meals and fresh food options within our shelters in Brooklyn.

We ask the Council to please consider our FY26 request of \$20,000 per borough to the Bronx Delegation, (TIMER CHIMES) Brooklyn Delegation, and Manhattan Delegation to further expand this critically needed program.

Do you mind if I offer comments about the legislation? Okay, thank you.

With regards to the legislation being considered today, for Intro 245, we're supportive of DSS exploring the feasibility of creating a universal benefits application. But one flag we have is it's not clear to us how City benefits are defined based on § 21-151 of the code.

For Intro 1028, we're supportive of streamlining public benefits, but we recommend that enrollment must have an opt-in requirement – rather than an opt out – for each adult in the household to make sure that they wish to receive benefits and avoid inadvertently harming their personal situation. Examples where this could be problematic include survivors of domestic violence who are fleeing their

1 abuser, young people who are seeking emancipation
2 from the parent or legal guardians as both of those
3 cases, if they're already added to a household and
4 are trying to apply for their own benefits, would be
5 denied. And we also are concerned about immigrant
6 households who would be seeking permanent residency
7 status given the public charge concerns around that.

8
9 Finally, for Intro 148, we strongly endorse this
10 legislation to require DSS to provide receipts and
11 for applications for benefits and services. We
12 recommend the receipt also be automatically uploaded
13 to the applicant's Access HRA account, so that they
14 can download it on demand should they lose their
15 paper copy. And the receipt should also include the
16 name and email address of the DSS caseworker to allow
17 for timely follow-up by the client or provider, as
18 well as foster additional transparency and
19 accountability within the process.

20 Thank you for the opportunity to testify today.

21 (PAUSE)

22 RACHEL SABELLA: Good afternoon; my name is
23 Rachel Sabella, and I have the honor and privilege
24 of serving as the Director of No Kid Hungry New
25 York. Chair, I want to thank you for your steadfast

work on this. What we heard today was how important this is, how you're holding the Administration accountable. We are lucky to have you leading in this battle, and I am proud to call you one of my hunger heroes. So thank you.

I also want to thank the full Council body and the staff. This council has always come together to fight for what is right and to put food on the table. Last year when the Administration cut school meal programs in the middle of the year, it was this body that got it restored in a month. It was this body that worked with us to get information out to families on summer EBT this year, and I so admire the work that Council is doing for immigrant families right now. This is more needed than ever before.

I have worked on anti-hunger programs for more than ten years. I have never seen anything quite like what we're facing right now. We just did a survey of New Yorkers, and what we found is half of New Yorkers are going into debt to pay for groceries; 86 percent have said their incomes are not rising as fast as grocery prices. New Yorkers also told us that not only is this stretching their

So you have my written testimony with all the data and policy recommendations and things. But I just wanna sum up my ask in two ways. One is we want this entire body to work together, again in a bipartisan way as we advocate in Washington. (TIMER CHIMES) It's not about politics. It's about what's right. It's really scary what these SNAP cuts could be, the proposals, whether limiting choice, cutting benefits, pushing costs onto states. It could have a devastating effect. There are also potential rollbacks to school meal programs. That's something we wanna keep in mind when New York City is giving

free meals to every child and when the State has a major proposal there too.

My second ask, and I will be very quick, and I think the word proactive was said by every Council member today. How are we making sure the Administration is being proactive? I think about school meal programs. There is so much growth for participation in school breakfast that doesn't have a financial implication. What is the Administration doing? Is SNAP outreach happening in school buildings and after school programs, that TA to help people get their summer EBT benefits? Are people getting information about where pantries are? We know they can't fix the SNAP skimming, but there are other things that we can do.

We also know New Yorkers are afraid, and they have trusted sources that they can go to for support, and we want to make sure the Administration continues to support them.

So I thank you for everything you and the entire team are doing. Please count us in in this work, and we are here together to make sure No Kid Hungry is a reality.

LO ANDERSON: Good afternoon, thank you so much for the opportunity to testify this afternoon.

My name is Lo Anderson; and I'm the Student Engagement Coordinator for a program called CUNY Cares. It's a pilot program right now that is a combination of the CUNY Office of Transformation and the Graduate School of Public Health. So we hope by FY26 to prove to the CUNY chancellor that this is a program that is worthy to spread to the other CUNY campuses.

So what do we do as CUNY Care Student Navigators? We meet the student with peer to peer support by helping them – and I call public assistance litigation, everyday litigation, right? So, do you respect and qualify college students as the everyday litigators that they – so 18,000 folks across the three Bronx campuses that we serve, so Hostos Community College, which I am a graduate, Bronx Community College, and Lehman College together. They have already been leading the way in terms of food security through their Access Resource Center, which you heard my colleague highlight. So, we have our local superheroes of Madeline Cruz, Dawn Daniels, Rain Diaz, Baraka

1 Corley who lead the conversation on food insecurity
2 every single day on campus and help students who
3 are coming to campus hungry. Because there's no way
4 that we can continue to advocate for higher
5 education — folks actually learning in the
6 classroom while they're hungry, and worrying about
7 losing their housing, and, furthermore benefits in
8 the midst of that.
9

10 So it was interesting to be in this hearing and
11 participate. I do want to thank you for the
12 accountability of all three of these legislations
13 that are providing some sense of accountability
14 towards DSS. Because I can tell you from the direct
15 service level there hasn't been a lot of it for us.

16 Fair Fares, specifically I can say, while
17 expanded eligibility has been introduced, I can
18 tell you that a student who works 40 hours at
19 McDonald's does not qualify for the Fair Fares
20 program currently.

21 I can tell you that students that I advocate for
22 on the ground every day in, order to access or
23 process a One-Shot Deal for housing arrears or
24 anything that they deal with, is upwards of six
25 applications in order to process it correctly.

(TIMER CHIMES) Thirty to 45 days is the full day that is set by DSS in terms of determination, and we find that it is egregiously more than that. So imagine a student dealing with a one semester, 30 to 45 days is simply insufficient.

So we appreciate your support, and we're asking for \$300,000 to expand upon the work of these resource centers and move CUNY CARES to all City University of New York campuses. Thank you.

CHAIRPERSON AYALA: Thank you so much. So you know, you're asking for \$300,000 more or \$300,000...

LO ANDERSON: I believe that's in addition. I know that we have asked from the Bronx Delegation as well. And we are advocating at the state level for \$4 million to expand the program.

CHAIRPERSON AYALA: Okay, all right, perfect.

Mr. Lee, I had a question for you. The food pantry programs within the shelter system, are those funded through the City or are those funded through the nonprofit organizations that are running the shelter?

ERIC LEE: So, we receive funding through our DHS contracts for food, for our shelters where people do not cook for themselves.

CHAIRPERSON AYALA: Uh-huh?

ERIC LEE: But, at the same time, we also layer on the funding from the Brooklyn Borough Delegation to enhance it, unfortunately, the DHS contracts to do not pay...

CHAIRPERSON AYALA: Enough...

ERIC LEE: a very high amount for the food. And we want to be able to offer culturally appropriate, nutritious, fresh foods to our people within our facilities.

CHAIRPERSON AYALA: So in in the case of an individual, like the one that I referenced that was in shelter for several days, didn't have any income, did not have a SNAP case open; she's in a shelter where she can cook if she had the food. In situations like that, in in shelters that are run by your organization, are those folks automatically screened for food insecurity to ensure that...

ERIC LEE: Our caseworkers work with our clients to get them on public benefits. If they cook themselves, or if they have facilities that can

1 cook in there, for at least in Brooklyn, we have
2 the ability to then have those food pantries to
3 offer food if their food stamps run out. If they're
4 a little short, we have that extra cushion there
5 based upon the Council support.
6

7 We would love to be able to offer it within also
8 Manhattan and the Bronx, which is why we expanded
9 our ask this year to those two borough delegations
10 as well.

11 CHAIRPERSON AYALA: So the City only provides
12 funding for shelters where there is no cooking
13 facility... no cooking available? Right?

14 ERIC LEE: Yeah, for shelter facilities where
15 clients do not have kitchens within their units...

16 CHAIRPERSON AYALA: Uh-huh?

17 ERIC LEE: They would offer food, uh, prepared
18 meals for the clients.

19 CHAIRPERSON AYALA: Okay. And in the cases where
20 the person can cook, those pantries, if there is
21 one, are funded through the Council funding?

22 ERIC LEE: For our sites. Not at...

23 CHAIRPERSON AYALA: But you're not receiving any
24 other funding to run those?
25

ERIC LEE: So for DHS facilities where people cook for themselves...

CHAIRPERSON AYALA: Uh-huh?

ERIC LEE: Not every building would have pantries. That is based on a building by building, contract by contract thing. And that is how we try to creatively use funding with VOA. But that's not something that I'm... I can't speak to every provider.

CHAIRPERSON AYALA: Mm-hmm.

ERIC LEE: But that's how we do the food services within our buildings.

CHAIRPERSON AYALA: And how soon does the caseworker, they're interfacing with the client do the assessment, makes the assessment on whether or not that individual may or may not need emergency food?

ERIC LEE: I can get back to you on that information. The other thing is to speak more broadly to how VOH works, is the FSAP program we use that to enhance food options within our DV programs. So trying to creatively look at how we can enhance the services and options to ensure that, holistically, people within our buildings

1 have the food that the need, connections to care,
2 services and other things. And that is one way in
3 which, as I mentioned in my testimony, we are
4 concerned that with the freezing of those funds
5 from Congress, that we would welcome the Council's
6 support in calling on Congress to push FEMA to
7 release that. Because that is not within FEMA's
8 authority currently.

9
10 CHAIRPERSON AYALA: Perfect thank you.

11 Did you want to add something?

12 SHIRLEY DE PEÑA: I just wanted to add with
13 respect to the DHS process, there are places and
14 units — we have a lot of students living in shelter,
15 period. So that's the reality.

16 And we do have programs that are coming out to
17 combat that, but in the interim, I do hear constantly
18 from my students who are living in shelter that their
19 access to food as they live in shelter is decreasing.
20 One example I can give you is a young mother of twin
21 daughters who were staying in a hotel in Queens and
22 had staff from the shelter come and remove the only
23 microwave that she had. So for someone with twins,
24 under the age of three, to me — egregious — with no
25 previous memo, with no notice, and no reasoning why.

So I would certainly pay attention through the ombudsman to see what folks are complaining about, food security specially. Because I know in the Bronx for certain, I hear those complaints a lot as well from students and their families.

CHAIRPERSON AYALA: No, that's very helpful, that's very helpful. All right, thank you, guys, so much for the work that you do and for coming here and spending the day with us to really lend truth to this crisis that we are facing. And hopefully, if you have any creative ways that you think that we can be helpful as well, you know where to find me.

PANEL: Thank you.

CHAIRPERSON AYALA: Thank you.

Our next panel is Nick Buess, Deborah Berkman, Naima Dahir, and Kim Moscaritolo.

(PAUSE)

CHAIRPERSON AYALA: All right, you can begin.

DEBORAH BERKMAN: Good afternoon, Deputy Speaker Ayala, staff, thank you so much for the opportunity to speak today. My name is Deborah Berkman, and I'm the Director of the Shelter and Economic Stability Project at New York Legal Assistance Group or NYLAG.

My specific project at NYLAG helps people access and maintain public benefits, and I'm intimately familiar with the subjects of today's hearing.

First I would like to speak out in support of Intro Number 1148. We very much support DSS, uh, requiring DSS to provide a receipt for all applications for benefits or services and particularly a detailed receipt for the documents submitted. So many times NYLAG clients visit DSS offices and attempt to apply or recertify or otherwise change their public benefits and they come away empty handed. Clients are later told that documents are needed when they were already submitted or that clients applications are denied for "failure to submit documents" when in fact they did include those documents with their application or submitted them within the time frame required. Given the current disorganization of DSS, and how many applications or recertifications are simply not acted upon, it's imperative that receipts are given so that clients may follow-up on their applications.

Second, NYLAG has some concerns about Intro Number 1028. While we applaud the intent of automatic enrollment of eligible people and City-created

benefit programs, we are concerned about the collateral consequences of involuntary enrollment. While the bill does contemplate an opt out provision, it's very likely that many people will never know that they've been enrolled in public benefits or how to opt out. And in the current political climate, people have very valid reasons why they may not want to access certain public benefits eligible for. Moreover, the bill is silent on people who don't meet their requirements for the benefits that they're accidentally enrolled in and what type of repayment for benefits wrongly issued would be mandated. That's why NYLAG thinks that all benefits should require an opt in, not an opt out. But in keeping with the spirit of the bill, NYLAG does support an automatic screening with a simplified opt in mechanism so people are able to more easily access those benefit programs.

(TIMER CHIMES) Just very quickly, far too many of our neighbors are going hungry. And I think that a huge part of it is that people are not able to access their food related public benefits, specifically SNAP. My team assists numerous clients every day who are hungry and reliant on SNAP, but because of DSS's

1 failure to process their applications properly or
2 their recertifications, they have their SNAP benefits
3 denied or discontinued. And while, of course, we're
4 able to get their benefits restored retroactively, as
5 we all know people need to eat on a consistent basis
6 and they can't eat retroactively. Most of these
7 clients that we have are elderly or they live with
8 disability, and when their SNAP is discontinued they
9 just don't know where to turn.
10

11 I wanted to answer a question that the Deputy
12 Speaker had earlier today also about how to maximize
13 how to help someone who's about \$5 below the SNAP
14 eligibility requirement access SNAP.

15 So there are a lot of... while the federal rules
16 can change and the City doesn't have any access to
17 change those rules, what they can do is help people
18 engage in SNAP budgeting that would make them
19 eligible for more benefits. So for elderly and
20 disabled people that's computing their medical costs
21 and that would change how much SNAP that they would
22 be eligible for. And for everyone there's something
23 called SUA and if people pay for heat and electricity
24 and or electricity, they get a bigger sort of income
25 deduction which raises the amount of the benefit that

they would get. And that's really important and it's something that HRA can do. They can screen for these issues instead of just relying on clients to know about these things. Even most professionals who work in this field don't know about these things.

So there are steps that HRA can take within the federal guidelines. Thank you very much for the important work you're doing.

NAIMA DAHIR: Good afternoon, Chair Ayala, and members of the Committee on General Welfare. My name is Naima Dahir, and I'm here with the Arab American Family Support Center.

The Arab American Family Support Center provides culturally and linguistically competent trauma-informed, multigenerational social services to the growing Arab Middle Eastern, North African, Muslim, and South Asian communities.

At AAFSC, we ensure that immigrants and communities of color receive support and services in culturally competent settings where our teams understand their background and speak their languages, removing one of the biggest barriers to care. We provide wraparound services including domestic violence case management, housing

navigation, legal services, and food distribution, ensuring that community members would receive holistic support.

Our community health and well-being team assists thousands of clients annually in enrolling in public benefits such as the SNAP, cash assistance, one-time emergency grants, heating and energy benefits, and health insurance, and New York City Cares for individuals who do who do not qualify through New York State programs. We conduct proactive outreach including pre-screening events and application assistance to ensure clients access the resources and supports they need to apply.

Our clients face numerous bureaucratic barriers when applying for public benefits. Clients struggle to track their application status, often receive unclear instructions about documents, they are not provided receipts confirming their submission, making it difficult to track progress. Many face obstacles such as long wait times – ranging from hours on the phones to entire days in person – or language barriers and the need to reapply multiple times due to incomplete or lost paperwork.

At HRA offices, our clients endure long lines and language barriers due to limited language access. Clients attempting to schedule interviews or follow-up on their applications face further roadblocks and at times they are unable to get proper assistance to schedule interviews. They run out of time (TIMER CHIMES) to complete their application process.

I will quickly summarize the rest; I can get through this.

Under this current challenging backdrop, recent federal administration policies that also place our communities in immediate jeopardy, these policies disproportionately impact our Muslim, Arab, Black, South Asian communities that we serve, and we're noticing that our communities are relying on us as trusted organizations even more right now more than ever. At this moment, we are enhancing our outreach to ensure that our clients apply, despite fear and other barriers. These inefficiencies of the system take away valuable time away from our organizations who are already stretched in.

Funding freezes and delays are creating unprecedented uncertainty. Our organization faces a \$1.1 million shortfall amidst growing need. So we

really urge the City Council to help alleviate these challenges.

We support the introduction of these bills, and thank you so much for allowing me to testify today.

KIM MOSCARITOLO: Hello, I'm Kim Moscaritolo, I am the Director of Communications and Advocacy for Hunger Free America.

Our overall message is very simple. New Yorkers still face massive food insecurity and hunger crises citywide, and we need a massive response from the City, especially one that focuses on increasing participation in federally funded SNAP, WIC, School Breakfast, and the new summer EBT program.

And given the massive funding cuts that are proposed, and in some cases already implemented by the federal government, it's more important than ever for New York City to step up and ensure that all New Yorkers have access to nutritious food.

We are here today specifically to support Intro 245, which would mandate the report on the feasibility of creating a universal benefits application, and mandate the creation of such a universal benefits application, as determined feasible by the commissioner of DSS.

1 So while it is true that it is easier to apply
2 for multiple benefits in New York City than in much
3 of the rest of the state, it is still an onerous
4 process to obtain those benefits. Rather than being
5 able to apply for multiple benefits at one time, low-
6 income New Yorkers are forced to spend countless
7 hours traveling to and waiting at social services
8 offices, spending long times on phone calls which
9 means taking time away from work or raising their
10 children.
11

12 Economists often talk about the term "opportunity
13 cost" as it relates to higher and middle income
14 people, meaning time they spend on one task is not
15 available to perform another important task, but they
16 rarely apply this concept to low-income people acting
17 as though their time is essentially worthless.

18 The reality is applying for benefits in New York
19 City is a time consuming, humiliating, and costly
20 process. So we have long championed the idea of a
21 single portal, including the MyCity portal, which we
22 have been very supportive of. We were particularly
23 disturbed by reports that the City has already spent
24 \$100 million on MyCity and none of the most important
25 features are operational.

So we are not technology experts, but every day our dedicated benefits access team works with struggling families to help them apply for and receive benefits they desperately need and we see the difficulties they face.

(TIMER CHIMES) So once again, we fully support Intro 245, and we hope that you will work expeditiously to get this work started. Thank you for the opportunity to submit this testimony.

NICHOLAS BUESS: Hi, good afternoon, I'm Nick Buess from the Food Bank for New York City. Thank you, Chair, for your continued commitment to addressing food insecurity in New York. Thank you to the Council for continuing to stand up for specifically food pantries and soup kitchens across our city. We want to recognize, acknowledge, and thank the Council for including \$100 million of baselined food funding for the Community Food Connection Program.

You saw it this morning on the steps, food pantries and soup kitchens are worried. We're worried because we stand in the gap. That's what council Member Banks was asking, "Who stands in the gap when SNAP's not available?" Food pantries stand in the

gap. It's the last best option for our for our community members. You know this.

But we need to make sure that our community based food programs have the support, have the capacity support and have the food support available, particularly in the face of what's happening in the federal government.

We can't retroactively eat. So even if things are moving around, even if we are successful in receiving more food from the USDA, today we have 2 million meals that are suspended from the USDA. We have to fortify our network so that we can make sure that food pantries have the supply they need.

So I have a little bit more details in the written testimony, but I just want to close by saying that the City Council's Food Pantry Initiative and emergency funding for food programs is an essential part of our need in the next year as well, given these uncertainties. Thank you.

CHAIRPERSON AYALA: Thank you all for your testimony. Thank you for that information, I had no idea.

DEBORAH BERKMAN: Definitely follow up with you...

CHAIRPERSON AYALA: Yeah, please, yeah. Thank you so much.

Our next panel is Stephen Grimaldi, Molly Eckerle, Jeanette Estima, Anita Kwok, and Jenny Veloz.

Hello, you may begin.

STEPHEN GRIMALDI: Okay. Good afternoon, thank you, Committee Chair Ayala, and members of the Committee on General Welfare for this opportunity.

I'm gifting you, Diana, 300 plates, from our participants in multiple languages, French, Spanish, Mandarin, and English and notes from our participants who are concerned about the cuts to the Community Food Connections program.

As you know, hunger in New York's reached epic proportions, epidemic proportions. I could go through the data – 1.3 million households, nearly 3 million people are struggling to make ends meet according to the True Cost of Living Report. One in three New Yorkers used a food pantry in the past three years according to Robinhood.

The data goes on and on and on. I think you've heard already today more information about that, and I know you're aware of that.

Last year, we served 11 million meals at the New York Common Pantry, and we're on pace to serve 12 million this year assisting 730,000 visitors.

When we started, we were serving 1.5 million meals to roughly a 100,000 guests. We continue to do more.

Last month, we experienced a 13 percent increase in March compared to last March. So just comparing that particular month, and, of course, that's an increase. That's on top of the increase of 17 percent in individuals we served last year.

A lot of people have talked about the cuts. Recent Department of Agriculture termination of the Local Food Purchase Assistance Cooperative Agreement, this funds NYFNYF or New York Food for New York Families. Last year, that was \$1.9 million for the New York Common Pantry — that's a gap of over 2.3 million meals — Never mind the SNAP cuts that were that are coming, WIC, possibly CSFP, EFSP, which we already know about, TFAP, which Nick just talked about. A lot of these cuts are going to layer and (TIMER CHIMES) really hurt those we serve.

We applaud the City, the City Council for the baseline funding for a \$100 million per year, and we hope that the budget will include that.

My last thing, I did want to say a little bit off script, listening to First Deputy Commissioner talk about mobile pantries. We have 60 mobile sites in addition to nourish sites. We have about a 175 sites, mobile, across our city. We have been waiting for two years to get an EFRO number from the City so we can open more mobile pantries, and we can get CFC money for that.

So, yes, we need CFC money to be able to do that, but we also need to have clearance just a site visit, which we have been promised for two years. There was initial visit. So those are the sort of things that can easily be done. Once we get an EFRO number, we can start distributing CFC food. Right now, we can only serve CFC food to our brick and mortar locations.

CHAIRPERSON AYALA: I can try to make a connection there, so that we can...

STEPHEN GRIMALDI: Okay, thank you.

ANITA KWOK: Thank you, Chair Ayala, for convening today's over oversight hearing. My name is Anita

Kwok, a Policy Analyst for United Neighborhood Houses, which is a policy and social change organization representing neighborhood settlement houses that reach over 800,000 New Yorkers from all walks of life.

Food insecurity emerged as a top community need at settlement houses in the beginning of the pandemic, and today demand for food assistance remains higher than ever. Settlement houses address hunger through benefit enrollment, pantry services, community outreach, resources and government support are sparse.

Older adult hunger is at crisis levels. Congregate meals at older adult centers have been severely impacted by rising food costs. The City must invest at least \$57 million in new funding for congregate meals, including restoring prior cuts and addressing inflation.

Additionally, home delivered meals, which are often the sole food source for homebound seniors, must be expanded with the Council Member Linda Lee's Intro 770, which ensures meals are provided seven days a week.

We also urge the Council to support Council Member Hudson's Intro 237, restoring grab-and-go options at older adult centers.

Beyond older adults, several UNH members rely on funding for the Community Food Connections Program, which plays a vital role in combating food insecurity. For example, WHEDco's weekly Community Food Pantry serves approximately 65 households per week and 3,400 individuals per year.

Providers have emphasized that sustained or increased CFC funding is critical to meeting the growing demand for emergency food assistance in their communities. UNH thanks the Council for putting the expansion of CFC to \$100 million to sustain and grow the program in your budget response.

Additionally, UNH urges the Council to support our ongoing efforts to create a SNAP for All Program at the state level, which would utilize state funds to provide food benefits to low-income New Yorkers who are currently ineligible for SNAP due solely to their immigration status. Food is a basic human right, yet the federal government has failed to uphold it slashing critical food assistance programs at a time of unprecedented need.

Our most vulnerable neighbors shouldn't be forced to choose between rent or food. (TIMER CHIMES) The City must take action to protect residents by ensuring our local food and rental assistance programs remain fully funded, accessible, and able to meet growing needs.

Please see my written testimony for more. Thank you for this opportunity.

JEANETTE ESTIMA: Thank you, Deputy Speaker Ayala, for the opportunity to testify today. My name is Jeanette Estima, and I am the Director of Policy and Advocacy at City Meals on Wheels. City Meals works to ensure that homebound older New Yorkers have the food they need to safely age in place, something we all want to be able to do.

Last year, our research showed that for 60 percent of older adults participating in the City's Home Delivered Meals Program, the one meal a day they receive is simply not enough. Our meal recipients are not able to regularly get to a grocery store or prepare their own meals, which means that SNAP food pantries and other food programs are not always accessible to them. It's critical we look at ways to expand and modernize existing food programs and

create new programs that bring more food directly to older adults in new ways.

City Meals piloted new programs this year, a breakfast box to provide a second meal and a mobile grocery program that allows an older adult to order a bag of food with a few options to choose from through a phone ordering system.

This innovative pilot is being done in partnership with WSCAH (West Side Campaign Against Hunger), and funding like CFC is critical in supporting organizations like ours working together to expand access to nutritious food to the City's most vulnerable residents. So, thank you for including a \$100 million in CFC in your budget response and we hope to see that included in the budget.

We also urge the Council to pass Intro 770 with \$20.6 million in funding to ensure that the Home Delivered Meals Program provides meals seven days a week — instead of just five days a week — and to increase reimbursement rates for congregate and home delivered meals to combat years of inflationary cost increases. Thanks again for your partnership.

JENNY VELOZ: Thank you, Deputy Speaker Ayala, and the members of the Committee on General Welfare for holding today's oversight hearing on food insecurity, and hunger.

My name is Jenny Veloz; I'm a Policy Associate at Citizens' Committee for Children of New York. And since 1944, CCC has served as an independent, multi-issue children advocacy organization dedicated to ensuring every New York child is healthy, housed, safe, and educated.

Low-income households continue to struggle with the high cost of not only food, but housing, child care, transportation, and utilities. According to the State Comptroller's May 2024 report on food insecurity, households with children experienced the highest rates of food insufficiency when compared to households without children. In 2022, 16 percent of households with children experienced food insufficiency. And, although that number decreased to 15.1 percent in 2023, it was still higher than the 10 percent of households without children.

With New York City potentially losing \$870 million a year if proposed federal SNAP cuts go into effect, it's even more important to invest in the

resources necessary to alleviate food insecurity among children and families. Programs like Community Food Connection are a vital resource for families needing that extra help in accessing healthy food options.

CFC and other food initiatives play a crucial role in ensuring families have the nutrition and supports that they need. So we applaud the Council's budget response of including increased funding for community food connections to a \$100 million and baselining that funding.

We also recommend the following investments: Increasing funding for free Health Bucks and creating a \$5 million Food Justice Fund.

And I just want to say that I think we can all agree that making sure that children and families are fed should not be controversial issue; we should not have to advocate every year for funding to make sure that New York City's children and families are fed. Thank you.

CHAIRPERSON AYALA: I agree, thank you all so much for coming and testifying today. It is a pleasure working with all of you. And, yes, we have a big fight ahead of us, thank you.

The next panel will consist of Martina Santos, Isaac Anderson, Adlerstein? He left, Isaac? Okay. Debipriya Chatterjee, and Leah Eden.

(PAUSE)

CHAIRPERSON AYALA: You may begin, whichever one of you wants to go first on either end. You want to start? (SPEAKING FOREIGN LANGUAGE) Okay.

LEAH EDEN: Thank you, Chair Ayala, for your leadership today.

My name is Leah Eden; I am Executive Director of Equity Advocates where we build the capacity of food justice leaders from across New York to advocate collectively for a strong, sustainable food system. We also lead the New York City Food Policy Alliance, a network of 60+ local food systems groups that we have had the honor of convening for the past five years since those early pandemic days.

You've heard the stark figures – food insecurity affects every borough, every demographic, but it does not impact all New Yorkers equally. Right? Communities of color and low-income households bear the brunt of this crisis, and failing to fund emergency food programs only deepens the racial and economic disparities. This is why we're calling for

\$100 million in baselined funding for Community Food Connections, and we really applaud and thank the City Council for your leadership and recognition – that now is not the time to scale back our City's investment in this program – as was outlined in the Mayor's Preliminary Budget Proposal.

We also urge the Council to continue to champion and invest in local food economies that build wealth in communities, specifically investing in creating and expanding market pathways for small and historically marginalized farmers, while increasing access to locally sourced food in public institutions. There's been some really great progress in this area, particularly in schools and hospitals, but dedicated funding, technical assistance, and connection is required to support our local farmers and growers and producers in meeting procurement contracts.

We also call for increased funding for Health Bucks, as well as Get The Good Stuff, to make healthy food more affordable for more New Yorkers while continuing to leverage federal GusNIP funds (Gus Schumacher Nutrition Incentive Program) to maximize those resources.

And finally, and thank you, Chair Ayala, for asking this question earlier today – we also urge the creation of a \$5 million Food Justice Fund for community-led projects that are designed to grow food justice and build wealth in BIPOC and low-income communities as outlined in the Food Forward New York Plan. We are happy to discuss that more offline.

(TIMER CHIMES) Thank you.

CHAIRPERSON AYALA: Thank you.

DEBIPRIYA CHATTERJEE: Thank you, Chairperson Ayala, and to everyone in the committee. My name is Debipriya Chatterjee, and I am the Senior Economist at the Community Service Society of New York (CSS), long-time nonprofit dedicated to improving the lives of low-income New Yorkers.

Today I am here to discuss the severity of the food insecurity landscape and suggest policy recommendations.

Per our annual survey of housing and economic security, what we find that almost a quarter, 24 percent, of New York City residents experience food insecurity, defined as skipping meals or enduring hunger due to lack of food or reaching out for free food at food pantries, meal programs, or soup

kitchens. For low-income households with incomes below 200% of the federal poverty line, the rate is higher at 38%. And even for someone who is employed and working full time, one in five are struggling to put food on the table.

As you would expect, these differences are not uniform. Black and Hispanic households are much more likely to endure food insecurity than their white peers.

The National True Cost of Living Campaign, which is a joint effort by CSS and FPWA (Federation for Protestant Welfare Agencies), commissioned the Urban Institute to estimate how much a household really needs to get by, and they estimate that the annual food cost for a household with children and no seniors is around \$14,600. And based off of their numbers, almost 62 percent, so that's two out of three New York City families, are struggling to make ends meet. When you look at households with children, the rate is around 74 percent.

When in our survey we asked folks, if you didn't have to pay so much for housing, what would you use the money for? The overwhelming response was to spend it on food.

We would strongly urge the Council to pass (TIMER CHIMES) and make the benefit system more accessible by passing Intros 0245, 1028, and 1148. Our survey shows that 15 percent of all potential recipients lost benefits in the past year due to incomplete or incorrect paperwork and missed application deadlines.

In addition to reiterating all the asks from our collaborators, from whom you have been hearing throughout the day today, I would also like to mention that as proposed tariffs go into effect, typical New York households will lose up to \$1,200 to \$2,000 in purchasing power, and here we need the City and the City Council to amp up its efforts to make sure the losses to our city is not as devastating.

You heard that we will lose around a \$1 billion every year in SNAP benefits, so this is where we would urge the Council to recognize the moment for what it is and invest heavily to improve nutritional security. Thank you so much.

CHAIRPERSON AYALA: Thank you.

MARTINA SANTOS: Good afternoon, everyone, Chair Ayala. Thank you for having me here for the second time today. I am going to ready my testimony to you,

and when I finish, I want to add a little bit more –
if you let me.

My name is Martina Santos, and I am a volunteer
at West Side Campaign Against Hunger (WSCAH). Thank
you for giving me the opportunity to present my
testimony.

Currently, I attend the West Side Campaign
Against Hunger as a customer, volunteer, and board
member – for over 15 years – where I originally came
as a customer because I have a low income, and I
couldn't afford to buy some food – fresh fruits and
vegetables. Immediately when I went to WSCAH, I saw
the quality of the food that WSCAH distributes to its
customers. That day I went home with a smile, as I
brought home fresh fruits and vegetables, protein,
grains, milk, which I was able to choose myself
during my visit. The experience of being able to
choose my fresh fruit and vegetables, is it like I
was going to the supermarket.

WSCAH has become a home for me, as almost
immediately from my first visit, I became a pantry
volunteer. Last year, WSCAH distributed over 6
million pounds of healthy food for its 110,000
families. For example, seven years ago WSCAH had one

1 distribution point and now WSCAH has more than 30
2 distribution points and is also delivering (TIMER
3 CHIMES) directly to over 2000 homes. My greatest
4 satisfaction is being able to refer family,
5 neighbors, friends and even strangers to WSCAH,
6 because I know they will find not only a wide variety
7 of fresh and healthy foods, but also empathetic
8 treatment from the WSCAH team.

9
10 As a WSCAH volunteer, I have been able to feel
11 the sad reality of hunger and need that exists in our
12 city. I am pleased to be able to do this job, because
13 no New Yorker wants to go to bed hungry.

14 In Fiscal Year 2024 the budget for Community Food
15 Connection program, which was \$60.1 million, was
16 slated to drop to \$25 million in FY 2025. WSCAH's
17 work has become indispensable to many in our
18 community, but unfortunately it is a job that
19 requires a lot of effort and financial support.

20 I'm here too, letting you know, Ms. Ayala, to
21 help in to fighting for the CCFC to bring the budget
22 back to (INAUDIBLE) pantries, because the sad part
23 for me is sometimes I'm going home with a broken
24 heart, because I see people in the street and heard
25 the conversation how they struggle to pay rent, buy

1
2 medicine, pay their electricity bill. All these
3 thing, I'm struggling too, because I'm low-income and
4 I be the work in the food stamp line.

5 So I appreciate if you and your team keep
6 continue with the hard work. And God bless you for
7 helping us to get the budget back to service to our
8 customer with dignity like they deserve. Because
9 sometimes I don't have enough money, and I need to
10 eat – like I don't (INAUDIBLE) to eat rice and beans
11 in the evening because I don't have enough meat and
12 this rice and bean they increase my sugar. I suffer
13 from high blood pressure, too. And that's why I'm
14 here, so can hear my voice – and to begging for help
15 to do something for us, the food pantry, because
16 that's not only me, that's my community, living
17 pantry to pantry. Food insecurity roars not a
18 monster, not only in New York City, around the world.
19 And now New Yorkers are supposed to skip meals,
20 because if they eat breakfast, they don't eat lunch.
21 They save it so they can go to bed with something in
22 their stomach. And that's really sad, Ms. Ayala. We
23 are living in the capitol of the world, and this is
24 heartbreaking for me.

Thank you very much for listening to me, and have a wonderful afternoon, every single person, and (INAUDIBLE) Ms. Ayala.

CHAIRPERSON AYALA: You did so good!

(APPLAUSE)

MARTINA SANTOS: Thank you.

CHAIRPERSON AYALA: Thank you! Thank you, thank you, ladies.

Our next panel will me Marcus Jackson, Liz Ward, Alex Hughes, and Angie Vega.

Okay, perfect, any one of you, whatever corner wants to start first. Do want to start? Okay.

LIZ WARD: Good afternoon, Chair Ayala, and staff. My name is Liz Ward, and I am a Program Assistant at the New York Health Foundation.

The New York Health Foundation is a private, independent foundation that seeks to improve the health of all New Yorkers, especially people of color and others who have been historically marginalized. Since 2014, we've invested millions of dollars in supporting programs and policies that connect New Yorkers with the food they need to thrive.

Despite considerable investment, food insufficiency remains a serious concern for millions

of New Yorkers. Nearly one in five Black New Yorkers and one in seven Hispanic New Yorkers experienced food insufficiency last year compared with one in eleven white New Yorkers. Recent federal cuts make City investment and stronger safety net programs all the more critical. Just last month, the USDA cut more than \$1.6 billion from food banks and schools. The Agency also paused \$500 million for the Emergency Food Assistance Program, meaning shipments of essential foods that were destined for food banks will no longer arrive. In New York City alone, 2.5 million meals are at risk. We are in full support of others' calls to continue investing in the Community Food Connection Program.

We also believe the City must pay service providers on time. More than \$4 billion in federal aid supports the work of nonprofits that are essential to New York City's safety net, yet many providers are still waiting on overdue payments. Federal cuts threaten their financial stability, so the City must honor its commitments and quickly pay them what they owe.

Finally, we encourage the Council to use its collective voice to oppose harmful federal cuts.

To conclude, we are grateful for the City's shared commitment to ensuring all New Yorkers have reliable access to the nutritious food they need to live healthy, dignified lives. Thank you.

CHAIRPERSON AYALA: Angie Vega?

ANGIE VEGA: Yes. Thank you. Good afternoon, members of the committee, and thank you for the opportunity to speak with you.

My name is Angie Vega, and I am the Assistant Director of the Children's Health Fund, the Healthy and Ready to Learn Initiative. Today I will speak about the importance of the continued and increased funding for programming that critically supports schools and parents, ensuring that students are well-positioned to thrive in schools like our New York City Council funded program, Healthy and Ready to Learn.

According to the New York City Office of the Mayor's Food by the Numbers Annual Report, over 1.2 million New Yorkers are experiencing food insecurity. Moreover, 40.2 percent of adults lived in a household at risk of food insecurity in 2023 continuing a rising trend.

Across the five New York City boroughs, the percent of children experiencing food insecurity ranges from as low as 14.2 percent in Staten Island to as high as 33.2 percent in The Bronx. In all counties, Black and Hispanic Latino individuals make up the majority of those who have limited access to quality food.

Child food insecurity is linked to a number of adverse outcomes, development interruptions, school behaviors, and academic problems, physical alignment including reduced immune system function, worse body weight outcomes, asthma, and mental health condition particularly anxiety and depression.

Children facing hunger may struggle in school and beyond. They are more likely to repeat a grade in elementary school, experience developmental impairs in areas like language and motor skills, and have more social and behavioral problems. This is why the New York City Council continued support of the Children's Health Fund, Healthy and Ready to Learn program is extremely important.

Healthy and Ready to Learn was developed by the Children Health Fund in 2014 as part of our mission of supporting kids so that they can thrive. (TIMER

CHIMES) It was developed recognizing the importance of education in helping kids to reach their potential and that they be healthy themselves to take advantage of educational opportunities.

The program is designed to help schools identify and address health barriers to learning rooted in social, racial, and economical inequities that impact student learning.

When we have their health needs met, they're able to be better learners and succeed in school, ultimately translating into a likelihood of a productive and happy life.

Healthy and Ready to Learn started with a strong focus on screening and responding to what we call health barriers to learning, such as addressing medical issues like asthma, dental, vision problems, and mental health well-being. While we continue to address these health barriers to learning, we are focused more on the worrisome needs of food insecurity and childhood trauma.

HRL therefore has evolved to include connecting families to local food banks and other community resources to ensure that families' food security

needs are addressed so that their children could thrive and reach their full potential.

Through our current model, we leverage finding our flagship school, PS 49 in the Bronx, and in Councilwoman Diana Ayala's district, to inform materials and training that are conducted with educators, administrators, and parents citywide – and through our Resource and Training Center, which was launched in 2017 as an online platform that enables Children's Health Fund to scale our impact to reach students throughout New York City.

Our aligned (INAUDIBLE) is equity and diverse focus, and houses a Board of Library that includes infographics fact sheets, interactive learning images, slide decks, and internal resources, external resources links.

Here is a snapshot of our resource and training center and HRL's impact...

CHAIRPERSON AYALA: Do you have a lot left? Your time expired. If you could... you could also submit the full testimony for the record.

ANGIE VEGA: Okay, we just wanted to give you a snapshot of the impact, but we want to thank you for allowing us to testify today and to continue to have

your support, so that we can continue to support schools citywide. And hopefully we can expand into more schools and provide services to them.

CHAIRPERSON AYALA: Thank you make sure that you submit that to us.

ANGIE VEGA: Pardon?

CHAIRPERSON AYALA: Make sure to submit that to us.

ANGIE VEGA: Okay, okay, thank you so much.

ALEX HUGHES: Thank you, Chair, and the General Welfare Committee for holding this meeting and hearing our testimony and frankly our cries for help. My name is Alex Hughes; I'm the Senior Director of Hunger Prevention and Advocacy with Project Hospitality, one of the largest social service providers on Staten Island. I've been with this agency since 2016 doing lifesaving work. I know what it is to be hungry and how it feels to have nowhere to turn. It's not something that I would wish on anybody.

We're here as the collective canary in the coal mine. Emergency food programs, whether food banks or food pantries, soup kitchens, funders, all of us, we're all feeling the heat. And to put it as simple

as I can, we're all seeing services go up, utilizations go up, the lines get longer with the resources tackle it dwindling in front of our eyes. And critical program in this is the Community Food Connection Program. Without this program, the 30,000+ folks that we serve annually on Staten Island would suffer.

The reality is that the work, and thereby the people that we serve, are under attack with reckless and inhumane public policy decisions at the federal level of our government. SNAP, WIC, Medicaid, TEFAP, school meals, and the list goes on. We all know that these programs work and that these programs are still under siege.

When the USDA cut the LFPA program that was mentioned earlier, they said in a statement that these programs "no longer effectuate agency priorities." In the face of that, I want to say that our drive and our commitment to this work will always remain an unwavering priority. We always want to do more. It's not a matter of want, it's a matter of having the proper amount of resources to make the work happen.

I implore the Committee, the Council, please continue thinking of the hungry. Think of the children who are missing school meals. Think of the single mother or the single father who skip meals so their children can eat. Think about the person struggling to choose between healthcare, between housing, and between food costs.

One way that we can do this, (TIMER CHIMES) and as other orgs here are saying, is to increase that CFC baseline to a \$100 million.

No, this won't bridge the gap, but it really could soften our landing as we work not just to serve meals, but to end hunger. In a time of discussion about priorities and what should and what shouldn't be cut, please don't forget us, our work, or our people.

As we all know in the hardest of times, New Yorkers band together and we lean into each other for support. Now is the time that we have to do this. We have to do this as organizations, as individuals, and as professionals. The time is now. Thank you.

MARCUS JACKSON: Good afternoon, members of the General Welfare Committee. My name is Marcus Jackson, and I serve as the Aging Friendly Community Organizer

for Encore Community Services. Thank you for the opportunity to speak today on food insecurity among older adults.

Encore operates one of the largest home delivered meal programs, more than 750,000 meals annually, to older adults who are homebound, medically fragile, and often entirely alone. For many, the meals we deliver are their only source of daily nutrition. But the City currently only funds one meal a day for five days a week. This leaves thousands of older adults hungry over the weekends and undernourished every day.

We're urging the Council to expand meal funding to provide three meals per day, seven days per week, to every older adult who needs them.

We also need reimbursement rates that actually cover providers' real costs. Food prices, labor, and delivery expenses have all increased but funding hasn't and has remained the same throughout. Without action, providers like Encore will be forced to make impossible decisions about what we can and can't afford to deliver.

Finally, nutrition is only one part. Our Financial Case Managers help older adults apply for

SNAP, manage health care bills, and access rent relief. They're essential to preventing hunger before it starts. Expanding funding for financial case management must be a part of the City's hunger response. Encore has been serving older adults for nearly 50 years. We know what it takes to prevent hunger and it starts with fully funding the programs at work. Thank you for your time and for your commitment to this issue.

CHAIRPERSON AYALA: Thank you. Thank you all for coming by and lending testimony to today's hearing, thank you.

Our next and final in person panel consists of Genevieve Brown-Ross, Christopher Leon Johnson, and Sharon Brown.

(PAUSE)

CHRISTOPHER LEON JOHNSON: Ready?

CHAIRPERSON AYALA: You can begin.

CHRISTOPHER LEON JOHNSON: Yeah. Hello, Chair Diana Ayala; My name is Christopher Leon Johnson. I'm here to support people that are hungry in the city of New York. The issue is that it's a lot of grandstanding that's going on with the City Council and these nonprofits that they love to serve nasty

1 food to the people. They don't serve healthy food. I
2 don't know what's going on with that. The City
3 Council need to start supporting more healthy food
4 giveaways to the people that are poor. Instead just
5 giving away nasty GMO processed foods, they need to
6 start pushing more for healthy foods. If you give
7 people healthy foods, it will solve the issue with
8 the hunger crisis because healthy foods last longer
9 than unprocessed foods.
10

11 But the thing is that these nonprofits only care
12 about getting a money lined up, and the way they get
13 their money lined up is through these organizations
14 and these donors that are backed and work hand in
15 hand with these GMO food organizations.

16 So it's it all come in hand... and this is all
17 about medical research on the people that they know
18 they can exploit and what I'm talking about is the
19 working poor. If you give them... if you give them
20 nasty food they get sick. And who we think that
21 benefits? It's the corrupt insurance companies and
22 the corrupt hospitals. And everybody knows that the
23 hospitals and the insurance companies fund majority
24 of these nonprofits and fund our Speaker of the city
25 Council and our Zoning Chair, Kevin Riley. So this is

all about research. This is all about exploitation of the poor and that's all it's about. We... there is a hunger crisis. There is a food shortage, but there's a way... you need to solve this by allocating more money into the foods and give it directly to the people instead of relying on these nonprofits that just see these people as photo ops and photo opportunities and exploit... and allow them to just see them as like, oh, we got well, if we get these people sick with the help of the hospitals and the nonprofits and the big donors, they make money off the sick people.

So this is under of pipeline. I call... I call the sick... the what is it? The hungry to (TIMER CHIMES) hungry to hospitals pipeline. This is what it is. It's all about getting these people sick. That GMO foods, it gets you sick.

So I say this right now, support we need to support, but this... this need... we need a lot of change the city. It needs a lot of change. And I feel bad for the people that, you know, that are hungry, that needs food, that don't have the opportunities that I do to try and make some money, but they rely on these food banks and these food pantries to

1 sustain themselves. But if you go to a food pantry or
2 any food bank or any food giveaway, like, it just...
3 they give this disgusting, nasty foods that don't
4 last that long. Some of the food expired. They have
5 black marks on the on the bananas. But that's all
6 done on purpose, because these big time food
7 distributors don't want the food and they know where
8 to give it to. And these nonprofits don't care
9 because they see, oh, we give out 20,000 boxes of
10 food in one day to the people that... especially in
11 like Corona or Elmhurst or Jackson Heights, you know,
12 they stay, you know, these it looks good for the
13 photo op. And some these people that run for city
14 council, they love that stuff.

16 CHAIRPERSON AYALA: Thank you, Christopher...

17 CHRISTOPHER LEON JOHNSON: Know I immediately... I
18 know

19 CHAIRPERSON AYALA: Christopher, I'm sorry, you...
20 I let you go over, I let you go over. Do you think
21 that you can submit the rest of it (INAUDIBLE)...

22 (CROSS-TALK)

23 CHRISTOPHER LEON JOHNSON: Yeah, yeah, I can.

24 CHAIRPERSON AYALA: All right, thank you, honey,
25 thank you for coming...

CHRISTOPHER LEON JOHNSON: Thank you, thank you.

CHAIRPERSON AYALA: Sharon?

SHARON BROWN: Hello, my name is Sharon Brown from Rose of Sharon Enterprises. Before I begin, remember the hostages, release the hostages, let Yahweh's people go, defend Israel.

Okay, for General Welfare, as far as the food is concerned, I am still concerned about the shelters. They were giving out spoiled food at specific shelters. I want to know if that there's going to be some kind of follow-up on that. It was like maybe six months ago, six months before that they were saying it was a problem. We came back, it was still a problem. They were giving out spoiled food at the shelter. So I hope that's being taken care of.

I want to make not for profit sit in restaurant chains and grocery stores not for profit. I hope other people do that. Just regular restaurants – all different variety, Mexican, Chinese, anything, but just up to standard and regular grocery stores, bodegas, and things that give out food free.

And we need to try to coordinate with the grocery stores they have now, the grocery stores, the restaurants and stuff, the people that don't sell out

the groceries and they always wind up with a backlog of food getting spoiled just sitting there. Maybe they can coordinate and have people come in and shop before all that food goes spoiled. Or they can do charitable giving, so when people are in need you can get people to coordinate with certain grocery stores. They can go there and they can shop. And then they can do some kind of tax write off, they can get some kind of benefit, maybe somebody can organize that myself or something.

We need prayer in school, we need to... we need prayer, we need the bible, we need the 10 commandments in school. We need to make sure (TIMER CHIMES) that all the students are fed. And they can coordinate with the schools and the grocery stores and stuff like that.

The school... just a few more minutes. The parents that don't have food at home, but they do have food at school, maybe we can coordinate with the restaurants and the grocery stores, that when they're doing bad and they're not selling, they can coordinate... and coordinate with the schools and the families to give food to these families - let them shop. And they can do it as a tax write off,

charitable giving, or something and just Rikers Island needs to be closed. Thank you.

CHAIRPERSON AYALA: Thank you so much for coming, Sharon.

We have now heard from everyone who has signed up to testify. If we have inadvertently missed anyone who would like to testify in person, please visit the sergeant's table and complete an appearance card now.

(PAUSE)

CHAIRPERSON AYALA: We will now move onto our Zoom portion of the hearing. William Flynn?

SERGEANT AT ARMS: You may begin.

WILLIAM FLYNN: (INAUDIBLE)

CHAIRPERSON AYALA: We can't hear you, William. Hold on. Are you muted?

WILLIAM FLYNN: (INAUDIBLE)

CHAIRPERSON AYALA: No, we can't hear you.

Okay, so we are going to move onto the next person, and we will come back to you while you figure out...

Adriana Beltran?

SERGEANT AT ARMS: You may begin.

ADRIANA BELTRAN: (INAUDIBLE)

CHAIRPERSON AYALA: Okay, we are taking a quick pause to check on our end to see if the issue is with us.

(PAUSE)

CHAIRPERSON AYALA: Okay, all right, we are going to go back to William Flynn. Try now.

SERGEANT AT ARMS: You may begin.

WILLIAM FLYNN: Can you hear me?

CHAIRPERSON AYALA: Yes.

WILLIAM FLYNN: Oh, great, okay. Thank you, I know it's been a long day.

Chairperson, Deputy Speaker Ayala, and members of the General Welfare Committee, thanks for the opportunity. I will be really brief.

My name is Bill Flynn; I am the Director of our Government Benefits Unit; our Disability Advocacy Unit; our LGBTQ+/HIV Advocacy Project; and our Veterans Justice Unit at Legal Services NYC in our Queens Office.

I am here today to speak Intro 1148, introduced to this body in December by Council Member Cabán, and how it will benefit and help our most vulnerable clients and your constituents.

The units I supervise intersect disproportionately impoverished communities we both serve. We at Legal Services NYC are very encouraged by the amendments offered by Council Member Cabán's bill.

Too many times we meet clients who seek our help, who have been denied services from the Department of Social Services and or HRA — sometimes multiple times — for failure to provide the information documents needed to complete an application for services — only to discover that the client had provided the requested information numerous times, which delays the much needed assistance that our clients and your constituents are seeking to help with in the first place.

We've requested Fair Hearings to appeal these such decisions. On a recent case, where I represented a veteran living with a disability who had lost a part time employment, just needed to adjust the income with HRA to adjust the rental assistance he would be entitled to going forward. He was denied two times for not providing the requested information to adjust his rental assistance. He came to LSNYC; we requested an expedited Fair Hearing, because the

delay was putting his housing in jeopardy. The agency sent me an evidence packet prior to the hearing, which contained all the documents, not surprisingly.

SERGEANT AT ARMS: Your time is expired.

(PAUSE)

WILLIAM FLYNN: (INAUDIBLE) as it will help our clients navigating these systems. And I encourage you to refer your clients to our agency for assistance in navigating these clients as well. Thank you.

CHAIRPERSON AYALA: Thank you, thank you so much.

Adriana?

SERGEANT AT ARMS: You may begin.

CHAIRPERSON AYALA: Adriana Beltran?

ADRIANA BELTRAN: Good afternoon, Chairperson Ayala and members of the committee.

My name is Adriana Beltran; I serve as a Deputy Director, Woodside on the Move. I have worked with Woodside on the Move for over a decade, and I have been serving (INAUDIBLE) residents during my tenure with Woodside on the Move.

In my role, I oversee and manage all the programs — including grants and contract management, insurance (INAUDIBLE) the services are made for the community.

Through my years with on the Move, I've had the privilege of assisting countless community members, particularly seniors, in applying for a critical benefit such as housing, Medicaid, and SNAP, programs that are essential to their daily well-being. However, I have repeatedly witnessed systematic inefficiencies that create unnecessary barriers to accessing their services.

One of the most persistent challenges our clients face is the lack of a clear and consistent application process. Many applications are delayed due to the prolonged processing times or disorganized case management. Applicants frequently find themselves having to submit their documentation multiple times due to either lost or untracked paperwork, causing them undue stress and delaying the assistance that they deserve. For example, one of our longtime clients, a senior woman who has been serving receiving assistance for 14 years, relies on (INAUDIBLE) to renew their SCRIE and SNAP services. While she has benefited greatly from these services, she has expressed delays in receiving renewal applications from DSS leading to disruptions in her benefits. Fortunately, our case managers at Woodside

on the Move have been able to advocate on her behalf, ensuring she does not lose access to those critical resources.

However, not all individuals have access to the advocacy and support that she does, leaving many struggling through the system.

Intro 1148-A (TIMER CHIMES) (INAUDIBLE)...
(CROSS-TALK)

SERGEANT AT ARMS: Thank you, your time has expired.

ADRIANA BELTRAN: Okay.

CHAIRPERSON AYALA: You can wrap it up.

ADRIANA BELTRAN: (INAUDIBLE) to step towards addressing the systematic issues by requiring DSS to provide a receipt for applications. This bill ensures transparency and accountability in the application process. A receipt will offer applicants clear documentation of their submission date and records of the materials received and guidance on completion of applications. This simple yet crucial measure will prevent unnecessary delays, reduce stress for applicants, and provide access to essential services for the City's most vulnerable residents. Thank you.

CHAIRPERSON AYALA: Thank you. Next will hear from Stephen Grimaldi?

SERGEANT AT ARMS: You may begin.

UNKNOWN: (INAUDIBLE)

CHAIRPERSON AYALA: Hello, Stephen Grimaldi?

UNKNOWN: (INAUDIBLE)

CHAIRPERSON AYALA: Okay, we're moving on to Syed Bhuiyan?

SERGEANT AT ARMS: You may begin.

(NO RESPONSE)

CHAIRPERSON AYALA: Okay. What is that?

ANDREW STA. ANA: Hello, I don't think there's a Syed Bhuiyan. But, I am here to testify. Should I begin? I think I was just unmuted.

CHAIRPERSON AYALA: Okay, uh, are you Andrew?

ANDREW STA. ANA: Yes, hi.

CHAIRPERSON AYALA: Andrew Ana? Okay.

ANDREW STA. ANA: Yes, Andrew Sta. Ana.

Thank you, Deputy Speaker Ayala, for holding this important, very timely hearing on food insecurity.

My name is Andrew Sta. Ana, I am the Interim Co-Executive Director at Asian American Federation representing the collective voice of more than 70

member nonprofits serving 1.5 million Asian New Yorkers.

Food insecurity for New York's Asian community is at a breaking point from a combination of federal cuts, escalating anti-immigrant policies, fears of folks jeopardizing their status because of public charge, and, of course, the wild shifts in the prices of food and the economy from tariffs have created an untenable situation.

Despite the model minority stereotypes surrounding Asian Americans as wealthy and successful, our communities face significant hardship. So while there has been population growth for our community, one in three Asian residents lives in low-income households, and they're twice as likely to experience poverty relative to white New Yorkers. Currently, 42 percent of Asian older adults are low-income, making them amongst the poorest seniors.

So what we hear from our communities about food insecurity is alarming. Our member organizations rely on federal, state, and city sources to feed their communities, and the potential cuts are terrifying. Food pantries that are funded under TEFAP, EFSP, and folks that seek assistance through SNAP, these cuts

are going to be devastating to the Asian communities. And so while we recognize that the City Council is doing its best to show up for our communities and protect the line, I wanted to share how this is impacting our communities. Because what we're hearing is that folks are fearing accessing food pantries because of ICE raids. People are disenrolling from benefits. And, of course, they're still subject to some of the perennial scams such as like their benefits cards being skimmed and compromised.

So when all of these things come together, we want to make sure that our communities that are doing that work in community to make sure that people are fed is resourced.

So, again, we believe that it's important – more important than ever that we continue to reinforce these supplemental supports for our communities, and that looks like a couple different things. Of course, continuing to fund the groups that do linguistically (TIMER CHIMES) and culturally competent food services that provide alternative food benefits for the immigrant community, the Asian community, and particularly older adults. And that, of course, includes continuing to fund that culturally

competent, in language, nontraditional service models that are often that space that provides that access point for older adults and food insecure people when they're often afraid to access other programs.

Listen, I know that there are not easy answers to these questions, and the challenges are complex. And your leadership and ongoing leadership in this space has been very vital. And I'm going to submit more details online. Thank you so much for your time.

CHAIRPERSON AYALA: Thank you, thank you so much.

Pernell S. Brice?

SERGEANT AT ARMS: You may begin.

PERNELL S. BRICE: Thank you, Deputy Speaker Ayala. My name is Pernell S. Brice, III, and I am the Vice President of Policy and Advocacy for Children's Health Fund.

Today to speak on behalf of the children and families of New York City who are struggling with hunger and food insecurity. As a city of great wealth, it is deeply troubling that so many of our neighbors, particularly our children, go to bed hungry or lack consistent access to nutritious food.

The statistics surrounding hunger in New York City are staggering and unacceptable. According to

recent data, one in five New York City children, approximately 400,000 kids, are food insecure, meaning they do not have consistent access to enough food for an active healthy lifestyle. Nearly one in four families with children in New York City experience food insecurity, with the rates disproportionately higher among families of color.

The poverty rate in New York City is approximately 18.9 percent, but for Black and Latino children, that number is even higher, at nearly 30 percent.

These figures are not just numbers – they represent real children, families, and communities who are facing daily struggles to access basic sustenance. Hunger affects a child's ability to learn, grow, and thrive. Food insecurity is linked to developmental delays, poor academic performance, and long term health problems. No child should have to worry about where their next meal will come from, especially in a city as prosperous as New York City.

We ask the City Council to continue to fund necessary food assistance programs, like SNAP, to ensure that all New Yorkers, particularly children,

have the sustenance that they need to be successful.
Thank you so much.

CHAIRPERSON AYALA: Thank you. We will now move
onto Barbara Hughes.

BARBARA HUGHES: My name is Barbara Hughes, and I
am the Executive Director of City Beet Kitchens at
Project Renewal, a New York City homeless services
nonprofit agency. Thank you for convening this
hearing.

For over 55 years, Project Renewal has provided
shelter, housing, health care, and employment
services to New Yorkers experiencing homelessness. We
are grateful to the City Council for its ongoing
support of our programs. We are proud to have
partnered with the City to address some of New York's
biggest challenges, including food insecurity and
hunger.

More than 1.2 million New Yorkers are food
insecure, with over 1.8 million receiving SNAP
benefits, and countless others relying on
approximately 400 food pantries and 80 soup kitchens
throughout the city. We are encouraged to see that
the General Welfare Committee is prioritizing
legislation to make it easier for New Yorkers to

1
2 apply for and receive benefits from food assistance
3 programs.

4 City Beet Kitchens, which I oversee, is a social
5 enterprise that plays an integral role in combatting
6 food insecurity throughout New York. As one of the
7 largest food providers to New Yorkers in need, we
8 serve 2.6 million meals each year at shelters,
9 supportive housing, and senior centers across the
10 city. Beyond our catering services for events and
11 meetings, we prepare meals for people living in
12 shelters and for other nonprofit organizations. We
13 also organize food drives and special holiday dinners
14 to ensure families don't go hungry during the
15 holidays.

16 Our Culinary Arts Training Program provides New
17 Yorkers facing barriers to employment—including
18 veterans— with world class culinary education and
19 pathways to fulfilling careers. Many graduates secure
20 positions in corporate kitchens, local restaurants,
21 and within City Beet Kitchens itself. We've witnessed
22 the powerful transformation of New Yorkers who once
23 faced employment barriers now working full time to
24 support others facing similar challenges.

To sustain (TIMER CHIMES) and expand City Beet Kitchens and our Culinary Arts Training Program, we rely on City investment. We thank the Council for its continued support of our programs and applaud the priority this committee is placing on alleviating food insecurity in our city. By investing in nonprofit food providers and facilitating access to SNAP and other food benefits, the Council plays a vital role in addressing the hunger crisis in our city.

I recently came across a quote that reminds me of everything I've heard today, which is "Democracy is a sham in the presence of hunger".

Thank you for the opportunity to testify today.

CHAIRPERSON AYALA: Thank you.

Our last person on Zoom is Jacob Zychick.

SERGEANT AT ARMS: You may begin.

JACOB ZYCHICK: Thank you so much to Deputy Speaker Ayala. On behalf of the American Heart Association, thank you for the opportunity to provide public testimony about hunger and food insecurity in New York City.

Heart disease is the leading cause of death for adult New Yorkers. A healthy diet and lifestyle are

the keys to preventing and managing cardiovascular disease. Unfortunately, too many New Yorkers lack access to healthy foods.

First, I would like to thank all of the fantastic organizations and advocates today who are doing incredible, meaningful work to address hunger by providing meals and food to those in need, thank you so much.

The American Heart Association is supportive of increased funding for two specific programs that will address nutrition, hunger, and food insecurity in the city. The American Heart Association is supportive of increased funding for Health Bucks, New York City's nutrition incentive program, and also for Get the Good Stuff, a program where every dollar you spend using SNAP EBT on eligible fruits, vegetables, beans, and other products is matched up to \$10 per day.

Once again, I want to thank everyone today for all their great work to address hunger in the city, and thank you so much for this opportunity to provide public testimony. Thank you.

CHAIRPERSON AYALA: Thank you.

All right, we are making one final call for Zoom registrants who have not yet spoken. Okay, seeing

1
2 none, if we have inadvertently missed anyone who
3 would like to testify virtually, please use the Zoom
4 Raise Hand Function, and I will call on you in the
5 order of hands raised.

6 Okay, seeing no one, I would like to note that
7 written testimony, which will be reviewed in full by
8 committee staff, may be submitted to the record up to
9 72 hours after the close of today's hearing by
10 emailing it to testimony@council.nyc.gov.

11 With that, this hearing is concluded. [Gavel]

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C E R T I F I C A T E

World Wide Dictation certifies that the foregoing transcript is a true and accurate record of the proceedings. We further certify that there is no relation to any of the parties to this action by blood or marriage, and that there is interest in the outcome of this matter.



Date May 6, 2025