

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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Wednesday, May 29, 2024

Start: 10:18 A. M.

Recess: 1:20 P. M.

HELD AT: Committee Room - City Hall

B E F O R E: Hon. 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

OTHER COUNCIL MEMBERS ATTENDING:

Fariás and Brewer

## COMMITTEE ON GENERAL WELFARE

## A P P E A R A N C E S

Jill Berry,  
First Deputy Commissioner at the NYC Department  
of Social Services

Lacey Tauber,  
Legislative Director, Representing the Office of  
Brooklyn Borough President, Antonio Reynoso

Joseph Rosenberg,  
Executive Director for Catholic Community  
Relations Council

Daryl Wright,  
Food Policy Fellow at the Metropolitan Council on  
Jewish Poverty

Lakisha Morris,  
Director of Operations for Catholic Charities  
Community Services Community Outreach Division

Jennifer Smith,  
Food Resource Manager for Catholic Charities  
Community Services-Brooklyn and Queens

Ariel Savransky,  
Senior Advocacy and Policy Advisor at UJA-  
Federation of New York

Chef Greg Silverman,  
CEO of the West Side Campaign Against Hunger NYC

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

Richard Ralph,  
Training Quality Control Manager City Beet  
Kitchens at Project Renewal

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

Jeanette Estima  
Director, Policy and Advocacy  
Citymeals on Wheels

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

Nick Buess,  
Director of Government Relations at The Food Bank  
for New York City

Camila Gomez,  
Policy and Planning Manager at God's Love We  
Deliver

Christina Hanson,  
Executive Director at Part of the Solution

Rachel Sabella,  
Director of No Kid Hungry New York

Joel Berg,  
CEO of Hunger Free America

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

Evelyn Garcia,  
Executive Chef of the Teaching Kitchen at Lenox  
Hill Neighborhood House

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

## COMMITTEE ON GENERAL WELFARE

## A P P E A R A N C E S (CONTINUED)

Sophie Martin, Registered Dietician at Housing Solutions of New York

Paula Inhargue,  
Policy Analyst at United Neighborhood Houses

Graham Horn,  
Staff Attorney in the Shelter Advocacy Initiative and the Public Assistance and SNAP Project at the New York Legal Assistance Group

Nazneen Rahman,  
Assistant Vice President at Emblem Health  
Neighborhood Care Emblem Health Neighborhood Care

Ruth Moore,  
Representing Self

Sharon Brown,  
Representing Self

Kathleen DiPerna,  
Senior Director of Government Relations and Advocacy at Rethink Food NYC

Egondu Onuoha,  
Board member of the Metropolitan NYC WIC Association

Susana Camarena,  
Executive Director at Tacombi

1  
2 SERGEANT AT ARMS: Good morning, everyone, and  
3 welcome to today's New York City Council Hearing for  
4 the Committee on General Welfare. At this time, to  
5 minimize disruptions through the hearing, we ask that  
6 you please place all electronic devices to vibrate or  
7 silent mode.

8 If you have testimony you wish to submit for the  
9 record, you may do so via email to  
10 [testimony@council.nyc.gov](mailto:testimony@council.nyc.gov), once again, that is  
11 [testimony@council.nyc.gov](mailto:testimony@council.nyc.gov).

12 We thank you for your cooperation, Chair, we are  
13 ready to begin.

14 CHAIRPERSON AYALA: Thank you. (GAVELING IN)

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

19 Today we are holding our annual oversight hearing  
20 on hunger and food insecurity in New York City. We  
21 will also be hearing seven bills:

22 The first, Intro 28, sponsored by Majority  
23 Leader, Amanda Fariás, is a Local Law that would  
24 require the Department of Social Services to create a  
25 system to obtain employment and income information

1  
2 from a third party for the City's use in making  
3 determinations for benefits and services eligibility.

4 The remaining six bills are resolutions:

5 Resolution 24, sponsored by, Council Member  
6 Schulman, Resolution calling on Congress to pass, and  
7 the President to sign, S.2258/H.R.3519, the "Hot  
8 Foods Act of 2023," to permit Supplemental Nutrition  
9 Assistance Program benefits to be used to purchase  
10 additional types of food items, particularly hot  
11 foods.

12 Propose Resolution 58, sponsored by, Council  
13 Member Avilas, calling upon the United States  
14 Congress to pass and the President to sign H.R. 3899,  
15 the American Family Act, which would expand the Child  
16 Tax Credit.

17 Resolution 57, which I have sponsored, calls on  
18 New York state to create a program to provide food  
19 benefits for those not eligible for existing  
20 benefits, including anyone over 55 meeting income  
21 eligibility.

22 Resolution 227, sponsored by Council Member  
23 Brewer, calling on Congress to pass, and the  
24 President to sign, a renewed Farm Bill that increases  
25 funding for life- saving food aid.

1  
2 Resolution 237, sponsored by Council Member  
3 Dinowitz, calling on Congress to pass, and the  
4 President to sign, S.1488/H.R.3183, the "Enhance  
5 Access to SNAP Act of 2023" (EATS Act of 2023), o  
6 remove certain eligibility disqualifications that  
7 restrict otherwise eligible students from  
8 participating in the Supplemental Nutrition  
9 Assistance Program.

10 Resolution 419, sponsored by Council Member  
11 Sanchez, calling on the New York State Legislature to  
12 pass, and the Governor to sign S.7823/A.4096,  
13 requiring the implementation of an electronic benefit  
14 transfer system using industry-standard commercial  
15 electronic funds transfer technology.

16 Moving on to our oversight topic for today,  
17 every year the Committee on General Welfare holds a  
18 hearing on hunger and food insecurity, recognizing  
19 the growing challenges around these issues for too  
20 many.

21 We know that for too many New Yorkers, we that  
22 poverty and food insecurity overlap, and we know that  
23 people of color, as well as those living with  
24 disabilities and chronic health conditions, are more  
25 likely to experience food insecurity.

1  
2       There are various food programs administered by  
3 DSS and HRA to help fill the inequities and gaps  
4 resulting in hunger in our city. For example, DSS  
5 funds and manages the network of the New York City's  
6 food pantries and soup kitchens through Community  
7 Food Connection.

8       We want to be sure that these programs are set up  
9 for success, and that providers have what they need  
10 to curb hunger. This means properly funding providers  
11 and doing so on time.

12       As the pandemic era food assistance programs have  
13 come to an end, we're seeing a greater number of New  
14 Yorkers facing hunger. Factors such as backlogs and  
15 rejections of SNAP applications, the influx of asylum  
16 seekers, and the theft of electronic benefits used to  
17 disperse SNAP payments have exacerbated food  
18 insecurity in New York City.

19       I look forward to hearing from the Administration  
20 and advocates today and gathering feedback on the  
21 oversight topic of all of the relevant current  
22 issues, as well as Intro 28.

23       At this time, I'd like to acknowledge my  
24 colleagues who are here: Council Member Avilas,



1 Council Member Ung, Council Member Cabán, and Council  
2 Member Brewer.

3  
4 I would also like to thank the committee staff  
5 who worked hard to prepare this hearing: Aminta  
6 Kilawan, Senior Legislative Counsel; Penina  
7 Rosenberg, Legislative Policy Analyst; Julia K.  
8 Haramis; Finance Unit Head; Phariha Rahman, Financial  
9 Analyst; Rose Martinez, Assistant Deputy Director;  
10 and Anne Driscoll, Data Scientist. And, finally,  
11 Elsie Encarnacion, Chief of Staff.

12 (PAUSE)

13 I will not turn it over to Council Member Avilas  
14 followed by Council Member Brewer to speak on their  
15 resolutions.

16 COUNCIL MEMBER AVILAS: Good morning, thank you  
17 Chair, thank you all for being here today to discuss  
18 this very pressing issue of hunger and food  
19 insecurity in our city. This is an issue that impacts  
20 certainly my district, District 38, and we know from  
21 citywide data collected by Feed NYC that food pantry  
22 visits are up by 60 percent since the pandemic. Of  
23 course, this shouldn't be a surprise considering  
24 since that time we've faced record high inflation  
25 record high housing costs, rising health care costs,

1 and stagnant wages - and of course the reason I'm  
2 here today -all of this combined with an expiration  
3 of the child tax credit, which caused poverty levels  
4 to double nationwide up from 5.2 percent to 12.4  
5 percent after the tax credit expired.  
6

7 While the extension of the child tax credit  
8 failed to materialize ahead of the April 15th  
9 deadline, there is still hope that the Senate will  
10 push this important measure through, and our families  
11 of our city who are struggling, will be able to see  
12 this benefit retroactively.

13 I urge my colleagues to move this resolution  
14 forward so that we might send a clear message to our  
15 colleagues in the federal government that our  
16 families desperately need this benefit to cover basic  
17 expenditures. We know that by implementing proven  
18 strategies like the child tax credit, they uplift  
19 working families and we're able to materialize gains  
20 that impact our communities for generations to come.

21 According to the center on Budget and Policy  
22 Priorities, by boosting the future earnings and tax  
23 payments of child beneficiaries improving health and  
24 longevity of parents and children, reducing health  
25 care, child protection, and criminal justice costs,

1  
2 the child tax credit expansion would likely provide  
3 large and lasting gains for the next generation.

4 So, here in New York City nearly, 18.5 percent of  
5 our children are living in poverty, the majority of  
6 which are Black and brown and living in communities  
7 like the one I represent. In helping our families  
8 care for their children we, uplift our entire  
9 community, and not only make our streets safer, but  
10 create flexibility to access opportunities that  
11 otherwise would not have been within reach. Thank  
12 you, Chair Ayala, for holding this important hearing  
13 today and all the Resolutions and Intros being heard  
14 today on this very important issue. I appreciate it  
15 thank you.

16 CHAIRPERSON AYALA: Thank you.

17 COUNCIL MEMBER BREWER: Thank you very much. I am  
18 here to support Resolution 227, which calls on a  
19 renewed Farm Bill that increases funding for  
20 lifesaving food aid. It used to be that, in the old  
21 days, this wasn't an issue, because it was  
22 bipartisan- farmers, and urban dwellers, and people  
23 who needed food. Well obviously, in our crazy  
24 environment that is not what's happening. The recent  
25 House majority Farm Bill proposal is doing the exact

1  
2 opposite by reducing \$30 billion in food resources to  
3 44 million Americans who live in food insecure  
4 households.

5 Too many New Yorkers are experiencing food  
6 insecurity. According to the Recent Mayor's Office of  
7 Food Policy 2022 Food Metrics Annual Report, an  
8 estimated 1.2 million - or 14.6 percent -of New York  
9 residents were food insecure. All you have to do is  
10 go to a food pantry, and you will see it. More cuts  
11 to food security will only continue the increase in  
12 need for emergency food assistance. Across the City,  
13 food banks and soup kitchens have seen double digit  
14 increases in demand.

15 We need more government investments in food  
16 security at all levels. The farm bill proposed by the  
17 Senate majority, which protects the nutrition safety  
18 net would be far better for hungry Americans. We urge  
19 the committees in Washington to work together to pass  
20 a farm bill that expands benefits. Providing  
21 lifesaving food aid is a moral imperative. Thank you  
22 Joel Berg, always, and Hunger Free America, for your  
23 leadership and advocacy in the fight against food  
24 insecurity. Thank you, and I have to go next door for  
25 the Committee.

1 CHAIRPERSON AYALA: Thank you.

2 (PAUSE)

3 I would now like to turn it over to our Policy  
4 Analyst to swear and members of the Administration.

5 PENINA ROSENBERG: First Deputy Commissioner  
6 Berry, could you please raise your right hand? Do you  
7 affirm to tell the truth, the whole truth, and  
8 nothing but the truth, before this committee, and to  
9 respond honestly to council member questions?  
10

11 FIRST DEPUTY COMMISSIONER BERRY: Yes

12 CHAIRPERSON AYALA: You may begin.

13 FIRST DEPUTY COMMISSIONER BERRY: Thank you. Good  
14 morning, my name is Jill Berry, and I serve as the  
15 First Deputy Commissioner at the Department of Social  
16 Services or DSS.

17 I would like to thank Deputy Speaker Ayala and  
18 the members of the Committee on General Welfare for  
19 holding today's hearing on hunger and food insecurity  
20 in New York City.

21 There are many faces of food insecurity: a child  
22 going to school hungry in the morning, a parent lying  
23 awake at night wondering how they'll put the next  
24 meal on the table, a pregnant person seeking  
25

1  
2 nutritious options as a part of their diet to foster  
3 healthy prenatal development.

4       Because food insecurity intersects with so many  
5 aspects of our well-being, it is essential that our  
6 city continue to build on efforts to be a strong  
7 partner in aiding food and secure households.

8       DSS serves as an integral part of a safety net  
9 that includes the New York City Department of Health  
10 and Mental Hygiene (DOHMH) and The Mayor's Office of  
11 Food Policy, as well as a panoply of community  
12 stakeholders, including neighborhood older adult  
13 centers, our houses of worship, and community based  
14 organizations. Collectively this array of  
15 institutions participate and tackling the challenge  
16 of food insecurity. Our shared commitment stems from  
17 our understanding that everyone deserves the peace of  
18 mind that comes with food security.

19       If anyone listening is facing food and security,  
20 know that there is help available. You can call 311  
21 or visit [foodhelp.nyc.gov](http://foodhelp.nyc.gov) to find nearby food  
22 pantries and community kitchens. Access HRA, our  
23 mobile app, and our benefits access center serve as  
24 further resources where clients can apply for  
25 benefits. I also want to take this opportunity to

1  
2 encourage those clients receiving SNAP to learn more  
3 about the Department of Health and Mental Hygiene's  
4 food access initiatives, including Health Bucks, Half  
5 Off Farm Box, Get the Good Stuff, and Groceries to Go  
6 - all assist in strengthening and network of healthy  
7 food options for New Yorkers.

8       The Department of Social Services is responsible  
9 for administrating programs crucial to uplifting food  
10 security. The Supplemental Nutrition Program, or  
11 SNAP, helps approximately 1.8 million New Yorkers  
12 access nutritious food. The Community Food Connection  
13 Program, CFC, funds 699 food pantries and community  
14 kitchens across the five boroughs. CFC served more  
15 than 25.9 million people (duplicated) in FY24. The  
16 CFC model has created added flexibility for providers  
17 to distribute the mix of foods that best meet the  
18 needs of the communities they serve, including fresh  
19 produce, Halal certified proteins, and Kosher  
20 certified foods, among many other options.

21       As highlighted by Mayor Adams earlier this year,  
22 DSS is happy to report that we have functionally  
23 eliminated the previously reported backlogs of Cash  
24 Assistance and SNAP applications that peaked at more  
25 than 50,000 combined cases, ensuring low income New

1  
2 Yorkers can quickly and easily access the federal  
3 benefit for which they qualify. Investments in  
4 staffing, technology, and process improvements has  
5 reduced the backlog of cases by 99 and 92%  
6 respectively. In total, DSS processed more than  
7 600,000 Cash Assistance and SNAP applications during  
8 this period. Faced with the record number of  
9 applications as federal pandemic related support  
10 expired, DSS deployed a robust plan to process  
11 outstanding applications quickly and make it easier  
12 for low income New Yorkers to access critical  
13 benefits.

14 DSS hired nearly 1,000 new staff since January  
15 2023 to process both Cash Assistance and SNAP  
16 applications, doubled down on training for staff, and  
17 strengthened remote application processes to make it  
18 easier to apply for benefits. This achievement would  
19 not be completed without the hard work of our  
20 dedicated staff who service millions of New Yorkers  
21 every day.

22 Outreach is an essential component of our work.  
23 We have a responsibility to not only make assistance  
24 available but also to make sure New Yorkers are aware  
25 that the City is a partner and food security. To that



1  
2 end, the DSS Office of Community Outreach conducts  
3 targeted outreach campaigns to organizations serving  
4 specific populations including older adults, the  
5 LGBTQIA+ community, persons with disabilities, and  
6 immigrant communities. The Office of Community  
7 Outreach conducts presentations and attends resource  
8 fairs, farmers markets, and other events to increase  
9 SNAP awareness and engagement.

10 In addition, DSS works through various channels  
11 to educate the public about SNAP benefits to maximize  
12 the City's use of available federal programs to  
13 increase the purchasing power of low income New  
14 Yorkers. The Office of Community Outreach also  
15 provides SNAP trainings and presentations, prescreens  
16 s potentially eligible applicants, and assist with  
17 the SNAP application process.

18 As I mentioned at the start of my testimony, New  
19 Yorkers in need of assistance should call 311, visit  
20 [foodhelp.nyc.gov](http://foodhelp.nyc.gov) to find nearby food pantries and  
21 community kitchens, or reach us through Access HRA or  
22 our Benefits Access Centers. New Yorkers can also be  
23 connected to a community based organization to get  
24 help with SNAP and enrollment, as well as other  
25

1  
2 benefits by calling 311 or visiting the HRA website's  
3 "Find a Partner Organization" page.

4 In addition, DSS participates in monthly SNAP  
5 Task Force meetings, chaired by Food Bank for New  
6 York City, to provide updates and answer questions  
7 from participating CBOs.

8 In 2023, DSS conducted a total of 81 trainings,  
9 which included 1,730 attendees, in using these tools  
10 to submit SNAP and other benefit applications, and  
11 provide benefit case management via Access HRA.

12 Training attendees included staff from other  
13 municipal agencies and community partner  
14 organizations, including older adult center staff.  
15 These trainings were also a forum for questions and  
16 concerns from providers and advocates, working  
17 directly with HRA and DHS clients, including older  
18 adults.

19 We must also recognize the challenge of pursuing  
20 innovative solutions and approaches in an environment  
21 that is severely constrained by stringent federal and  
22 state regulations. As the administrator of  
23 multibillion dollar social services programs, DSS is  
24 obligated to adhere to the rubrics set out by state  
25 and federal authorities.

1  
2 One of the most recent and successful  
3 collaborations across levels of government has been  
4 the response to the theft of SNAP benefits commonly  
5 referred to as skimming. Skimming occurs when  
6 unscrupulous actors tamper with retail credit card  
7 swipe machines and are able to siphon off vital SNAP  
8 funds from our local clients. In response to the high  
9 number of instances of stolen funds, DSS worked with  
10 our partners on the state and federal level to create  
11 a reimbursement program to assist the clients to rely  
12 on these funds. As of May 22, 2024 DSS has approved  
13 the reimbursement of over 82,000 SNAP claims  
14 amounting to more than \$26 million in restored  
15 benefits. Approved replacement benefits have  
16 consistently been added to client EBT cards within  
17 three days of determination.

18 We look forward to continued collaboration with  
19 our state and federal partners to ensure EBT cards  
20 are suited with the highest level of security to  
21 protect clients who rely on these benefits.  
22 Currently, there are proposals to add chip technology  
23 to the EBT cards similar to your average credit card,  
24 which will prevent this type of skimming theft. We  
25 are supportive of these proposals and are having

1  
2 ongoing conversations with our partners in government  
3 to advance this effort.

4 As a largest social service agency in the nation,  
5 it would be criminal of me not to highlight the  
6 importance of the federal Farm Bill currently being  
7 reviewed and elevated in Congress. Among several  
8 provisions included in this dense piece of  
9 legislation, this bill and enable the SNAP funds that  
10 1.8 million New Yorkers rely on. Any discussion or  
11 entertainment of a cut to the SNP program would be  
12 catastrophic, and put millions at risk of food and  
13 security, including 560,000 children and 530,000 New  
14 Yorkers above the age of 60. One in three New York  
15 City renters experience food insecurity. More than  
16 half of New Yorkers experiencing food hardship also  
17 reported facing health problems. It is essential that  
18 this already limited subsidy get maintained at  
19 current funding levels, or better yet, improved. The  
20 Adams' Administration are or actively collaborating  
21 with our partners in government, as well as the  
22 advocacy community, to ensure that this vital  
23 resource is available to New Yorkers in need of food.  
24 We encourage the City Council and any other  
25

1  
2 stakeholders to join us in advocating for this  
3 essential tool in fighting food and security.

4 Shifting to the legislation noticed for this  
5 hearing, DSS is reviewing Introduction 28 and is  
6 committed to working with our state and federal  
7 partners improve income and employment verification.  
8 We agree on the need to utilize tools to facilitate  
9 the process of eligibility, determination, and client  
10 information verification; this why presently DSS  
11 engages with external databases and state government  
12 partners.

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

22 Our work as the largest social services agency in  
23 the country would not be possible without the  
24 generosity, partnership, and commitment of countless  
25 fellow New Yorkers. Thank you to the hard-working

1  
2 staff at DSS/HRA/DHS and all across government and  
3 our community partners who dedicate their lives to  
4 servicing the most vulnerable. Special thanks to the  
5 Council and this committee for your support and  
6 sustained advocacy on this critical issue. I  
7 appreciate the opportunity to testify and welcome  
8 your questions, thank you.

9 CHAIRPERSON AYALA: Thank you, I would like to  
10 recognize that we have also been joined by Council  
11 Member Farías, Council Member Banks, and Council  
12 Member Riley.

13 Council Member Farías?

14 COUNCIL MEMBER FARÍAS: Thank you, Chair, for  
15 allowing me time to read my statement.

16 So, thank you, again, and thank you, First Deputy  
17 Commissioner Berry, for your testimony.

18 Good morning everyone, I'm really proud to be  
19 attending today's hearing to discuss hunger and food  
20 insecurity in New York City and hear my bill  
21 Introduction 28 in relation to establishing a system  
22 to obtain employment and income information from a  
23 third party for the City's use in making  
24 determinations for benefits and services eligibility.  
25 This legislation would encourage the City to better

1 streamline City processes and ensure we get New  
2 Yorkers the services they need as fast as possible.  
3 Instead of making an appointment, after appointment,  
4 and waiting weeks on end to hear back if you qualify,  
5 which many of my constituents go through, this  
6 legislation would allow for people to instead have a  
7 one-stop shop where they can find out every benefit  
8 that they qualify for, and while we use similar  
9 systems throughout our service oriented agencies  
10 currently, our people really do need a one-stop shop  
11 focused on efficiency. We know that programs like  
12 SNAP are often emergency relief for people and their  
13 families, and, thus, we cannot leave our neighbors  
14 in need to wait for weeks to know if they're eligible  
15 for only one benefit.  
16

17 Local government's main function in my belief is  
18 to get dire services to their constituents and to  
19 maximize our tools for outreach. We can do that with  
20 Introduction 28.

21 In New York State, one in four adults are  
22 experiencing food insecurity, and in my home borough  
23 of the Bronx, it's at a staggering 39 percent. This  
24 legislation is long overdue and grows more urgent  
25 with the rise of inflation and the ongoing

1  
2 affordability crisis in New York City. So I look  
3 forward to continuing our conversations. Thank you,  
4 Deputy Speaker Ayala, for your leadership on today's  
5 issue and for including my bill in today's hearing.

6 CHAIRPERSON AYALA: Thank you. And I just want to  
7 clarify, I mean, today's hearing is really... is an  
8 important one, because we touch on so many different  
9 aspects of food and how that impacts ,you know, the  
10 daily lives of our very... of our most vulnerable New  
11 Yorkers. I would be remiss if I did not acknowledge  
12 that I'm very disappointed that HPD was not here -  
13 they were invited to come and testify, specifically  
14 because they did receive... they were the recipient  
15 of a no-bid contract, in the amount of \$53 million,  
16 to provide asylum seeking families with debit cards  
17 that they would be able to use for food. And it would  
18 have been nice, considering that it's been several  
19 months now, to get a sense of how well or not that  
20 program was operating. It is ,you know, our oversight  
21 responsibility to ensure that we have a better  
22 understanding of how our taxpayer dollars are being  
23 spent. And it's really just disappointing that ,you  
24 know, no one is he from HPD to respond to those  
25 questions.



1  
2 I will move on. HRA's, uh, New York City benefits  
3 program contracts with community based nonprofit  
4 organizations across the city to provide assistance  
5 with public benefits eligibility screening and  
6 applications. Funding for this program was first  
7 added in Fiscal Year 2023, uh, as a joint priority  
8 between the Administration and the Council, and it is  
9 a vital resource aiming to increase public benefit  
10 enrollments among low-income New York City residents.

11 Currently, can you tell us how many CBOs are part  
12 of the New York City benefits program, and can you  
13 provide a breakdown by borough?

14 FIRST DEPUTY COMMISSIONER BERRY: Yep, there are  
15 36 direct services CBOs as part of the program and  
16 another three that are technical assistance  
17 providers. I do have the full list of each of the 39  
18 by borough, which I could read to you or we could  
19 provide to you after the hearing.

20 CHAIRPERSON AYALA: I think you... I would  
21 actually like to have it on the record, so if you can  
22 read through them?

23 FIRST DEPUTY COMMISSIONER BERRY: Absolutely. So,  
24 the citywide providers are: Arab American Family  
25 Support, Center for Independence of the Disabled New

1  
2 York, Center for Urban Community Services, Fortune  
3 Society, Hunger-Free America, Jewish Association for  
4 Services for the Aged, Red de Pueblos  
5 Transnacionales.

6 In Brooklyn we have Bedford-Stuyvesant  
7 Restoration Corporation, Center for Family Life in  
8 Sunset Park, Chinese American Planning Council,  
9 Cypress Hills Local Development Corporation, Haitian  
10 Americans United for Progress, Make the Road New  
11 York, Mixteco, RiseBoro Community Partnership, YM-  
12 YWHA of Brighton-Manhattan Beach, United Jewish  
13 Organizations of Williamsburg, Yemeni American  
14 Merchants Association.

15 In the Bronx we have BronxWorks, Bronx Defenders,  
16 Mercy Center, Montefiore Medical Center, Mosholu  
17 Montefiore Community Center, Northern Manhattan  
18 Improvement Corporation, Part of the Solution (POTS),  
19 Women's Housing and Economic Development Corporation,  
20 and Yemeni American Merchants Association.

21 In Manhattan we have Asian Americans for  
22 Equality, Chinese American Planning Council, Goddard  
23 Riverside Community Center, Henry Street Settlement,  
24 Northern Manhattan Improvement Corporation, and Union  
25 Settlement.

1  
2 In Queens we have Asian Americans for Equality,  
3 Common Point Queens, Haitian Americans United for  
4 Progress, Korean Community Services, Make the Road  
5 New York, South Asian Council for Social Services,  
6 Sunnyside Community Services.

7 In Staten Island, Project Hospitality, La Comina,  
8 and Make the Road New York.

9 And our three technical assistance providers that  
10 operate citywide are: Bronx Legal Services, Community  
11 Services Society, and Public Health Solutions.

12 CHAIRPERSON AYALA: Thank you.

13 We've also been joined by Council Member Stevens.

14 Can you confirm that there will be no  
15 programmatic impact to any of those CBOs in this  
16 program from the PEG that was included in the  
17 preliminary plan?

18 FIRST DEPUTY COMMISSIONER BERRY: Yes, these...  
19 all of these providers will receive the same level of  
20 funding for... In FY25 as they have received under  
21 the prior contract. What we did was we took these  
22 contracts inhouse from CUNY. CUNY charges an 8  
23 percent admin fee on top of the amount that we're  
24 paying for the contracts. This program is also very  
25 important to our agency, and we really felt strongly

1  
2 that both, there would be the dollar savings running  
3 it ourselves, and we can also be closer to and have  
4 better oversight over the program that is so  
5 important to connecting New Yorkers to our services.

6 CHAIRPERSON AYALA: Can you tell us what the  
7 budget for the New York City benefits program is in  
8 Fiscal Year 2024 and Fiscal Year 2025, and in the  
9 outer years if possible?

10 FIRST DEPUTY COMMISSIONER BERRY: So, the funding  
11 for the program, uh, the budget for FY24 was \$9.2  
12 million, it's \$11.7 million in FY25. That's more than  
13 enough to cover the \$9.5 million for the CBOs. There  
14 is a cliff in the out years for this program, but  
15 we're confident that as we can continue to  
16 demonstrate the success and importance of this  
17 program that we will work with the Administration to  
18 keep these this program funded. The new contracts  
19 will be one-year contracts renewable for three  
20 succeeding years that we're establishing in July.

21 CHAIRPERSON AYALA: Okay.

22 Now we've heard from some of the CBO providers is  
23 that despite being granted a three-year award, their  
24 initial contracts were just for one. Why was that the  
25 case?

1  
2 FIRST DEPUTY COMMISSIONER BERRY: The contracts  
3 were one-year contracts that were renewable for  
4 subsequent years for up to three years.

5 CHAIRPERSON AYALA: For up to three years? Okay.

6 And we have additionally heard from providers  
7 that the first year contracts ended in December, uh,  
8 that when they ended in December, they were not  
9 automatically given another contract. After some  
10 delay, while many of them continue to provide  
11 services without a contract in place, they were  
12 granted the six-month contract. Why was there a delay  
13 and why was the contract then, uh, term shorted if  
14 you're acknowledging that it should have been  
15 renewed?

16 FIRST DEPUTY COMMISSIONER BERRY: So, the six-  
17 month contract term was the was the bridge  
18 essentially from CUNY to DSS. So there was a one-year  
19 calendar year 2023 contract with each of the  
20 providers. Now we're bridging the... CUNY is bridging  
21 the gap for the six months from January 2024 to June  
22 2024, and then we will pick up one-year contracts at  
23 DSS starting in July 2024. There were absolutely some  
24 delays with the that six-month bridge, but we are  
25 working with CUNY to smooth out any issues.

1 CHAIRPERSON AYALA: Okay.

2 Can you tell us what the share is that goes to  
3 CUNY?  
4

5 FIRST DEPUTY COMMISSIONER BERRY: They charge an 8  
6 percent admin fee on top of the contract values.

7 CHAIRPERSON AYALA: On top of the contract, okay.

8 I had a question regarding the EBT, the  
9 reimbursement of the skimming cases. So, you  
10 mentioned in your testimony that as of May 22nd  
11 82,000 SNAP claims amounting to \$26 million were  
12 restored.

13 Do you know how many applications were denied?

14 FIRST DEPUTY COMMISSIONER BERRY: It is a very  
15 small number. Let me see if I have that here with me.  
16 If I don't have that readily available, we can  
17 definitely get that to you. Uh, 70 percent are  
18 approved.

19 CHAIRPERSON AYALA: Seventy percent (INAUDIBLE)...  
20 (CROSS-TALK)

21 FIRST DEPUTY COMMISSIONER BERRY: Seventy percent  
22 of the applications are approved, so 30 percent are  
23 not approved.

24 CHAIRPERSON AYALA: Do you have any idea of what  
25 would... what would be a reason for a denial?

1  
2 FIRST DEPUTY COMMISSIONER BERRY: Yes, so there's  
3 a variety of reasons. We do set submit a send a  
4 denial notice to every client who is denied with the  
5 reason for denial. So they have an opportunity to  
6 resubmit their application.

7 Uh, reasons for denial could be that dates that  
8 they indicate their benefits were skimmed were not  
9 dates that there were any transactions on their  
10 cards. It would mostly be issues like that, uh,  
11 somebody didn't indicate their case number; we're not  
12 able to identify them as a SNAP recipient, uh, mostly  
13 issues like that. If the individual were skimmed,  
14 they receive that information in their denial notice,  
15 and they would then have the information to be able  
16 to resubmit their claim. And there's no limit on the  
17 number of claims people can submit.

18 CHAIRPERSON AYALA: I'm just... I'm concerned  
19 about that, because I ,you know, I know that we were  
20 receiving a number of calls directly from folks that  
21 had their benefits skimmed and were desperate, like,  
22 I mean, desperate. Because ,you know, this is the  
23 only money that they have for food for the month, and  
24 now it's gone, and there's no way to reimburse it.

1  
2 And, then, finally, after they wait months for  
3 reimbursement, and they're finally... there's an  
4 opportunity, the State does the right thing here, and  
5 people were being denied.

6 I had a case in my district where there was, uh,  
7 one of my seniors had an issue. She called me frantic  
8 she's ,like, Diana, they stole my money, and I had to  
9 explain to her that, unfortunately, she wasn't going  
10 to get it back. That we were working and hoping that  
11 the State would add some funding. So, as soon as the  
12 State added the funding, I was really excited to call  
13 her and say, hey ,you know, the money's there, let me  
14 help you personally fill out this application, sent  
15 it in that same day, and she got denied.

16 She was denied, because of the date issue. Now,  
17 the problem was that she was correct, because in the  
18 system that she has, she has an app on her phone,  
19 when I looked at it, the date that she gave me was  
20 the date that we reported. But, for some reason on  
21 HRA's end, you had a separate... you had a  
22 different date.

23 So, I wonder if that happened to ,you know, I  
24 mean, thankfully because of that, because she had the  
25 app, she was able to go back, and she's one of those



1  
2 very savvy older adults that knows how to handle  
3 technology. So, she was like, no, no, no, that was  
4 the date, that's the date that's on the app. So, we  
5 were able to go back, and she was then ,you know,  
6 provided her funds back. But, it took a little  
7 troubleshooting.

8 So, is that happening ,you know, beyond offices  
9 like mine?

10 FIRST DEPUTY COMMISSIONER BERRY: It is.  
11 Unfortunately, the date issue is the most common  
12 reason for denial, and it happens a lot. There are  
13 third party apps out there that don't have the exact  
14 transaction date that is required for submission of  
15 the application. We make sure that as we're talking  
16 to elected officials, we're talking to CBOs, and all  
17 of the literature that we're putting out to our  
18 clients, we are letting them know that they need to  
19 use the app (TIMER CHIMES) the main app, the primary  
20 app. It was connected EBT up until a few weeks ago.  
21 Now it is Edge EBT, but you have to use the State's  
22 app not a third party app in order to get the correct  
23 information.

24 CHAIRPERSON AYALA: So who contracts with the  
25 third party app?

1  
2 FIRST DEPUTY COMMISSIONER BERRY: Third party apps  
3 are using... yes, they have no connection to the City  
4 or the State

5 CHAIRPERSON AYALA: That's scary, because if they  
6 don't have a connection to the City or the State, how  
7 do they have access to all of that information that's  
8 supposed to be very confidential... (CROSS-TALK)

9 FIRST DEPUTY COMMISSIONER BERRY: Yes, we strongly  
10 encourage people to use the app that is approved by  
11 the State and the City.

12 CHAIRPERSON AYALA: Yeah, but how... is there  
13 any... does HR ... is HRA aware of where... how...  
14 I mean, I don't understand. I'm not as Tech savvy as  
15 my seniors obviously, but how does a third party...  
16 are they purchasing that information?

17 FIRST DEPUTY COMMISSIONER BERRY: You know,  
18 honestly I'm not sure. They're certainly not  
19 purchasing it from the city of New York. The city of  
20 New York is not providing that information to any  
21 vendors.

22 CHAIRPERSON AYALA: We will sick Gail Brewer on  
23 this, because this is like more of an oversight.  
24 (LAUGHTER) This is more of an oversight and

1  
2 investigations getting to down to the nitty  
3 gritty...(CROSS-TALK)

4 FIRST DEPUTY COMMISSIONER BERRY: (INAUDIBLE)

5 CHAIRPERSON AYALA: part of the of this  
6 investigation. But, I find that very troubling.

7 Is there any information that is shared with the  
8 recipients letting them know what a third party app  
9 is? An example of any that may be out there ,you  
10 know, in in the atmosphere, and that they should be  
11 very careful not to?

12 Because, I mean the one that she was on, I was  
13 pretty sure was an HRA app. So, if it wasn't an HRA  
14 app, it looked very official. Because even I thought  
15 that it was.

16 FIRST DEPUTY COMMISSIONER BERRY: Yeah, and ,you  
17 know, I don't know for certain that these third party  
18 apps are doing anything the nefarious. They are not  
19 getting their information... (CROSS-TALK)

20 CHAIRPERSON AYALA: No, but still... (CROSS-TALK)

21 FIRST DEPUTY COMMISSIONER BERRY: from us. And we  
22 do... all of our messaging to clients tells people  
23 which app it is that they should be using.

24 CHAIRPERSON AYALA: Okay, I'm gonna... yeah, we'll  
25 follow up on that, just because I'm... you know,

1  
2 and, again, I don't know whether they are or they  
3 aren't, but the fact that they have access to client  
4 information scares the bejesus out of me. Uh, how  
5 they're obtaining that information ,you know, is  
6 important to me. What they're doing with that  
7 information is important to me. But, whether or not  
8 individuals understand what the difference is between  
9 the apps is also critically important. Because,  
10 they're using it, as a guiding principle, right?  
11 They're using it, and to them this is a legitimate  
12 app. And I was very impressed with it by the way. So,  
13 I will go back, and I'll look at hers just to double  
14 check.

15       Regarding the hiring and staffing processes, even  
16 with the system improvements, well-trained, adequate  
17 staffing levels at HRA is a crucial component of  
18 processing public benefits in a timely manner.  
19 According to OMB documents, the SNAP program area has  
20 1,231 budgeted positions, which is 26 positions less  
21 than the actual head count back in April of 2023 -  
22 which was 1,257.

23       Does HRA plan to adjust the budgeted headcount  
24 for the SNAP program area in a future plan? If so,  
25 when, and by how many positions?

1  
2 FIRST DEPUTY COMMISSIONER BERRY: So, right now  
3 OMB is allowing us to replace all of our attrition in  
4 the SNAP program one for one. So every time somebody  
5 leaves or is promoted, we are able to replace that  
6 individual. And we're going to continue with that  
7 process to maintain our current staffing levels. At  
8 this point, we don't have any plans to make any  
9 changes to our budget. We're going to keep working  
10 with OMB to maintain our current staffing levels.

11 CHAIRPERSON AYALA: How many positions in HRA are  
12 currently trying... is current... is HRA currently  
13 trying to fill for SNAP administration?

14 FIRST DEPUTY COMMISSIONER BERRY: Every person who  
15 leaves, we are trying to replace. I want to say it's  
16 in the 30 range for this month.

17 CHAIRPERSON AYALA: Where are they budgeted?

18 FIRST DEPUTY COMMISSIONER BERRY: The budget for  
19 SNAP is in budget code 1315.

20 CHAIRPERSON AYALA: What are... what special  
21 hiring accommodations of any are being made to staff  
22 up to these areas beyond just the citywide mandated  
23 hiring policy for one-on-one? Does HRA have  
24 authorization to fill all of the budgeted positions  
25 that are vacant regardless of attrition?

1  
2 FIRST DEPUTY COMMISSIONER BERRY: In the case of  
3 SNAP, we're working with OMB to fill all of the  
4 positions one-for-one regardless of the budget. So,  
5 right now, that is a little bit over the budget quite  
6 frankly. So the one-for-one will maintain our current  
7 staffing levels, which is what we believe we need in  
8 SNAP right now.

9 CHAIRPERSON AYALA: Is HRA still deploying staff  
10 from other areas to assist in the processing of SNAP?

11 FIRST DEPUTY COMMISSIONER BERRY: There are no  
12 staff redeployed in SNAP right now. We still have  
13 about 200 staff redeployed to the Cash Assistance  
14 program, they'll be returning to their home programs  
15 by the end of June.

16 CHAIRPERSON AYALA: Okay.

17 Can you talk is where we are in terms of the  
18 backlog? I know that we heard that the backlog had  
19 been cleared, are we at zero now? I mean, that was  
20 the previous backlog, so I'm curious to hear about  
21 what the number is to date.

22 FIRST DEPUTY COMMISSIONER BERRY: Yep. So, as of  
23 the end of April, we had approximately 165 SNAP  
24 applications that were overdue and 534 Cash  
25

1 Assistance applications that were overdue. Well...

2 (CROSS-TALK)

3 CHAIRPERSON AYALA: Five-hundred and I'm sorry?

4 Could you repeat that number, the last number?

5 FIRST DEPUTY COMMISSIONER BERRY: There are 534  
6 Cash and 165 SNAP.

7 CHAIRPERSON AYALA: How does that compare with  
8 where you were last year?

9 FIRST DEPUTY COMMISSIONER BERRY: Last year we  
10 were in the much higher than that. These numbers are  
11 ,you know, while every application should absolutely  
12 be processed on time, these are more reflective of  
13 our regular process, where occasionally a client  
14 might submit a documentation... a piece of document  
15 close to the end of the time period, and we'll keep  
16 the case open while we assess the eligibility. We're  
17 not looking to just close out an application if we  
18 have more work to be done.

19 CHAIRPERSON AYALA: Okay.

20 So, what would you say that the current timeline  
21 rate is for processing - for SNAP specifically?

22 FIRST DEPUTY COMMISSIONER BERRY: So, our  
23 timeliness numbers are still the February numbers,  
24 which are reflective of before we cleared the backlog  
25

1  
2 - the 61.8 percent for Cash Assistance and 71.2  
3 percent for SNAP. The numbers that we manage to on a  
4 day-to-day are the actual backlog numbers the numbers  
5 of cases that are actually due. Uh, calculating  
6 timeliness for over 70,000 applications received  
7 every month takes us a little bit of time to put  
8 those numbers together.

9 CHAIRPERSON AYALA: Analysis from the new city  
10 Council's data team found that there was a decrease  
11 in SNAP usage in 2023 as compared to 2022 - in  
12 Brooklyn, uh, especially in Bushwick, which was had a  
13 6 percent decrease; Crown Heights had a 5 percent  
14 decrease in Red Hook; and Carol Gardens well in Red  
15 Hook; and Carroll Gardens... Well, in Red Hook,  
16 Carroll Gardens, Gowanus, uh, had a 7 percent  
17 decrease.

18 Do you have any idea of what could account for  
19 this decrease in usage in these areas?

20 FIRST DEPUTY COMMISSIONER BERRY: This was a  
21 decrease in what? I missed the beginning part...

22 (CROSS-TALK)

23 CHAIRPERSON AYALA: It was a decrease in use of  
24 a... decrease in SNAP applications. The SNAP usage.



1  
2 FIRST DEPUTY COMMISSIONER BERRY: Not sure why  
3 there would be a decrease in SNAP applications from  
4 any particular borough. There were certainly  
5 decreases as the pandemic benefits decreased over  
6 time. There were... the dollars that were going...  
7 that are going out into every community are a lot  
8 less today than there they were during the pandemic  
9 when everybody was receiving the maxim benefit. And  
10 I'm sure that there are some people who were staying  
11 on... applying for and staying on SNAP for that  
12 maximum benefit - where it might not be quite as  
13 worth their while for a much smaller benefit today.

14 CHAIRPERSON AYALA: Okay.

15 FIRST DEPUTY COMMISSIONER BERRY: But, there's...  
16 there would be no particular reason. We really do try  
17 to make sure everybody who's eligible for SNAP  
18 applies.

19 CHAIRPERSON AYALA: Testimony by HRA staff at the  
20 Preliminary Budget - and the Executive Budget  
21 Hearings - directly contradicted some of the claims  
22 that were made by HRA leadership at the at the  
23 hearing regarding the benefit backlog - such as the  
24 backlog being cleared and that the mandatory overtime  
25 no longer being utilized. Employees testified that

1  
2 the mandatory overtime is still happening at some  
3 sites, and that HRA still had a backlog of 30,000  
4 applications as of May 6.

5 In addition, staff claimed that the technology  
6 changes HRA had made, such as those relating to the  
7 ANGIE system, severely hindered their ability to  
8 work efficiently, because the system does not allow  
9 the workers to double check applications. It is prone  
10 to glitches, and the IT tickets were not quickly  
11 resolved.

12 Staff members testified that they are able to  
13 process fewer applications per day than before ANGIE  
14 was implemented.

15 Can you clarify why there was such a notable  
16 discrepancy in your testimony and the account of HRA  
17 staff at the hearing? And what is HRA doing to  
18 address the issues with the ANGIE system?

19 And I know that there was a lot... there's always  
20 ,you know, the testimony are always very, very  
21 different when it relates to the ANGIE system.

22 So, I... my understanding of it is that ANGIE was  
23 created right before the pandemic, or it was it was  
24 implemented right before the pandemic. So, when the  
25 pandemic hit, and everybody went remote, there was a

1 decision in HRA to revert back to the old system,  
2 which allowed... I think it was over 70 percent  
3 processing rate. You know, it was pretty decent in  
4 comparison. Then once people went back to the office,  
5 ANGIE was then reinstated. Now, the complaint that  
6 we consistently get from the staff, and it's very  
7 consistent, and I believe them, is that there are  
8 glitches with the system that don't allow them to go  
9 from point A to point B sometimes, so they have to  
10 stop an application. And I HRA's point, you want to  
11 be very thorough, so you want them to be able to slow  
12 down enough to ensure that they are asking all of the  
13 questions. But, at this point ,you know, it appears  
14 as though there is something, it may not be the worst  
15 thing, but there is a problem that is occurring  
16 within the system that is preventing the workers from  
17 being able to process some applications.

19 They've brought it up several times. Has there  
20 been an acknowledgment of those complaints? And has  
21 anyone addressed them? Because I feel more like ,you  
22 know, when we were going through the questions,  
23 whenever we've asked these questions, and we've asked  
24 it several times, is the explanation that we get is  
25 more of, uh, kind of like, no, no, we've gone through

1  
2 it, but... you know it's not, "Yes, listen, we heard  
3 that from them, so we're going to go back, we're  
4 going to go check."

5 There's never been that level of accounting for  
6 like what the root cause of those complaints...

7 FIRST DEPUTY COMMISSIONER BERRY: I absolutely...  
8 I hear you.

9 So, a few things that I want to say that we  
10 we've done, so the backlog number that was being...  
11 the backlog number that was being reported in ANGIE  
12 was not the number of cases that were overdue. It was  
13 a number of cases that had been ready for processing  
14 for more than five days. And it wasn't just an  
15 application or a restart, it was any case change. So,  
16 we've... since then, we - and since we were last  
17 here, we've changed the name of that indicator in  
18 ANGIE. So it no longer calls it a back backlog, but  
19 rather ,you know, case changes ready for action or  
20 something along those lines. So it is more reflective  
21 of what that data point actually is. The staff  
22 members that testified after the last budget hearing,  
23 we reached out to each of them personally and invited  
24 them to join the regular meetings that we are already  
25 having with other line staff. It's not that we were

1 not meeting regularly with line staff to hear about  
2 the system and what's working and what's not working.  
3 But, we personally invited those particular staff  
4 members to join that Working Group. And I know at  
5 least one of them is actively participating at this  
6 point in time. The system is not perfect, every  
7 system has some glitches. Some things are glitches  
8 and technology issues, some things are training  
9 issues, and we need to do a better job of training  
10 staff. Now that we have cleared the backlogs, and in  
11 recognition that this system needs a little bit of  
12 attention, our IT teams took all of the outstanding  
13 help desk tickets - which I know staff get annoyed at  
14 having to put into the system, but they do help us to  
15 figure out where our problems are.  
16

17 We were able to group the top five help desk  
18 tickets, and we're specifically focused on resolving  
19 each one of those issues. We believe if we could  
20 address those top five help desk issues, it would  
21 probably resolve about 80 percent of the issues with  
22 the system.

23 So, those are some concrete steps that we are  
24 taking now, and we are able to take now because we've  
25 been able to clear the backlogs, and we can put some

1  
2 more energy and attention into tweaking the system  
3 and making sure that it's working well - as we  
4 intended, and is working well for the staff who  
5 actually have to use the system and do the work every  
6 day.

7 CHAIRPERSON AYALA: So, I'm assuming that the next  
8 time that the staff comes to testify, they'll say  
9 that it's gotten better?

10 FIRST DEPUTY COMMISSIONER BERRY: I'm hoping the  
11 same staff, they should be talking about working in  
12 these Work Groups, and the and the same things that  
13 I'm saying is what they are hearing and talking  
14 about.

15 CHAIRPERSON AYALA: Okay.

16 FIRST DEPUTY COMMISSIONER BERRY: If it's new  
17 staff, we'll invite them to the Work Group.

18 CHAIRPERSON AYALA: Okay.

19 I'm going to allow council member questions now.  
20 Council Member Farías, followed by Council Member  
21 Riley.

22 COUNCIL MEMBER FARÍAS: Thank you so much, Chair.  
23 And, thank you for answering all of the Chair's  
24 questions.

1 I just wanted to kind of go over Introduction 28.  
2 You... the Admin at least seems somewhat supportive  
3 of it.  
4

5 Can you kind of describe some of the systems we  
6 already use? I know you gave a brief description to  
7 the Deputy Speaker earlier. Some of the systems we're  
8 already using, what's the catch basin that we're  
9 getting information from? Is there any specific  
10 things we look for to find eligibility? And any  
11 streamlining that we do.

12 FIRST DEPUTY COMMISSIONER BERRY: Absolutely. The  
13 legislation specifically talked about income and  
14 employment information. So the data matches that we  
15 have and use right now for income and employment  
16 information include information from the State  
17 Department of Labor, new hires and wage information.  
18 We also are able to leverage the State's contract  
19 with the (INAUDIBLE) Corporation that has a lot of  
20 income and employment information from private  
21 vendors. And we use all of that information whenever  
22 possible to not require additional documentation from  
23 clients. But, in addition, income and employment is  
24 not the only data that we get, we also have access to  
25 data through Lexus Nexus, Department of Health vital

1 records. We're always looking for ways to get  
2 information that we need for applications from data  
3 matches. It's verified. It's something that staff  
4 don't have to look at. It's easier for the clients.  
5 It's really it's more streamlined and easier for  
6 everybody. That being said, not everybody's income is  
7 in one of these systems. The other thing is that if  
8 somebody had a job, was employed, was working, and we  
9 see that in the system, but they just lost it - Now  
10 they are eligible for benefits, but data that we're  
11 looking at indicates that they were very recently  
12 working, of course, and doesn't have the date that  
13 they lost their employment. So, there are... Even  
14 though we have access to a lot of data, we do a lot  
15 of data matches, there are absolutely times when we  
16 do need to ask clients for more information. And, I  
17 mean it, if there are other third-party sources for  
18 data out there - that we're not using and we should  
19 take a look at - we are happy to take a look at those  
20 options.

21  
22 COUNCIL MEMBER FARIÁS: Okay, great.

23 And are there any concerns or challenges you  
24 might see, at least right now, for where the bill  
25 stands on it?



1  
2 FIRST DEPUTY COMMISSIONER BERRY: I think that the  
3 bigger issue is, what is there that we're not looking  
4 at? We would love to take a look at it.

5 COUNCIL MEMBER FARIAS: Okay, great. I don't have  
6 any other additional questions, thank you, Chair.

7 CHAIRPERSON AYALA: Council Member Riley?

8 COUNCIL MEMBER RILEY: Thank you, Chair.

9 Good morning, Deputy Commissioner. I think, as  
10 you stated before the CFC provides, uh, according to  
11 the 699 food pantries and community kitchens across  
12 New York City, DSS funds and manages the CFC and the  
13 network of NYC food pantries and kitchens. Due to the  
14 fact that food and living costs are increasing, can  
15 you just share what the plans are to address the  
16 theft of electronic benefits used to disperse SNAP  
17 payments?

18 FIRST DEPUTY COMMISSIONER BERRY: What was the  
19 last part? Could you repeat the question?

20 COUNCIL MEMBER RILEY: What are the plans to  
21 address the theft of electronic benefits used to  
22 disperse SNAP benefits?

23 FIRST DEPUTY COMMISSIONER BERRY: Right for  
24 skimming - So, we do have an application out there  
25 online, we've we have approved over 82,000

1 applications, over \$25 million in replacement  
2 benefits for SNAP. One thing I do want to highlight  
3 for everybody is that the authorization to replace  
4 skimmed SNAP benefits expires currently at the end of  
5 September. After September, we will not have the  
6 authorization to replace SNAP benefits. We would  
7 welcome and encourage everyone's advocacy at the  
8 federal level to have that extended past September.  
9 As long as there are not chips in the EBT cards, the  
10 EBT cards are going to be very susceptible to  
11 skimming.  
12

13 COUNCIL MEMBER RILEY: Thank you.

14 In recent years, New Yorkers have been dealing  
15 with increased food bills due to the rising cost of  
16 groceries. A great number of New Yorkers are  
17 experiencing food insecurity as we all know, what  
18 plans or steps are being done to address the rise in  
19 backlogs and rejections of SNAP applications? And  
20 what recruitment efforts, advancement opportunities  
21 for employees and external partnerships have been  
22 explored to fill the needed positions in your office?

23 FIRST DEPUTY COMMISSIONER BERRY: So, we've been  
24 able to fill all of our vacant positions and address  
25 our backlogs. I believe as Deputy Speaker Ayala

1 pointed out, we're a little bit over our budgeted  
2 headcount on SNAP right now, and we're maintaining  
3 those staff levels, and we plan to continue to do so.  
4 We have resolved our backlogs, and at this point we  
5 continue to not have backlogs, and we will keep a  
6 close eye on those. In terms of access to the SNAP  
7 program, we're really proud the federal government  
8 establishes a program access index, which essentially  
9 gives you the percentage of people who are in  
10 receipt of SNAP versus the number that that are  
11 likely eligible for SNAP. And the PAI for New York  
12 City is 91.9 percent. That is our highest yet, we  
13 continue to increase that each (TIMER CHIMES) year.  
14 PAI for the United States is 77.9 percent, and for  
15 New York State it's 82.7 percent. So we are doing  
16 better than the country and the state. That doesn't  
17 mean we don't have more to do. There's still another  
18 8 percent left, so making sure our benefits are  
19 available both in centers and online, contracting  
20 with CBOs through the New York City benefits program  
21 to outreach to communities that might be a little bit  
22 more wary of government. All of those are things we  
23 are doing to try to continue to close that gap and  
24  
25

1  
2 ensure that everybody who's eligible for SNAP is in  
3 receipt of SNAP.

4 COUNCIL MEMBER RILEY: Thank you, Deputy  
5 Commissioner, thank you, Chair.

6 CHAIRPERSON AYALA: Thank you.

7 Council Member Avilas?

8 COUNCIL MEMBER AVILAS: Hi there, thank you so  
9 much, thank you, Chair.

10 I'd like to inquire a little, I understand HPD  
11 is not here today to talk about ,you know, the  
12 contracts that they're managing related to food,  
13 which is deeply disappointing. However, you are here,  
14 so I'd love to hear some more about food in the DHS  
15 facilities in terms of contract management for  
16 asylum seekers in the asylum seeker shelters. Could  
17 you tell us a little bit about how many contracts are  
18 being held for food? And if you've seen a similar  
19 experience to what we saw happening with the Dot Go  
20 Food (sp?) contract, which was enormous amounts of  
21 waste and these meals being thrown out for variety of  
22 reasons?

23 So, if you could tell us a little bit about that?

24 FIRST DEPUTY COMMISSIONER BERRY: Sure, so  
25 generally in the DHS system providers, the contracted

1 shelter providers are responsible for procuring and  
2 providing food - usually through a subcontract with a  
3 food vendor. In recognition of the large number of  
4 contracts we had to stand up very quickly, and the  
5 inability of community based organizations providers  
6 to stand up the staff immediately, we also have three  
7 emergency contracts that are held directly by DHS,  
8 and those bridge the gap until a provider is able to  
9 fully take over the shelter and contract for their  
10 own food. They can provide the food themselves, they  
11 can cook food on site, they can subcontract with  
12 others. In terms of the food itself, we follow the  
13 City's food standards for food. We do make sure  
14 that... we do allow shelters and encourage shelters  
15 to order more food if people are hungry, to make sure  
16 that if somebody needs... in especially in  
17 recognition of the new arrivals to the city, people  
18 are hungry. Right? And if people want more than one  
19 meal, they can get more than one meal. We do things  
20 like tasting the foods, weighing the foods to make  
21 sure that food vendors are providing food that that  
22 tastes good, that meets nutrition standards when we  
23 review the menus, and that it is the right weight and  
24

1 size for what we are contracting for. And when we  
2 find issues we resolve them.

3  
4 There is certainly some food waste always. It can  
5 be very hard to predict what meal is going to be  
6 appealing to the residents of a shelter on a given  
7 day. We do encourage our shelter providers if there's  
8 a particular meal that's not popular at your shelter,  
9 maybe you work with your vendor to not order that  
10 meal again and look for something different. (TIMER  
11 CHIMES)

12 COUNCIL MEMBER AVILAS: Thank you, Chair.

13 I just want a follow-up question. So, for the  
14 three emergency contracts you hold for those that  
15 are, I guess, those shelters that are in transition,  
16 who are those contracts with? And what... how much  
17 are those contracts?

18 FIRST DEPUTY COMMISSIONER BERRY: The contracts  
19 are with Whitson, Riviera, and (INAUDIBLE), and I  
20 would have to get back to you on the exact dollar  
21 value for each of those three contracts.

22 COUNCIL MEMBER AVILAS: In terms of you mentioned  
23 ,like, doing some quality control and checking in.  
24 What is... what's the cadence of that, given kind of  
25 the huge expansion of facilities? How often are you

1  
2 checking in? Is there... do you receive any direct  
3 feedback from any of the residents in those  
4 facilities around the quality of the food?

5 FIRST DEPUTY COMMISSIONER BERRY: Thank you, those  
6 are great questions. We do regular surveys with all  
7 of our clients. That was something we did before the  
8 influx of asylum seekers, and it is something we  
9 continue to do. In terms of it's of (INAUDIBLE)...  
10 (CROSS-TALK)

11 COUNCIL MEMBER AVILAS: What does regular mean?  
12 What does that mean?

13 FIRST DEPUTY COMMISSIONER BERRY: I'm going to  
14 have to get back to on the... I'm not sure I have  
15 it... the regular... I believe it's annual, but I do  
16 want to get back to specifically on what that is.

17 In terms of the staffing and the cadence of  
18 checking the food, we are staffed for pre-migrant  
19 when most of our shelters in fact did not provide  
20 food. We had gotten to the point where families with  
21 children were not in hotels, they mostly had their  
22 own cooking facilities, in which case we were not  
23 providing food.

24 So, it's not... we are not tasting the food,  
25 weighing the food for every provider on any regular

1 basis. We are right now targeting it to places where  
2 we are hearing a lot of complaints or maybe larger  
3 providers. And it is something we need to explore as  
4 to whether we need to expand our capabilities there.  
5

6 COUNCIL MEMBER AVILAS: And, lastly, in terms of  
7 complaint feedback, what's the mechanism for that?  
8 Is it participants have to complain to the provider?  
9 Is there a number they can go directly to DHS? What's  
10 the mechanism through which you receive the feedback  
11 around the quality of the food in the facilities?

12 FIRST DEPUTY COMMISSIONER BERRY: They have a  
13 variety of methods. Certainly the first line of  
14 defense is the provider who is on site, who should be  
15 hearing that information. But, we also run the DHS  
16 Office of Ombudsman's where clients can come to...  
17 can walk in, call, email, reach out to us with any  
18 complaints about their shelter, food, and other. And  
19 we do follow up on every one of those complaints...

20 (CROSS-TALK)

21 COUNCIL MEMBER AVILAS: Great if you would, for  
22 the record, can you note the telephone number and  
23 email for the DHS Ombudsman office?

24 FIRST DEPUTY COMMISSIONER BERRY: I think I might  
25 have to get back to you on that, I'm sorry.



1  
2 CHAIRPERSON AYALA: Do you happen to have a  
3 sample menu or an idea of what a day-to-day meal  
4 would look like at some of these facilities? Because,  
5 I'm a little concerned that ,you know, we had a  
6 hearing a few months ago, and there were some  
7 gentlemen that were asylum seekers who were here in  
8 the vicinity of City Hall for something else, and  
9 somebody told them about the hearing, so they came in  
10 and testified. One of them actually had brought his  
11 breakfast with him , and I'm not saying that that was  
12 the DHS site or whatever, but I'm trying to kind of  
13 get a general idea of - if we're saying that we're  
14 serving folks breakfast, is it a full breakfast? His  
15 breakfast consisted of a yogurt with a pack of  
16 raisins. So, if I ask him ,you know, did they provide  
17 you breakfast? Technically, yes, he was provided with  
18 breakfast. But, then when I asked for more  
19 clarification in terms of the details of what that  
20 breakfast entailed. then it was really obvious that  
21 it was an inadequate meal for an individual that's  
22 placed in a City shelter.

23 FIRST DEPUTY COMMISSIONER BERRY: So, if I could  
24 just go back, the ombudsman's office, the phone  
25 number for the DHS on Ombudsman's Office is 800-994-

1  
2 6494 (TIMER CHIMES), and the email is  
3 [Ombudsman@dss.nyc.gov](mailto:Ombudsman@dss.nyc.gov). People can also, and I should  
4 have said this initially, but anybody could also call  
5 311 and they'll be directed appropriately.

6 I don't have any sample menus with me, but we  
7 do post the menus in the shelters. I've seen them  
8 posted for the week in the shelters, and providers  
9 are required to send us sample menus to review the  
10 nutrition standards on a regular basis. So, as an  
11 agency, that is something that we do have and  
12 collect and review.

13 CHAIRPERSON AYALA: So how would you compare the  
14 waste ,you know, the quantity of food that went  
15 without being eaten last year compared to May of  
16 2024? Has it gotten better? Are we ordering less?  
17 Are we changing the menu options? And that is making  
18 it so that folks are ,you know, more inclined to eat  
19 the food that were serving them?

20 FIRST DEPUTY COMMISSIONER BERRY: So, we're not  
21 currently measuring the amount of food waste in order  
22 to make those types of comparisons. But, again, we  
23 are sharing feedback with providers. We are spot  
24 checking where we can to try to encourage providers  
25 to hold their subcontractors accountable to providing

1  
2 healthy, nutritious, quality food that meets the  
3 needs of shelter providers.

4 I would be a little bit cautious about the food  
5 waste piece. There are always going to be... We would  
6 rather make sure that nobody is hungry and have a  
7 little bit of excess food on a day... day-to-day  
8 basis than to have insufficient food to meet people's  
9 needs. That being said, we shouldn't be wasteful  
10 either, we should be monitoring that very carefully.

11 CHAIRPERSON AYALA: I mean, but it is an important  
12 question, because if you don't like the food, if  
13 you're eating the same thing day after day, if  
14 you're not getting enough of it - all of that impacts  
15 the nutritional intake that you're able to get daily.  
16 And people may say well, you know what, if you don't  
17 have anything else, then you're going to have to eat  
18 whatever is there. But they're not the ones that are  
19 eating it day in and day out. And it can become not  
20 just annoying, but your body just doesn't even react  
21 to the food anymore at some point. So, that's  
22 important, because then we are contributing to folks  
23 not eating, in one scenario, but we're also wasting  
24 public dollars by paying contractors to provide foods  
25 that are going ,you know, uneaten. So, that is

1  
2 problematic in and of itself, right? Because when  
3 we're trying to determine how much money we need to  
4 fund these different line items, we need to know that  
5 people are actually eating it. And if they're not  
6 eating it, then what is the solution to that? Right?  
7 Is it as simple as a meal change? Is it as simple as  
8 giving them a card so they can buy foods that are  
9 culturally relevant to them?

10 I mean we recently ,you know, we saw and heard  
11 from a lot of, specifically in the HERC, with the  
12 Muslim holidays, there were folks that were not sure  
13 if they were going to be able to eat the foods that  
14 they're accustomed to, at the time that they were  
15 accustomed to.

16 So it is important that ,you know, in New York  
17 City, we don't have people that are going day in and  
18 day out without the nutritional energy that they need  
19 to be able to get through the day. And that really  
20 concerns me.

21 So, I would really like to... I would encourage  
22 HRA and DSS to start tracking that as a means of...  
23 I don't want it to be something that is worth  
24 criticizing, but rather something that we're learning  
25 from. Right? I don't want to say, "Hey, you wasted 10

1 bags of bread," no, I... why did we waste 10 bags of  
2 it? Is that people here in this particular site don't  
3 like it? Okay, well then that means that they didn't  
4 get that. They didn't get that that meal option that  
5 day. So, how can we do that better? And unless  
6 you're tracking, you're not going to get a good sense  
7 of where this is happening and where it isn't. So, I  
8 really would encourage that.

9  
10 Regarding... I want to just move on, because I  
11 know that we have a lot of people that are here to  
12 testify.

13 I have a couple more questions. Regarding the  
14 Community Food Connections Program. You know that it  
15 is a vital resource providing much needed food to the  
16 City's vast network of food pantries and soup  
17 kitchens. This program is especially important given  
18 the current number of asylum seekers in the city who  
19 are not eligible for public benefit programs.

20 As of the Executive Plan, there is \$57.1 million  
21 budgeted in Fiscal Year 2024 for HRA's Community Food  
22 Connection Program. This drops to \$25.1 million in  
23 Fiscal Year 2025 and then \$20.9 million in Fiscal  
24 Year 2026 - and in the outer years.

1  
2 In the budgeted responses the Council called on  
3 the Administration to increase the baseline funding  
4 for CFC at \$60 million a year. No funding was  
5 allocated in the Executive Budget Plan to increase  
6 the baseline funding for CFC per the Council's budget  
7 response.

8 Does HRA expect adjustments will be made in the  
9 adopted plan? And, if so, how much will be added and  
10 in which years?

11 FIRST DEPUTY COMMISSIONER BERRY: So, the CFC  
12 program is really important to DSS and to this  
13 Administration as evidenced by the additional \$30  
14 million that the Adams' Administration added to the  
15 CFC budgets for FY23 and FY24.

16 We know that the need is still out there. There  
17 are, unfortunately, still many hungry and food  
18 insecure New Yorkers in this city. And we will  
19 continue to work with the Administration to make sure  
20 that CFC is adequately funded.

21 CHAIRPERSON AYALA: How will the program continue  
22 its current operations without the additional funding  
23 added in FY25 and beyond?

24 FIRST DEPUTY COMMISSIONER BERRY: Say.... I'm  
25 sorry the first part of that?

1  
2 CHAIRPERSON AYALA: How will the program continue  
3 its current operations without additional funding  
4 added in Fiscal Year 2025 and beyond, especially  
5 given both the increased need in the city and state  
6 and the higher cost of the food?

7 FIRST DEPUTY COMMISSIONER BERRY: As I stated, we  
8 are working with the Administration to make sure that  
9 the CFC program is adequately funded. Regardless of  
10 the funding level, we will continue to operate the  
11 CFC program, and we will ensure that all 699, or  
12 more, depending on... as more people are added to  
13 the program, our given allocations within our CFC  
14 budgets to be able to supplement their food pantries  
15 and soup kitchens.

16 COUNCIL MEMBER AVILAS: I mean, do you feel that  
17 they're getting sufficient money to supplement their  
18 food needs at the pantries now?

19 FIRST DEPUTY COMMISSIONER BERRY: I'm sorry?

20 CHAIRPERSON AYALA: Do you feel that the food  
21 pantries are able to make do with the funding that  
22 they're getting now? Because my understanding, and  
23 what I've seen visually in communities post  
24 pandemic, is that the lines are still ridiculously  
25 long. I have a pantry that's I would say maybe half a

1  
2 block from my apartment building, and I've never seen  
3 the line so long. And it has consistently stayed that  
4 way.

5 So ,you know, I have been having conversations  
6 with a lot of my food pantries, and what they're  
7 saying is ,like, we're having to also ration to be  
8 able to ensure that people get something. But there  
9 are times when we're struggling to make ends meet.  
10 And on top of that, we're struggling to allow new  
11 groups in, new participants into the programs,  
12 because we just don't have enough. And this is why  
13 we've been fighting for the additional increase this  
14 year as well.

15 FIRST DEPUTY COMMISSIONER BERRY: The need is  
16 definitely there. CFC is not the only funder for food  
17 pantries, it is supplemental to the state HPNAP  
18 (Hunger Prevention and Nutrition Assistance Program)  
19 funding, and federal funding, and private donations  
20 and food bank resources. I completely agree that the  
21 need is there. We see that the need for food is  
22 there.

23 CHAIRPERSON AYALA: I appreciate that. Can you  
24 tell us what the actual spending for CFC in Fiscal  
25



1  
2 Year 23 was, and what is the actual spending thus far  
3 in 2024?

4 FIRST DEPUTY COMMISSIONER BERRY: In FY23, we  
5 fully expended our budget at \$54.3 million. For FY24,  
6 we have spent \$46 million to date, and we will  
7 continue to make reallocations as we get towards the  
8 end of this fiscal year to make sure that all the  
9 funding is spent. There are larger food pantries that  
10 can... that are that are skilled and capable of  
11 getting bulk food out into all communities throughout  
12 the City quickly - to make sure that we are using  
13 every resource at our disposal and not letting any of  
14 it go to waste and getting the food out into the  
15 community.

16 CHAIRPERSON AYALA: How many... can you tell us  
17 how many providers are in the CFC network?

18 FIRST DEPUTY COMMISSIONER BERRY: There are 699.

19 CHAIRPERSON AYALA: Okay, 699.

20 All right, I'm going to move on.

21 City Harvest released their State Child Hunger  
22 Report on in May of 2024. The report states that one  
23 in five New York City children do not know where  
24 their next meal will come from. And there has been  
25 nearly a 100 percent increase in visits to food

1  
2 pantries by children and families compared to pre  
3 pandemic years. Given the increase in need and the  
4 budget proposal to reduce the CFC budget by nearly 56  
5 percent in the next fiscal year, how do you intend to  
6 ensure that no child is going hungry New York City?

7 FIRST DEPUTY COMMISSIONER BERRY: Yes, CFC funding  
8 for sure is an important component of that, but also  
9 the SNAP program and making sure we're preserving and  
10 advocating with the Farm Bill to make sure that there  
11 is adequate SNAP funding for families. The maximum  
12 SNAP benefit right now is at the maximum not the  
13 average, but it's \$8.00 per person per day. That is  
14 wholly inadequate already as it is. Any cuts to the  
15 Farm Bill are going to make hunger, including  
16 childhood hunger, even worse.

17 CHAIRPERSON AYALA: I think that it's specific...  
18 it's harder also on... because, I think people don't  
19 get that even when we were having the discussion  
20 around the cards that the asylum seekers would  
21 receive, the daily allotment was \$11.00 or \$13.00.  
22 So, they're like that's a lot, and it's more than  
23 people on food stamps get. And I'm ,like, well having  
24 been a food stamp recipient, one of the benefits of  
25 having a home was that I could buy and bulk and cook

1  
2 and prepare raw foods. When you're living in a  
3 shelter, and you have to buy the foods already  
4 prepared, I don't know how you can possibly eat  
5 breakfast, lunch, and dinner for that amount of  
6 money. So I think when you break it down like that,  
7 it gives you a different perspective on what exactly  
8 is happening. But, even with buying bulk, obviously  
9 it's still not enough to ensure that families have  
10 the adequate you know amount of food at home for the  
11 entirety of the month. So, usually ,you know, for  
12 those people that are watching, or for those people  
13 that are not familiar ,you know, even if you are  
14 receiving food stamps, you may very well run out of  
15 food ,you know, week two or week three. So, you have  
16 to stretch whatever little bit you get. So, we're  
17 seeing more and more families going into the food  
18 pantry system to help supplement those needs. So,  
19 these networks are great when they work together, but  
20 we need to ensure that we're fully funding them so  
21 that people are not forced to ,you know, supplement  
22 those needs.

23 I had another question here regarding...

24 (PAUSE)

25

1  
2 CHAIRPERSON AYALA: Okay, I didn't ask about the  
3 audit from... The Comptroller's Audit. So, on May  
4 15th, the New York City Comptroller's Office released  
5 their audit on the New York City Department of  
6 Social Services Administration of the Pandemic Food  
7 Reserve Emergency Distribution Program or P-FRED, and  
8 found that DSS had poor fiscal controls over the  
9 contract with Driscoll. As a result, the Comptroller  
10 recommended that DSS should recoup almost \$7 million  
11 in overpayments. DSS agreed to take several  
12 corrective actions to improve fiscal controls. What  
13 are the implementation plans and timelines for those  
14 corrective actions?

15 And DSS currently has a provider, uh, H. Schrier  
16 & Co, Incorporated managing food inventory,  
17 warehousing, and delivery for the CFC program. What  
18 measures is the DSS already taking to ensure that  
19 this provider is accurately billing for transactions  
20 without warehouse staff and food cost?

21 FIRST DEPUTY COMMISSIONER BERRY: So, the P-FRED  
22 program that was run by Driscoll was really  
23 instrumental in the early days the pandemic in  
24 getting fresh food out to communities. This was at a  
25 time when grocery stores weren't open, people were

1  
2 afraid to leave their homes, people were afraid to go  
3 into grocery stores. And the program was very  
4 successful in getting a lot of food out into the  
5 community - millions of pounds of food for hundreds  
6 of food pantries in a relatively quick period of  
7 time, and in a time when food was really important.  
8 And the quality of that food was tremendous. We had a  
9 ,you know, all providers talked about the quality of  
10 the food. That being said, we certainly were  
11 overcharged for the delivery of that food. And we are  
12 working with a CPA firm to do a deeper audit of the  
13 contract to make sure we're recouping the full  
14 amount. The Comptroller's Audit, some of it is based  
15 on samplings, and we have no reason to doubt the  
16 Comptroller's findings. We just... with such a large  
17 disallowance, we want to make sure that we're  
18 accounting for every dollar correctly and  
19 appropriately as we do the recoupment.

20 We're not currently working with Driscoll any  
21 longer. The way that contract was structured is not  
22 the same way that the Driscoll contract is  
23 structured. But, we are still making sure that our  
24 contract with Schrier, for the CFC program, that  
25 we're getting the rebates that we're entitled to -

1  
2 and other things that were found - that that we not  
3 being charged for truck space, delivery, that is  
4 being delivered for another program for example -that  
5 all that cost allocation is done correctly.

6 What happened with the P-FRED program is  
7 unfortunate. The Agency certainly should have caught  
8 it sooner, but it was successful in getting food out  
9 into the community. And we have the proper oversight  
10 and controls over our current contract with  
11 Schrier... (CROSS-TALK)

12 CHAIRPERSON AYALA: So was the Agency aware prior  
13 to the Comptroller's audit of the overspending... the  
14 overcharging?

15 FIRST DEPUTY COMMISSIONER BERRY: Who was the  
16 vendor for P-FRED?

17 CHAIRPERSON AYALA: No, no, no, was DSS aware of  
18 the overcharging...

19 FIRST DEPUTY COMMISSIONER BERRY: We had been  
20 aware of some of it, and we had already recouped as  
21 the Comptroller's Audit acknowledge. We had already  
22 disallowed some of their expenses. The Comptroller's  
23 found additional ones that we had not previously  
24 found.

1  
2 CHAIRPERSON AYALA: Okay. All right, well, thank  
3 you so much. Hopefully there's somebody here that can  
4 stay behind and hear the public testimony from some  
5 of the providers. I think it's always helpful and  
6 useful to get that real time feedback from the folks  
7 that are the most impacted by these contracts and our  
8 fiscal protocols that sometimes become impediments to  
9 their ability to service their clients in the way  
10 that we intend. So, thank you so much for being here  
11 today.

12 FIRST DEPUTY COMMISSIONER BERRY: Thank you,  
13 Deputy Speaker.

14 CHAIRPERSON AYALA: We are going to take a five  
15 minute break.

16 (PAUSE)

17 SERGEANT AT ARMS: Can I have your attention  
18 please, can I have your attention please? At this  
19 time, please take your seats, please ensure that all  
20 cell phones and electronic devices are placed as  
21 silent mode. Once again, please take your seats,  
22 please ensure all cell phones and electronic devices  
23 are placed on silent. We shall resume momentarily.

24 (PAUSE)

1  
2 CHAIRPERSON AYALA: I want just recognize that  
3 we've been joined by Council Member Ossé.

4 I'm now going to open the hearing for public  
5 testimony. I remind members of the public that this  
6 is a governmental proceeding and that the decorum  
7 shall be observed at all times. AS such, members of  
8 the public shall remain silent at all times. The  
9 witness table is reserved for people who wish to  
10 testify. No video recording or photographing is  
11 allowed from the witness table. Further, members of  
12 the public may not present audio or video recordings  
13 as test testimony, but may submit transcripts of such  
14 recordings to the Sergeant at Arms for inclusion into  
15 the hearing record.

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

22 If you have a written statement or additional  
23 written testimony that you wish to submit for the  
24 record, please provide a copy of that to the Sergeant  
25 at Arms. You may also email testimony to





1  
2 transportation, educational opportunities, active  
3 recreation, and, of course, healthy food.

4       So, the maps from the Comprehensive Plan show  
5 these patterns clearly as they are related to food  
6 access. The first one shows food insecurity in the  
7 borough. You can see Coney Island, Gravesend, and  
8 Brownsville have the highest percentage of food  
9 insecure households in the borough and that this also  
10 correlates to the highest use of SNAP. You can see  
11 that there is a real pattern of food insecurity in  
12 Central and Eastern Brooklyn.

13       Map 2 addresses is healthy food. So, when we were  
14 talking to stakeholders and residents about their  
15 food and healthy living habits, they really said that  
16 the food insecurity metric didn't respond to observed  
17 conditions in their neighborhood or really reflect  
18 their experience. So, what we also looked at was  
19 DOHMH's metric of unhealthy food access, which is the  
20 ratio of bodegas to supermarkets in each community  
21 district. So by this measure, you can see that  
22 Central and South Western Brooklyn stand out with as  
23 many as 19 bodegas to a single supermarket. So,  
24 these trends, as I mentioned, align with the parts of  
25 the borough that receive SNAP.

1  
2 In map three you can see NAP access, but I think  
3 something that's really important is that even when  
4 New Yorkers do get SNAP, according to a recent report  
5 by The Natural Resources Defense (TIMER CHIMES)  
6 Council, people still struggle to access fresh and  
7 healthy food, and they may not understand how to use  
8 incentive programs.

9 Also in map 4, you see a lack of correlation  
10 between where the farmers markets are, where they can  
11 use these benefits and where people are receiving  
12 SNAP.

13 I will I just stop there and say there's a number  
14 of recommendations in the Comp Plan that are in the  
15 written testimony which I encourage you to take a  
16 look at. And Borough President Reynoso Brooklyn is  
17 very interested in working with the Council on  
18 addressing this.

19 CHAIRPERSON AYALA: Were you here when... I  
20 believe that we mentioned in my in my testimony or my  
21 line of questioning, there was a question about  
22 certain sectors in Brooklyn that were under... where  
23 the application rate had significantly dropped, or I  
24 mean significant I guess it's maybe too large of a  
25 word, but we had maybe like a 7 percent decrease in

1  
2 applications - 5 percent. Was that something that you  
3 guys covered as well?

4 LACEY TAUBER: I think that this data might  
5 predate that a little bit, but I think that ,you  
6 know, I think it really speaks to the need for the  
7 City to be partnering with these CBOs that are doing  
8 the work on the ground, uh, which you've talked a lot  
9 about just now. Because ,you know, I think there were  
10 two reasons that we thought people might not really  
11 be using the benefits: One, again, they just don't  
12 have the information for how to use them, and then  
13 what we're also kind of hearing is that there's still  
14 some fear on the ground related to Public Charge Rule  
15 and everything that happened under Trump. Even though  
16 that was lifted, I think people are still... a lot of  
17 immigrants are still worried about using the  
18 benefits. So, there needs to be education that it's  
19 okay, that it's not going to affect Green Card  
20 applications.

21 CHAIRPERSON AYALA: I agree, I agree. And any  
22 partnership would ,you know, be welcome. Thank you so  
23 much.

24 LACEY TAUBER: Thank you.  
25

1  
2 CHAIRPERSON AYALA: Okay, our next panel will be  
3 Joseph Rosenberg, Jessica Chait, Lakeisha Morris,  
4 Jennifer Smith, and Daryl Wright.

5 MR. JOSEPH ROSENBERG: Good morning, Deputy  
6 Speaker, Council Member Stevens, and Council Member  
7 Ossé.

8 I am Joseph Rosenberg, the Director of the  
9 Catholic Community Relations Council. Thank you for  
10 focusing this hearing on such an important and timely  
11 topic. Food insecurity and hunger among New York City  
12 residents is in a crisis situation, and nonprofit  
13 human service providers require emergency funding to  
14 distribute desperately needed food to the working  
15 families, elderly, and children of our city.

16 Catholic Charities of the Archdiocese of New York  
17 and Catholic Charities of Brooklyn and Queens have  
18 been providing shelter, food, and clothing to New  
19 Yorkers for more than one century - not just during  
20 disasters such as superstorm Sandy and the Covid-19  
21 pandemic, but every day of every year. Both Charities  
22 combined operate 77 food pantries throughout the five  
23 boroughs, and we serve more than 7.4 million meals  
24 annually.

1  
2 All providers have faced many challenges feeding  
3 hungry and needy New Yorkers over the years, right  
4 now this challenge is at a crisis point. We are not  
5 only feeding more working families, seniors, and  
6 children at our pantries, recent clients include  
7 college students, youth aging out of foster care, as  
8 well as asylum seekers. The plight of hungry children  
9 is particularly heartbreaking with more than one in  
10 four children in our city living in poverty. That is  
11 why with more New Yorkers going hungry, we urge that  
12 you support our request to include \$20 million in  
13 emergency funding for food pantries in the FY25 City  
14 Budget. We are not alone and pressing for this  
15 relief, we are working closely with Met Council on  
16 Jewish Poverty and the Hispanic Federation.

17 We also request that the 60 percent funding cut  
18 to the Community Food Connection program be  
19 reinstated and be restored at a level of \$55 million.

20 While the skyrocketing increase in food  
21 insecurity caused by the pandemic has partially  
22 subsided, demand remains extremely elevated from pre  
23 pandemic levels. We're seeing an increase of over 20  
24 percent clients in the last two years and in many  
25 pantries (TIMER CHIMES) much more.

1  
2 We all understand that \$10.00, because of  
3 inflation, covers far less food than it used to, and  
4 we've also had a tremendous cut in the federal and  
5 loss in the federal pandemic programs that helped  
6 fund us. We're also, because of the deficit issues,  
7 are not being able to provide as much fresh food as  
8 we used to, and we are relying on canned food, which  
9 is not as healthy and nourishing for the families  
10 that need it.

11 All of us must ensure that New Yorkers,  
12 especially working families, the young, and the  
13 elderly do not go hungry. We therefore call for your  
14 support in including this essential \$20 million  
15 emergency fund for the food pantries of our city,  
16 thank you.

17 MS. DARYL WRIGHT: Chair Ayala and fellow members  
18 of the General Welfare and Aging Committees, thank  
19 you for the opportunity to testify at this crucial  
20 oversight hearing on food and insecurity in New York  
21 City.

22 My name is Daryl Wright, and I am Food Policy  
23 Fellow at the Metropolitan Council on Jewish Poverty,  
24 one of the largest emergency food providers in the  
25 City.

1  
2 For over 50 years, Met Council has been one of  
3 the America's largest Jewish Charities dedicated to  
4 fighting poverty. We provide services across the five  
5 boroughs through a range of services including 100  
6 percent affordable housing, award-winning family  
7 violence programming, comprehensive Holocaust  
8 survivor assistance, senior programming, crisis  
9 intervention, and the country's largest Kosher, and  
10 increasingly Halal, emergency food network. In total,  
11 we provide a wide array of support to over 320,000  
12 clients a year.

13 Met Council fully supports all the items on  
14 today's Agenda. Despite all our work, food insecurity  
15 still rages across our city, and we must do all we  
16 can to alleviate it. And these resolutions in the  
17 bill identify areas where we can do better.

18 In addition, we must reiterate our grave concern  
19 over the Mayor's proposed cuts to the City's  
20 Community Food Connections program or CFC. CFC is one  
21 of the most important hunger fighting tools we have,  
22 and we implore the Council to ensure that the program  
23 is funded at least to 2024 levels.

24 Finally, we urge the New York City Council to  
25 reprise the Food Pantry Initiative to support



1  
2 grassroots organizations and those excluded from  
3 traditional emergency food system by providing \$20  
4 million in order to relieve severe and overlooked  
5 food insecurity remaining from the pandemic in our  
6 most under resourced communities.

7 Met Council plays a unique role in the emergency  
8 food system by offering exclusively Kosher and Halal  
9 emergency food. While our goal is to ensure  
10 communities with specific cultural needs have the  
11 food they deserve, any New Yorker in need may access  
12 our food regardless of race, ethnicity, or religion.

13 Like a food bank, we secure food either by  
14 purchasing or through government sources, and then  
15 distribute it to Jewish, Muslim and other communities  
16 (TIMER CHIMES) facing significant barriers to food  
17 access.

18 In addition, to linguistic and cultural barriers,  
19 which have kept these communities from fully  
20 participating a in the established emergency food  
21 system, these communities have historically been  
22 short changed as so little of the distributed  
23 products will be suitable for their religious dietary  
24 restrictions, despite the fact that the need in these  
25 communities is acute and documented.

1  
2 A recent study conducted found over 80 percent of  
3 Muslim Americans observe a Halal diet, and that food  
4 insufficiency within these communities was more than  
5 double the rate of other respondents.

6 New York is also home to the largest Jewish  
7 population in the country. Another recent study  
8 conducted by UJA Federation of New York showed that  
9 there are nearly 243,000 people in Kosher observant  
10 households that are food insecure, one-third of which  
11 are children.

12 More broadly, we know that New Yorkers still  
13 desperately need an extra hand and another push to  
14 get back on their feet post pandemic. The New York  
15 Times recently reported that, one, the poverty rate  
16 is still higher - 23 percent- than it was in 2021-18  
17 percent; two, life expectancy in the City has not yet  
18 recovered; three, most working families in New York  
19 cannot afford to pay for their basic needs; and four,  
20 evictions are rising as rents are increasing.

21 These studies reflect what Met Council, our  
22 partners, and our colleagues have witnessed firsthand  
23 as many of us continue to serve more New Yorkers than  
24 at any point in the history of our organizations. In  
25 fact, Met Council served more people in 2022 than in

1  
2 2020 or in 2021, and more and more New Yorkers are  
3 arriving on our doorstep seeking food each day. These  
4 individuals cannot afford to pay for their most basic  
5 needs, and they need our help.

6 While the pandemic may be over for many, the  
7 lasting economic effects remain part of the daily  
8 lives of our community members. At the start of the  
9 pandemic, we quickly recognized that without  
10 additional assistance, many smaller more thinly  
11 resourced pantries might fail. Indeed the pantry  
12 system itself seemed to be teetering under the weight  
13 of the need.

14 The City Council stepped in and provided funding  
15 to the largest emergency food distributors in the  
16 City to supply these pantries with the food and  
17 capacity resources they desperately needed. Met  
18 Council, along with partners including Catholic  
19 Charities and the Hispanic Federation used the  
20 funding to distribute tens of millions of pounds of  
21 food in 18 months to New Yorkers in every zip code in  
22 the City.

23 We also distributed millions of dollars in grants  
24 to keep frontline agencies operational, and conducted  
25 distribution via mobile pantries and popups in

1  
2 neighborhoods that lacked pantries. Met Council on  
3 its own provided food and grants to Halal pantries  
4 who were otherwise not connected to the emergency  
5 food system in New York City.

6 The City's targeted funding works to keep the  
7 emergency food system afloat; unfortunately, as we  
8 now know, poverty and food insecurity have not abated  
9 since the pandemic, and these pantries once again  
10 need help.

11 Met Council urges the Council to come to the  
12 rescue again by rejecting the cuts to CFC and by  
13 bringing back this initiative by providing \$20  
14 million, so that the pantries can continue to provide  
15 food resources that New Yorkers so desperately need,  
16 thank you.

17 MS. LAKEISHA MORRIS: Good afternoon, Chair Ayala  
18 and members of the Committee On General Welfare. I  
19 want to thank you for this opportunity to sit in  
20 front of you and testify on behalf of Catholic  
21 Charities Community Services regarding food  
22 insecurity. My name is Lakeisha Morris, and I'm the  
23 Division Director of Operations for the Community  
24 Outreach Division.

1  
2 As you know, Catholic Charities' mission is very  
3 simple, treat our neighbors like we want to be  
4 treated. And one of the ways that we are able to do  
5 that is through our food pantries.

6 In New York City, between the Bronx and  
7 Manhattan, we have about 27 pantries, some of which  
8 are in your district, Chair Ayala, St. Cecilia's for  
9 one. And what we do at these pantries is not just  
10 give out food, but we provide people with food  
11 information ,you know, education, access to other  
12 resources, quality of foods. We try our best to do  
13 what we can, but with the recent cuts that we've  
14 experienced, it's been more and more challenging  
15 every day to meet the needs of our New Yorkers...

16 (LOUD BACKGROUND NOISE)

17 CHAIRPERSON AYALA: Sorry, give me one second.

18 MS. LAKEISHA MORRIS: It's been and more  
19 challenging to meet the needs of our New Yorkers, and  
20 one of the things that Catholic Charities strives on  
21 is client choice and making sure our neighbors, our  
22 families have an option in what they eat. We want to  
23 be more culturally sensitive and dietary appropriate  
24 for what we give out. And with the reductions that  
25 we've received, and the proposed reductions to come,

1  
2 it's really going to limit our ability to be able to  
3 provide these resources to our families.

4 If I can't say anything else I would say this,  
5 without food, we can't sustain households, people  
6 can't think to make informed decisions, so on behalf  
7 of Catholic Charities, we support every bill that has  
8 been put before (TIMER CHIMES) us today. And we hope  
9 that we continue to support our New Yorkers in need.  
10 Food is not a luxury, it's a necessity, and it should  
11 be treated as such, thank you.

12 (APPLAUSE)

13 MS. JENNIFER SMITH: Thank you, good afternoon  
14 Chair Ayala and members of the Committee. Thank you  
15 for having me here today.

16 I am Jennifer Smith, Food Resource Manager for  
17 Catholic Charities Brooklyn and Queens. I have  
18 overseen the Operation of our 21 Network pantries  
19 throughout Brooklyn and Queens since 2015. I'm happy  
20 to be here today, because the subject of hunger and  
21 food insecurity in New York City could not be more  
22 important at this time.

23 Since the pandemic, many of our pantries have  
24 seen an increase in attendance of more than a 1,000  
25 percent. Small Parish pantries that fed 25 to 30

1  
2 people a week started seeing 400 to 500 people.  
3 People were out of work, seniors needed help, food  
4 prices are rising. Our network went from feeding  
5 10,000 people a month to over 54,000 people a month.  
6 It was overwhelming, but we changed how we  
7 distributed food, received help from many  
8 organizations, and with the strength of our amazing  
9 volunteer base, we made it through the worst of the  
10 pandemic. Things started to level off in 2021, and  
11 while we never get back to pre-pandemic numbers,  
12 things became more manageable. People went back to  
13 work, Catholic Charities was able to help people get  
14 SNAP benefits, seniors were still coming, but working  
15 families started to come less often. We started to  
16 average about 20 to 25,000 people a month. But, the  
17 price of food is rising, and funding is becoming more  
18 difficult.

19 Since the beginning of 2023, we've been seeing a  
20 steady increase of people attending our pantries once  
21 again. As of today, we feed an average of 36,000  
22 people a month. We are seeing many clients come back,  
23 especially working families needing help feeding  
24 their children, seniors need Catholic Charities' help  
25 to stretch their fixed incomes, as well as many new

1 clients (TIMER CHIMES) who have heard from friends  
2 and family that we can help. Our pantries, especially  
3 in Sheepshead Bay, Coney Island, and Canarsie are  
4 seeing an influx of Russian and Ukrainian people,  
5 many of whom have displaced family members living  
6 with them. We've seen an increase in the amount of  
7 young people seeking our help, college and high  
8 school students are now coming to pantries either for  
9 themselves or to help their families.  
10

11 This surge of clients and the high cost of food  
12 has forced us to change food distribution again.  
13 We're not able to provide fresh produce like we were,  
14 and we rely mostly on dry goods and canned foods. I  
15 work at a pantry every Wednesday at Our Lady of  
16 Angels at 330 73rd Street in Bay Ridge, this pantry  
17 is one that has grown by over a 1,000 percent. As I  
18 register new people, I make it a point to say my name  
19 is Jennifer, and, please, if you ever have an  
20 emergency, you come to me; we'll get you some food.

21 Please support the \$20 million food pantry  
22 emergency funding for the FY25 City Budget, thank  
23 you.

24 CHAIRPERSON AYALA: I'm going to be limiting my  
25 questions, because we have a significant number of



1  
2 panels. But, I wanted to just say, thank you, for not  
3 only being here today to testify, but for your  
4 guidance, because we have really been listening and  
5 utilizing those experiences and bringing those to the  
6 budget negotiating table. Because, we agree that we  
7 need to do more, and we... I mean, you have to be  
8 ,you know, insane not to realize that the need has  
9 gotten greater in New York City. All you have to do  
10 is look and see. Thank you so much.

11 PANEL: Thank you

12 CHAIRPERSON AYALA: Our next panel consists of  
13 Richard Ralph, Barbara Hughes, Ariel Savransky, and  
14 Greg Silverman.

15 You may begin, any one of you want to come this..  
16 way? You can begin.

17 MS. ARIEL SAVRANSKY Thank you for, Chairperson  
18 Ayala and members of the Committee on General  
19 Welfare, for holding this hearing and for the  
20 opportunity to submit testimony. My name is Ariel  
21 Savransky, and I am a Senior Advocacy and Policy  
22 Advisor at UJA Federation of New York.

23 We know that food access continues to be a  
24 concern among New Yorkers, and we continue to see  
25 high rates of inflation and food insecurity,

1 especially in households with children, and New York  
2 food pantries and soup kitchens are reporting that  
3 they are unable to meet increased demand. We thank  
4 the Council for introducing the resolutions that were  
5 discussed today, which uplift opportunities for the  
6 state and the country to implement programs and  
7 policies that will support the most vulnerable  
8 individuals and families.  
9

10 UJA supports the New York City Council in this  
11 area, and offers the following contributions:

12 I know there were a number of questions, and  
13 thank you Chairperson, for posing a lot of the  
14 questions that we also had questions about.

15 We were happy to hear commitment from the  
16 Commissioner that the CFC program will be adequately  
17 funded. We still have concerns, but we know that they  
18 are aware of how important this program is, and we  
19 will continue to push for the \$60 million in funding.

20 We were also happy to hear that the NYC Benefits  
21 program will be maintained, that's something that we  
22 know is very helpful, especially given the influx of  
23 asylees and migrants into the City.

24 A program that we support, and, again, will  
25 continue to push for, uh, the contracts to be awarded

1  
2 on time and for providers to be made aware that they  
3 are actually going to be awarded those contracts.

4 I'll just say a few words on the Farm Bill. We  
5 are very supportive of a full Farm Bill and increased  
6 funding for emergency food programs. We're also very  
7 focused on the Halal and Kosher food being included  
8 in the emergency food assistance programs. We know  
9 that there's a huge need. UJ Federation supports Met  
10 Council to operate the largest Kosher food bank and  
11 pantry network in the country, and there are a number  
12 of recommendations (TIMER CHIMES) we have that would  
13 make the program work better for these kinds of  
14 pantries.

15 Lastly, I'll just say, I know we've spoken about  
16 SNAP for All Bill, and we're very supportive, thank  
17 you for introducing that resolution. We're working  
18 with the state to make sure that we can get a Task  
19 First form that can look into the impact of this  
20 program.

21 We are looking forward to continuing to work  
22 together, thank you so much and I'll happy happily  
23 answer any questions.

24 MR. GREG SILVERMAN Thank you, uh, General Welfare  
25 Chairperson Diane Ayala. We really appreciate all

1  
2 your support, and I want to call out - thank you for  
3 not letting go on the line of questioning on the SNAP  
4 backlog. We're all baffled by what's happening, and  
5 our frontline staffers keep saying the same things.  
6 You know and Jill Berry said if someone's hungry, she  
7 said call 311 to find a pantry. The pantry is going  
8 to be closed with these CFC cuts - many of them. So,  
9 it's the disconnect is real you know my name is real.

10 My name is Greg Silverman; I come from the  
11 Westside Campaign Against Hunger. We serve about  
12 80,000 community members, some in in your district,  
13 with a lot of healthy fresh food, a lot of that  
14 through CFC funds. That's really important.

15 In addition to the work at the Westside Campaign  
16 an Hunger, we helped found the Roundtable Allies for  
17 Food Access, a network of eight of the largest  
18 emergency food providers in the City, you're going to  
19 hear from a number of them in this process. Many of  
20 us brought plates, we would love for you to bring to  
21 the Mayor or Jill Berry, saying things like that our  
22 community members said ,like, we're hungry, don't cut  
23 CFC - you're starving our pantries. Restore CFC  
24 funding, so our community gets the food they need.

1  
2       You know, during the past summer, WSCAH alone, my  
3 organization, saw a 42 percent increase in the demand  
4 - on top of the pandemic. This is unheard of. I was  
5 proud in the winter of 2020, 2021, 2022 to be named  
6 Co-Chair of the food transition for Mayor Adams in  
7 looking at the food policy initiatives, and we really  
8 focused in on CFC as this core piece of the work. And  
9 to see these kind of cuts as an outrage.

10       So, you're hearing it from everyone, but we want  
11 to be as helpful as we can to you and other city  
12 council Members in pushing this agenda forward of  
13 making sure the community is fed. So, obviously,  
14 again, like everyone else is saying, we need to make  
15 sure there's no cuts to CFC, bring it back to \$57 if  
16 not \$60 million, and make sure that the City is truly  
17 a City of Yes to our community, and Yes to CFC, thank  
18 you. (TIMER CHIMES)

19       MS. BARBARA HUGHES: Hello again, my name is  
20 Barbara Hughes, and I'm the Executive Director of  
21 City Beet Kitchens at Project Renewal; it's a New  
22 York City homeless services nonprofit agency. And  
23 thank you, Chair, and the City Council for convening  
24 the hearing.

1  
2 For over 55 years, Project Renewal has provided  
3 shelter, housing, health care, and employment  
4 services to New Yorkers experiencing homelessness.  
5 We're grateful to the City Council for supporting our  
6 programs. We're proud to have partnered with the City  
7 to address some of New York City's biggest  
8 challenges, including food insecurity and hunger.

9 The budget must address the root causes of these  
10 challenges. And to make meaningful progress, we must  
11 improve stability for individuals and entire  
12 communities in the first place - In part by expanding  
13 access to supportive workforce development  
14 opportunities, especially for those who face  
15 significant barriers to employment. We need these  
16 employment opportunities for New Yorkers, so that  
17 they can move towards supporting themselves.

18 Our workforce development programs are a vital  
19 resource for thousands , or example our Culinary Arts  
20 training program provides New Yorkers facing barriers  
21 to employment, including veterans, with a worldclass  
22 culinary education and a pathway to fulfilling a  
23 career. Graduates who go on to work in settings like  
24 corporate kitchens, local restaurants, and for City  
25 Be Kitchens, prepare food for other New Yorkers,

1 which prepares food for other New Yorkers in need.

2 Our career advancement program provides retention and  
3 advancement services tailored to helping our clients  
4 build careers. Programs like this ensure career  
5 growth and maximize earning potential, so  
6 participants can attain financial independence.  
7

8 To continue critical programs like these, we rely  
9 on \$400,000 in City-Wide Initiative and Speaker  
10 funding. (TIMER CHIMES) Investing in workforce  
11 development programs generates a strong return on  
12 investment for all of New York City by creating  
13 conditions for entire families to survive. We know  
14 the Council is a true partner to the nonprofit  
15 sector, so in the final budget we urge the Council to  
16 increase investment in workforce development  
17 programs. Thank you very much.

18 MR. RICHARD RALPH: Good morning, thank you Chair  
19 Ayala and the City Council for convening. My name is  
20 Richard Ralph, I'm the Training Quality Control  
21 Manager for the nonprofit Project Renewal at Social  
22 enterprise catering company City Beet Kitchen.

23 As Barbara said, Project Renewal has been  
24 providing shelter, housing, health care, and  
25 employment services for 100,000 New Yorkers for over

1  
2 55 years. This is a meaningful program working  
3 towards addressing these challenges.

4 Supportive employment personally made a big  
5 difference in my own life. I worked hard to get where  
6 I am today. My journey wasn't an easy one. I'm proud  
7 to say that I served our country in the Marine Corp  
8 from 2001 to 2005 and an Army National Guard from  
9 2006 to 2013 with one deployment in Afghanistan in  
10 2012. When I finished my term of service, I had a  
11 hard time readjusting civilian life, and  
12 unfortunately I was incarcerated for 5 years. Upon  
13 release, I was eager to renew my life, and that's  
14 when I found Project Renewal in 2018. I enrolled in  
15 the Project Renewal Culinary Arts training program,  
16 and CATP trains New Yorkers who face barriers, such  
17 as myself, and many others, in finding employment  
18 after hardship that we experienced due to poor life  
19 choices. We need these types of employment  
20 opportunities...

21 CHAIRPERSON AYALA: Not always a life of poor  
22 choices, sometimes it is a life of poor  
23 circumstances.

24 MR. RICHARD RALPH: Yes, I totally agree...  
25



1  
2 CHAIRPERSON AYALA: Don't assume all of the  
3 responsibility.

4 MR. RICHARD RALPH: Yes.

5 We need these type of opportunities, and  
6 definitely getting the support and funding for these  
7 programs y helps in that manner. (INAUDIBLE) program  
8 the Project Renewal team was impressed with my hard  
9 work and dedication, and I was hired as a junior  
10 cook. Since then, I've been promoted twice, and now  
11 I'm the Training Quality Control Manager. I oversee  
12 service, we allocate to contracts with other homeless  
13 shelters to buy food for the residents, assess food  
14 quality, address discrepancies, and get feedback so  
15 we can (TIMER CHIMES) try to improve the quality of  
16 what we do.

17 Project Renewal has helped brighten the dark part  
18 of my life after incarceration, and has helped me to  
19 get back into work and help me to give back to the  
20 community - which I'm very proud of.

21 Every person, every veteran, should have these  
22 kinds of opportunities, especially when they fall in  
23 hard times, and I hope that New York City Council  
24 will continue to provide funding for Project Renewal  
25 and other programs like these to help generate a

1  
2 strong return investment for New York City by  
3 creating conditions for entire families to thrive,  
4 thank you.

5 CHAIRPERSON AYALA: I'm going to have to come and  
6 taste the food first. (LAUGHTER IN CHAMBERS) And then  
7 we'll determine. But, I really appreciate this  
8 program so much. I appreciate ,you know, all of the  
9 panelists, but I really appreciate this program the  
10 most, because it has such a benefit for  
11 sustainability for a person's independence, for  
12 future generational change. I grew up on public  
13 assistance; my mother was a single mother who was  
14 also born and raised into poverty, and so it's  
15 cyclical. And then, when I got there, you know, when  
16 I was old enough, I had two children, and I remember  
17 being in the park, and I couldn't afford to buy the  
18 kids an ice cream cone, because I had already spent  
19 my money on ,you know, Con Edison, and the cable  
20 bill, and the kids needed this and that or whatever.  
21 And it was really through school, and I tell people,  
22 it's either... You know, the only way out of... to  
23 really get out of this, out of poverty is through an  
24 education or through employment. And ,you know,  
25 they... these programs reap so many benefits for

1  
2 future generations. So, I'm so proud of you. I'm so  
3 happy that you're happy there. And I will come and  
4 taste the food, and maybe you can teach me how to  
5 make your favorite dish. It's something that I really  
6 enjoy. I'm trying to get my son into as well, because  
7 he really enjoys the art of cooking. So, thank you,  
8 and best of wishes. Thank you guys so much.

9 PANEL: Thank you.

10 CHAIRPERSON AYALA: The next panel consists of  
11 Jeanette Estima, Stephen Grimaldi, Nick Buess, and  
12 Camila Gomez, and again my apologies if I  
13 mispronounce your name.

14 I feel like you shouldn't even be here, Steve, I  
15 feel like I know too much about you. (LAUGHTER) You  
16 may begin, you may begin.

17 JEANETTE ESTIMA: Hello, my name is Jeanette  
18 Estima, I'm the Director of Policy and Advocacy at  
19 City Meals on Wheels. Thank you, Chair Ayala, for the  
20 opportunity to testify.

21 In addition to funding home delivered meals for  
22 weekends, holidays, and in emergencies City Meals  
23 also provides, uh, directly, uh, food to people  
24 during citywide emergencies and localized emergencies  
25

1  
2 - when they cannot access other emergency food  
3 programs.

4 I wanted to share some findings from recent  
5 research that we completed which demonstrates the  
6 urgent need for expanding nutrition programs to  
7 better address food insecurity for older New Yorkers.  
8 We partnered with the CUNY Urban Food Policy  
9 Institute on a study of older adults using home  
10 delivered meals and congregate meal programs to  
11 understand their practices and unmet needs. The level  
12 of food insecurity among those who are already  
13 accessing the City's two programs that target elder  
14 hunger is staggering; 48 percent reported some level  
15 of food insecurity, and that goes up to 60 percent  
16 when we're looking just at home delivered meals  
17 recipients; 56 percent received SNAP benefits, but  
18 about a third of them said that the amount that they  
19 received was not enough to meet their needs; in  
20 addition, only 18 percent had used a food pantry, and  
21 about 4 percent had used a mobile food pantry. So,  
22 given that this was also a very low income sample  
23 that we surveyed , with about 65 percent of those  
24 surveyed earning about \$15,000 a year or less in  
25 income, and this high level of food insecurity all

1  
2 really suggests a serious disconnect between the  
3 services that are offered to them and the need that  
4 they're experiencing.

5 Older adults must no longer be an afterthought.  
6 They really (TIMER CHIMES)... their needs must be  
7 included in our anti-hunger solutions. We need to  
8 look at all the food programs across City, State, and  
9 Federal levels to ensure that they're accessible to  
10 older adults and that they're presenting a  
11 comprehensive approach to hunger. This includes  
12 expanded SNAP funding, the ability to use SNAP  
13 dollars for hot and prepared meals, extending  
14 benefits to all immigrants and undocumented older  
15 adults, and funding more mobile food pantries.

16 Finally, we're also asking that the Council help  
17 to advocate for expanded funding and additional meals  
18 that are provided through the Older Americans Act for  
19 congregate and home delivered meals programs, thank  
20 you.

21 MR. STEPHEN GRIMALDI: Good afternoon, I have  
22 about 500 exhibits here from participants of our  
23 programs just to give you an example of the  
24 commitment and the impact that cuts to CFC will have.  
25 We actually gave the people, all of our participants,

1  
2 the option of just putting a sticker in their native  
3 language, they chose not to, most of them, they  
4 actually wrote a personal message on them. So, I  
5 encourage you to read them, they're very powerful.

6 Thank you, Deputy Speaker Ayala, and members of  
7 the Council for allowing us to testify. I'm Stephen  
8 Grimaldi, the Executive Director of the New York  
9 Common Pantry, as well as a representative of the  
10 Roundtable: Allies for Food Access. As you know, the  
11 Roundtable is a dedicated and collaborating network  
12 of eight emergency food providers throughout New York  
13 City.

14 Put simply: It should be a right to have access  
15 to healthy food. What should be a right, is now a  
16 fight.

17 An investment in providing food means allocating  
18 resources—financial, human, and material—toward  
19 programs aimed at ensuring people have access to  
20 nutritious and sufficient food.

21 By confronting food insecurity today, we help  
22 solve its attendant problems of tomorrow - poor  
23 health outcomes, poor functioning in school, mental  
24 health issues just to name a few.

1  
2           Unfortunately, the current proposed budget does  
3 not create a positive the blueprint for the future  
4 with its extreme cuts to CFC funding. For the past  
5 two years, we saw what a difference a well-funded CFC  
6 program made. CFC provided fresh produce and  
7 increased allocations for food purchases to help us  
8 serve the increased volumes of people needing food  
9 assistance.

10           Last year alone at NYCP, we saw the number of  
11 guests we serve rise 32 percent, this year it's  
12 rising another 29 percent with our fiscal year ending  
13 June 30th, and we will likely distribute more than 11  
14 million meals.

15           According to the True Cost of Living Report, 3  
16 million of our neighbors are considered income  
17 inadequate; 50 percent of working age households do  
18 not have enough earnings to meet the minimum cost of  
19 living; and more than half of New Yorkers earn less  
20 than \$46,000 annually.

21           We urge the City Council and the Mayor to not  
22 only restore CFC funding to its original levels, but  
23 to increase funding to \$60 million for CFC (TIMER  
24 CHIMES) and \$20 million in emergency food pantry  
25 funding.

1  
2 Let's invest in a brighter future, let's increase  
3 CFC and Pantry funding not cut it, let's say, yes, to  
4 food access.

5 MR. NICK BUESS: Hi, good afternoon, I'm Nick  
6 Buess... (CROSS-TALK)

7 CHAIRPERSON AYALA: I feel like I know too much  
8 about you, too.

9 MR. NICK BUESS Okay, I'm done (LAUGHTER).

10 I'm Nick Buess from the Food Bank for New York  
11 City; I'm the Director of Government Relations. Thank  
12 you, Chair, so much, to you, to your staff, and to  
13 all the Council Members for really pressing HRA and  
14 DSS on the importance of food security .

15 You've heard a lot about need from so many  
16 community providers, and you will continue to hear  
17 about it. So, I just want to clarify and kind of add  
18 some flavor to a couple things. One, when it comes to  
19 the community food connection, you've heard the First  
20 Deputy Commissioner talk about adequate funding.  
21 The reality is when you look at City, State, and  
22 Federal funding it is inadequate for emergency food.  
23 The supply gap and the meal gap - so these are the  
24 metrics that indicate what the difference between  
25 household resources are versus how much it costs to



1 actually buy food at the grocery store - and when you  
2 look at the supply gap, which fills in that gap,  
3 there's still a gap. And that's with... if we look at  
4 current funding, where CFC is higher than it has  
5 been, where SNAP had been higher than it had been,  
6 but the reality is citywide food distribution is  
7 declining. That means community based organizations  
8 are trying to do more with less and that's  
9 unacceptable. You know this, but I just want to  
10 reiterate this idea that the adequacy that we're  
11 talking about is really just a basic survival and  
12 persistence. We're not talking about filling that  
13 meal gap or filling that supply gap fully.

15 The second thing I want to clarify is the concept  
16 around the way the City helps people access SNAP. New  
17 York City and New York State does a good job. I don't  
18 want to underestimate that, but it is the case that,  
19 while around 90 percent of the people who are under  
20 125 percent of the federal poverty limit do access  
21 SNAP - many people in New York City who are above  
22 that federal poverty limit, up to 200 percent, still  
23 qualify for SNAP benefits. And when you look at that  
24 metric, it's really one in four New Yorkers. New York  
25 City, by HRA's estimate specifically, who are

1  
2 eligible potentially for SNAP, but are not  
3 participating in SNAP. (TIMER CHIMES) That's one in  
4 four New Yorkers. So, there's a lot of room, a lot of  
5 opportunity for growth, and we think the way to do  
6 that is to lean into community based providers who  
7 are providing access, who are helping people navigate  
8 in highly personalized, language specific, trusted  
9 spaces, and I'll stop there.

10 MS. CAMILA GOMEZ: Hi, thank you, Chair Ayala, for  
11 holding this very important hearing. My name is  
12 Camila Gomez, and I'm here on behalf of God's Love We  
13 Deliver. We're New York City's leading provider of  
14 medically tailored, home delivered meals and  
15 nutritional counseling for people living with severe  
16 and chronic illness, and who are too sick to shop or  
17 cook for themselves and their families.

18 Annually, we prepare and cook more than 4 million  
19 meals in our kitchen with fresh ingredients and  
20 deliver and refrigerated vans directly to the home of  
21 more than 15,000 clients across New York City.

22 The medically tailored meal model is an  
23 intervention designed to support people living with  
24 severe and chronic illnesses. Our meal plans are  
25 tailored to the medical and dietary needs of each of

1  
2 our clients by one of our 11 registered dietitian  
3 nutritionists.

4 Our clients receive unlimited nutritional  
5 counseling sessions from our team of RDNs in an  
6 effort to provide ongoing support to clients.

7 Research demonstrates that MTMs improve health  
8 outcomes, lower cost of care, and increase patient  
9 quality of life. In fact, when patients receive MTMs,  
10 health care systems see a 16 percent net cost savings  
11 after paying for the intervention. Patients are  
12 admitted to the hospital 50 percent less often, and  
13 they reduce their reliance on emergency department  
14 services by 70 percent.

15 We believe that being sick and hungry is a crisis  
16 that demands an urgent response. And for New Yorkers  
17 living with complex illnesses, God's love is the only  
18 service that stands between them hunger and  
19 malnutrition. Each Love, God's Love continues to grow  
20 to meet the demand for services; it's one of our core  
21 principles that we never have a waiting list.

22 However, this is becoming increasingly difficult  
23 without additional support, as we're now on track to  
24 deliver 4.3 million meals this fiscal year, having  
25

1  
2 grown more than 50 percent in just the last two years  
3 alone.

4 Now in our 39th year of service, we have been a  
5 longstanding life-saving resource for New Yorkers in  
6 need who are living with severe and chronic illness -  
7 and who are facing malnutrition. Food insecurity  
8 impacts an individual's ability to follow medication  
9 plans, control their chronic conditions, as well as  
10 receiving timely medical care. Furthermore,  
11 malnourishment actually increases a person's  
12 likelihood to be readmitted (TIMER CHIMES) to the  
13 hospital after a first hospitalization by 50 percent.

14 In light of the great need demonstrated by New  
15 Yorkers living with severe and chronic illness, along  
16 with the improved health outcomes shown by research,  
17 we ask that the City Council develop a contract  
18 specifically in service of those in need of life-  
19 saving medically tailored meals. However, while  
20 appreciating that this may not happen in the last  
21 month of the fiscal year, we urge the Council to  
22 support our request for FY25 discretionary funding  
23 through the Speaker's Office, thank you so much.

24 CHAIRPERSON AYALA: Thank you, I've had the  
25 pleasure of doing both Gods Love We Deliver and the

1  
2 Meals on Wheels program for many years, and I love  
3 them. The benefit... I mean I think it, to me, is  
4 like... I love them more than they do probably,  
5 because when I go into those homes and speak to the  
6 people, the recipients, these are real people that  
7 are maybe struggling or maybe are, you know,  
8 undergoing some illness that prevents them from being  
9 able to prepare their own meals, and who don't have  
10 that informal support. So, thank you for doing that  
11 work, and, you know, Steve is, like, teaching me how  
12 to really understand the ins and outs of what it  
13 means to run the food pantry business. It is very  
14 difficult, but it's also very humbling experience. He  
15 had me do for... I'm just going to rat him out, but  
16 he had me do Thanksgiving dinner a couple of times.  
17 And it was hard taking those, you know, the menu  
18 options, and then making sure that people got the  
19 right food back. It was hard, it was hard, but it was  
20 very fulfilling for me, and to the people that were  
21 there, so thank you so much. And Nick has taught me  
22 everything about, you know, the waitlists that exists  
23 even in the local pantry around the corner from my  
24 home, which, you know, thanks to your program, gets  
25 funded. And just seeing all of the work that you guys

1  
2 put in, and the love that you put into the work that  
3 you do, is really uplifting and helps ensure that we  
4 have that fight, to continue to advocate beyond the  
5 walls of today's hearing, and have that translated  
6 into our budget negotiation conversation. So, thank  
7 you so much.

8 PANEL: Thank You

9 CHAIRPERSON AYALA: Our next panel consists of  
10 Christina Hanson, Rachel Sabella, Martina Santos, and  
11 Joel Berg. You may begin.

12 MS. CHRISTINA HANSON: Thank you, Deputy Speaker  
13 Ayala, and the Committee on General Welfare for  
14 having this hearing today.

15 My name is Christina Hansen, and I'm the  
16 Executive Director of Part of The Solution or POTS, a  
17 community based organization in the Bronx that has  
18 been fighting food insecurity and poverty for over  
19 four decades.

20 Last year's True Cost of Living Report shed light  
21 on a stark reality, over half of New York's  
22 households cannot cover the necessities, it is an  
23 insurable challenge. That rate exceeds 80 percent in  
24 the Bronx communities that we serve. The demand for  
25

1  
2 our services has not abated, in fact, increased since  
3 the Covid-19 pandemic.

4 For many of our clients in the most critical  
5 situations, including those facing homelessness, they  
6 come to us desperate for access to food. Clients will  
7 prioritize paying rent, so they're not evicted; they  
8 will sacrifice their access to food, and rely on  
9 organizations like POTS to make it through the month.

10 In addition, for clients who've overcome many  
11 challenges by securing steady a job or finding a  
12 stable housing arrangement, the wages they are paid  
13 are just not enough to cover the cost of essentials  
14 in this city.

15 Last year we partnered with members of our  
16 community to create a space where they could share  
17 their thoughts about neighborhood issues. On the  
18 subject of food insecurity, I bring a statement from  
19 this committee, and it reads: "POTS Community  
20 Advisory Committee stresses that the five boroughs  
21 are facing hunger. The added costs of rent and taxes,  
22 among others, make it impossible to cover the cost of  
23 food that is needed. Salaries have not increased at  
24 the same pace as prices. The Committee is concerned  
25 about the quality of food that is available. Children

1  
2 are hungry at home, and school meals are not always  
3 ideal; a hungry child cannot focus on learning.  
4 Seniors are not always accessing the most nourishing  
5 food that will give them the nutritional values they  
6 need at their age. Hunger is real in the City, and  
7 people are forced to make the most of limited  
8 resources, including expired food to survive.”

9 POTS believes that hunger in New York City is  
10 unacceptable. This is one of the richest cities in  
11 the world, with the political will and resources  
12 available, we can have both short (TIMER CHIMES) and  
13 long-term solutions to food insecurity.

14 We're concerned about the trends we see in  
15 proposing cuts to public programs assisting with  
16 hunger, like Community Food Connections and the  
17 School Meals Program, which are a matter of survival  
18 for many vulnerable families. We ask City officials  
19 to consider expanding the budget for these programs  
20 to the levels that others have mentioned, as well as  
21 in this program. Thank you so much for your time, we  
22 really appreciate it.

23 MS. RACHEL SABELLA: Good afternoon, my name is  
24 Rachel Sabella, and I serve as the Director of No Kid  
25 Hungry New York. Thank you, thank you Chair; thank



1  
2 you Deputy Speaker; thank you hunger hero, Diana  
3 Ayala, and the entire City Council. We have worked  
4 together for a long time to connect more New Yorkers  
5 with meals, and we need your support and leadership  
6 more than ever before.

7 One in four children in New York City could face  
8 hunger this year. A recent poll that No kid Hungry  
9 put out in the field found that 85 percent of New  
10 Yorkers are saying incomes are not rising as fast as  
11 grocery prices. We all feel that, and we need to do  
12 more. What passed last week out of the House  
13 Agriculture Committee was cruel - to take away that  
14 much funding from SNAP recipients. We need to come  
15 together to ensure there is a bipartisan bill that  
16 protects New Yorkers, that expands benefits.

17 The other place where we can work together is to  
18 continue to hold this Administration accountable. We  
19 heard today from the Department of Social Services,  
20 they talked about a very limited portfolio of  
21 programs. And we know that every City agency is  
22 either providing food or meal programs or has a way  
23 to promote it to families. So, we want to make sure,  
24 as we're approaching summer, the hungriest time of  
25

1  
2 year, the City is working to promote summer meals to  
3 anyone who is eligible through different agencies.

4 This year, for the first time, New Yorkers are  
5 going to be eligible for Summer EBT. We thank the  
6 Council for advocating for New York to opt into it.  
7 While it's being administered by the State, we need  
8 the City - DSS, DOE, any agency that touches eligible  
9 families, to promote it. And the best way to make  
10 sure people are getting those benefits is to do SNAP  
11 Enrollment.

12 So, are those happening are those events  
13 happening in schools and after school programs? How  
14 are they working across City agencies (TIMER CHIMES)  
15 to feed families?

16 I would be remiss, though, if I did not mention a  
17 big issue that we've been all working on - cuts and  
18 confusion over the Department of Education's budget  
19 for School meals. We want to make sure that kids have  
20 consistent access to nutritious meals and that this  
21 Administration continues to fulfill their promises of  
22 supporting families. So, thank you, and together we  
23 can make No Kid Hungry reality.

24 MR. JOEL BERG: Hi, I'm Joel Berg, CEO of Hunger  
25 Free America. Let me reiterate the thanks of all my

1  
2 colleagues to the Deputy Speaker for your incredible  
3 leadership on these issues. I've submitted detailed  
4 testimony for the record. So, let me just highlight a  
5 few points.

6 Number one, this is an affordability problem, not  
7 a food distribution problem. We need to raise wages  
8 and make New York City affordable again and then fill  
9 it in with food.

10 Second, just like Rachel said, that the top thing  
11 we need to do is increase participation in the  
12 existing federal programs. Every dollar we at Hunger  
13 Free America spend on SNAP outreach funded by the  
14 City generate \$60 worth of groceries funded by our  
15 very wealthy Uncle Sam. We need to do more to help  
16 people get WIC, which is available for new migrants.  
17 School breakfast, we still have the lowest school  
18 breakfast participation rate out of any big city in  
19 the United States.

20 I know the General Welfare Committee doesn't  
21 oversee the Department of Education, but I hope the  
22 Council can really focus on this. Every Mayor claims  
23 they're going to fix it, and it's still not fixed.  
24 We're losing out to LA, Chicago, Houston, Newark -

1  
2 not Mayberry, big city school districts are doing  
3 better than us.

4 Of course, it's absurd that for the third Mayor  
5 in a row, they're proposing slashing emergency food  
6 to pantries and kitchens, the food banks, and  
7 agencies. Every year, the Council puts back the  
8 money, and every year we have this ridiculous dance  
9 where we have to come here and beg so to speak, for  
10 the needs of the most vulnerable New Yorkers. It is  
11 insane.

12 Lastly, let me reiterate how crazy and immoral  
13 the Farm Bill passed by the House Republicans are. We  
14 support all the legislation here to increase, to push  
15 Congress to do better. But just to help you  
16 understand, the same bill that cuts \$30 billion out  
17 of the most vulnerable American children, older  
18 Americans, workers, veterans, and people with  
19 disabilities - that adds \$50 billion in agribusiness  
20 corporate welfare - to the biggest agriculture  
21 corporations in America. (TIMER CHIMES) It's  
22 immoral, and Council should do everything it can to  
23 oppose it, thank you.

24 MS. MARTINA SANTOS: Good afternoon, Chair Ayala,  
25 good afternoon everyone in this room. My name is

1  
2 Martina Santos, and I'm a volunteer and board member  
3 of the West Side Campaign Against Hunger.

4 My testimony today is because the situation is  
5 really critical for our community here and the United  
6 States.

7 Currently, I attend the West Side Campaign  
8 Against Hunger (WSCAH) food pantry as a customer,  
9 volunteer, and board member. I have been visiting  
10 WSCAH for over 14 years. When I initially came to  
11 WSCAH, I fell in love with WSCAH. As a customer my  
12 income was too low; I was living in the Bronx, and I  
13 could not afford to buy healthy food to put on my  
14 table, and that is why I came to WSCAH. That day, I  
15 went home with a smile, as I brought with me fresh  
16 fruits and vegetables, protein, grains, milk, which I  
17 was able to choose myself during my visit.

18 Everything is worse after the pandemic. In the  
19 pandemic, people lost their jobs and they need to  
20 move with a family member.

21 WSCAH's mission is to alleviate hunger by  
22 ensuring that all New Yorkers have dignified access  
23 to healthy food selection and support services.

24 Please do not cut our budget.

1  
2 I am really nervous, because this is the first  
3 time I am talking in public. I hope you will forgive  
4 me.

5 Last year, WSCAH distributed over 4 million  
6 pounds of healthy food for its 80,000 families.

7 For example, seven years (TIMER CHIMES) ago WSCAH  
8 had one distribution point, and now WSCAH has more  
9 than 30 distribution points and is also delivering  
10 directly to over 1500 homes. My greatest satisfaction  
11 is being able to refer family, neighbors, friends and  
12 even strangers to the WSCAH pantry because I know  
13 they will find not only a wide variety of fresh and  
14 healthy foods, but also empathetic treatment from the  
15 WSCAH team.

16 Also, they are trying to cut the budget. If the  
17 Council could do something, please do not cut the  
18 budget. Everybody who in the room, we are working on  
19 the same page - do not cut the budget for families  
20 going to food pantries. Food pantries means healthy  
21 food for people and the communities, and they are  
22 also saving some money. Before you reminded me when  
23 you said something about Con Edison. I spoke to a  
24 couple of ladies at the pantry in WSCAH, and those  
25 ladies said they are going to two pantries, day by

1  
2 day, and the money they saving at the end of the  
3 month. Part the money it goes to Con Edison, and the  
4 other part has to go to pay the internet bill,  
5 because they have grandkids living in the house and  
6 they need to do their homework at home, because they  
7 go into the library, the line is too big.

8 So, the situation is really, really, really bad.  
9 And no New Yorker deserves to go to bed with an empty  
10 stomach. So, that is why I say, thank you to you, and  
11 thank you to all the Members. Please help us to not  
12 getting cuts on the budget. Please, I beg of you, and  
13 I am begging for everybody who is in the room, to  
14 keep pushing. Because, not you, not her, not him -  
15 everybody is going to be on the same place to

16 (SPEAKING FOREIGN LANGUAGE)

17 CHAIRPERSON AYALA: to ensure...

18 MS. MARTINA SANTOS: I get it...

19 CHAIRPERSON AYALA: Yes, to ensure that the cuts  
20 don't go through, yes.

21 MS. MARTINA SANTOS: Yes, yes, yes, please, thank  
22 you.

23 CHAIRPERSON AYALA: Muchas gracias.

24 MS. MARTINA SANTOS: That is why I am here. To  
25 give my testimony, because the thing is really,

1 really... WSCAH before they are taking only 300 - 400  
2 customers, in one day WSCAH, they take 600 customers.

3 CHAIRPERSON AYALA: Yes.

4 MS. MARTINA SANTOS: It's because when you see  
5 people in the line at the pantry, it is because they  
6 need it. Because, if you don't need it, you'd be  
7 lying down on your couch watching tv or doing else.  
8 Thank you very much for listening to me... (CROSS-  
9 TALK)

10 CHAIRPERSON AYALA: Are you sure you haven't done  
11 this before?

12 (CHEERS AND APPLAUSE)

13 CHAIRPERSON AYALA: I don't know (LAUGHTER) Thank  
14 you, thank you so much to this panel. (LAUGHTER)

15 MS. MARTINA SANTOS: Have a wonderful afternoon.

16 CHAIRPERSON AYALA: (SPEAKING FOREIGN LANGUAGE)

17 Okay, we have two panels and...

18 (PAUSE)

19 Evelyn Garcia, Alex Hughes, Sophie Martin, and  
20 Paula Inhargue. Sorry about that, Paula. Okay, you  
21 may begin which ever side wants to go first.

22 MS. EVELYN GARCIA: Chair Ayala and members of the  
23 Committee on General Welfare, hello, name is Evelyn  
24 Garcia, and I am the Executive Chef of the Teaching  
25



1 Kitchen at Lennox Hill Neighborhood House. Thank you  
2 so much for holding this important meeting.

3  
4 The Lennox Hill Neighborhood House is an 130-  
5 year-old settlement house that provides an extensive  
6 array of social services that improve the lives of  
7 over 15,000 New Yorkers in need each year - from ages  
8 three to 103.

9 Today I will be speaking on behalf of our  
10 community, from my unique perspective as a chef  
11 leading a farm to institution training program that  
12 impacts almost every council district.

13 Lennox Hill Neighborhood House is in support of  
14 resolutions being heard today, and we will submit a  
15 more thorough testimony on what we believe are  
16 positive impacts of federal legislation supported by  
17 Resolutions 25, 227 and 237.

18 The Neighborhood House serves over 400,000 meals  
19 annually to our clients inhouse, including three and  
20 four-year-old children in our Head Start Early  
21 Childhood Program, to unhoused women residing in a  
22 mental health shelter, and to members of our older  
23 adult centers. Our social workers and Benefit  
24 Advocates help clients obtain gain SNAP benefits,  
25 provide resources for food pantries and soup

1  
2 kitchens, assess and authorize home delivered meals,  
3 share free nutrition education programs, and often  
4 navigate conversations with clients on how to  
5 maximize governmental benefits and eligibility in  
6 order to stretch budgets and improve access to food  
7 and food security.

8 The resounding refrain and common barrier is lack  
9 of access to healthy affordable food and not having  
10 enough funds or resources to afford food - even if  
11 accessible and available to purchase.

12 Generally, legislation to increase flexibility-  
13 and where and what type of healthy food can be  
14 accessed through assistance programs is welcomed and  
15 more closely matches the realities of how working  
16 people purchase and prepare their meals.

17 Expanding eligibility for food assistants to  
18 promote participation in higher education and  
19 workforce training is also (TIMER CHIMES) warranted.

20 Most importantly, increasing food for food aid,  
21 that adjusts for the rising consumer cost, is  
22 essential.

23 There are steps that the City can take on this  
24 for this as well. To address food cost and inflation,  
25 the City should partner with organizations to provide

1 government funded meals through nonprofits and  
2 schools. At the Teaching Kitchen, we offer all  
3 nonprofits free training on our Farm to Institution  
4 Model to improve citywide meal programs.  
5 Incorporating this training into workforce  
6 development for cooks and chefs, along with basic  
7 equipment upgrades, such as sharp knives and cutting  
8 boards, would ensure healthier nutritious meals  
9 across the City. Promoting local procurement, and  
10 enhancing the food system across New York State to  
11 supply locally grown food at a reduced cost is  
12 essential. Additionally, investing in the salaries  
13 and professional development of cooks and chefs,  
14 especially in nonprofit institutional kitchens, will  
15 improve food security and support the retention and  
16 financial growth of paid workers, primarily (SPEAKING  
17 FOREIGN LANGUAGE) women of color.

18  
19 In closing, food and having access to health  
20 healthy affordable and fresh food and meals, is  
21 something we consider a right. The federal  
22 legislation you will support through these  
23 resolutions and innovation in the City practices can  
24 get us closer to addressing food insecurity, thank  
25 you.

1  
2 MR. ALEX HUGHES: Hi good morning, thank you  
3 Council Member Ayala, for holding this important  
4 hearing on an issue that is really critical to not  
5 just our city, but our state and nation as a whole,  
6 and also for the rest of the City Council members who  
7 are here to hear this.

8 My name is Alex Hughes, I'm the Senior Director  
9 of Hunger Prevention and Advocacy with Project  
10 Hospitality. We're an interfaith service provider in  
11 Staten Island and we service over 30,000 individual  
12 Staten Islanders a year.

13 According to United Way's 2023 True Cost Of  
14 Living Report, 41 percent of Staten Islanders in  
15 Community District 1, do not make enough money to  
16 make ends meet; Community District 2, also 41  
17 percent; and in Community District 3, which is  
18 considered to be a more affluent area of the Island,  
19 still almost one-third of Staten Islanders do not  
20 have enough resources to make ends meet, often times  
21 that means not enough to feed their families.

22 I'll tell you a little bit about our pantry.  
23 We're still seeing 200 to 400 individual households  
24 come to us twice a week. We have some messages from  
25 some of those households, these plates are literally

1 just from three hours of a distribution, uh, and the  
2 messages can range from things that are very policy  
3 oriented to just messages as simple as, "please, we  
4 need the food pantry," "this is how we feed our  
5 family of eight", "please".

6  
7 If these cuts go through, I'm not worried about  
8 just our program, but also all of the other programs  
9 that benefit - I think 699 was said earlier - that is  
10 how many programs that are receiving funding from  
11 CFC.

12 This issue is personal to me as well; I was one  
13 of those kids that went to school hungry. I was one  
14 of those kids that couldn't focus in class because I  
15 was hungry. I was in a state where there was not a  
16 robust emergency food system that exists here.  
17 that's one of the reasons I moved here, because New  
18 York City (TIMER CHIMES) has often been a leader on  
19 so many important issues. And our city has the chance  
20 and the opportunity to continue being leaders in this  
21 space - and not followers, especially with what we  
22 all fear is upcoming with the with the Farm Bill. So,  
23 thank you all for your support and recognition of how  
24 important those policies are at the federal at the  
25 level.



1  
2 Healthy food access and nutrition promotes health,  
3 community stability, and fights against homelessness  
4 and recidivism. Since 2019, we've empowered this  
5 through various services like our Ryan White Food And  
6 Nutrition Program, emergency pantry services where we  
7 provide a variety of culturally diverse meal kits for  
8 family shelters and community based pantry.

9 We're pleased that the Council is supportive of  
10 crucial bills like the Farm Bill, enhanced Access to  
11 SNAP Act, and the Hot Foods Act; however, there's  
12 definitely more work to be done. We call on council  
13 members to encourage their federal colleagues to  
14 prioritize nutritious foods in each legislation.

15 A USDA study estimates that over 20 percent of  
16 SNAP dollars are spent on poor nutrition items like  
17 soda and desserts, which contribute to unfair and  
18 debilitating disease. As the largest food benefit,  
19 SNAP presents an opportunity to improve health by  
20 prioritizing nutritious foods as allowable purchases.  
21 This will ensure that SNAP dollars can go further in  
22 helping vulnerable families achieve security and  
23 health. We recommend partnering with meal providers  
24 to deliver low cost nutritious meals for those in  
25 need.

1  
2 Finally, we'd like to emphasize that we can  
3 effectively reduce food insecurity by aligning  
4 policies and programs (TIMER CHIMES) to evidence-  
5 based models and recommendations. Giving away food is  
6 not enough. By offering evidence-based programming  
7 that combines Client Choice Pantry Models to reduce  
8 food waste and promote autonomy, nutrition education,  
9 motivational interviewing, and targeted referral  
10 services, we can better help people obtain stability  
11 in food, health, housing and beyond. Thank you.

12 MS. PAULA INHARGUE: Thank you, Chair Ayala, and  
13 members of the Committee for the opportunity to  
14 testify today. My name is Paula Inhargue, and I'm a  
15 Policy Analyst at United Neighborhood Houses. UNH  
16 represents neighborhood settlement houses and our  
17 members provide a wide variety of services to their  
18 community, such as providing support to access  
19 benefits and case management for HRA programs.

20 We are at a crucial moment to address issues of  
21 hunger, food insecurity, and poverty in New York  
22 City. The City must fund the Community Food  
23 Connection Program at \$60 million in FY25 to sustain  
24 and grow the program, allowing providers to  
25



1  
2 effectively allocate resources and keep supporting  
3 the growing needs of asylum seekers.

4 Several settlement houses in UNH's network  
5 receive this funding, and it directly supports  
6 communities in need of food. Thank you for your  
7 support for this funding level.

8 The Council should also restore its Food Pantry  
9 Initiative to at least FY23 three levels, recognizing  
10 its important role in addressing food insecurity and  
11 supporting communities in need. Fully funding both of  
12 these programs is critical, especially because they  
13 both support people regardless of their immigration  
14 status.

15 Our written remarks highlight our concern around  
16 New York City aging programs that address food  
17 insecurity for older adults, including recently  
18 awarded contracts for the Home Delivered Meals  
19 Program. We are concerned that some of these  
20 contracts went to private contractors for the first  
21 time, and that this may compromise the integrity of  
22 this essential social service program.

23 Lastly, thank you for your questioning earlier  
24 around the New York City Benefits Program and  
25 clarifying the funding levels. We need to ensure this

1  
2 program is fully funded in the out years, so all 36  
3 CBO providers are able to continue their essential  
4 work. Thank you

5 CHAIRPERSON AYALA: Thank you guys so much.

6 This is the final in person panel, so I just  
7 want to remind anyone that if you are here and you  
8 wanted to testify, please see the Sergeant at Arms  
9 and fill out a form.

10 Nazneen Rahman, Graham Horton, Ruth Moore, Sharon  
11 Brown, come on up. You can begin when you are ready.

12 MR. GRAHAM HORN: Deputy Speaker Ayala, Council  
13 Members, and staff, good afternoon, and thank you for  
14 this opportunity to offer testimony.

15 My name is Graham Horn, and I am a staff attorney  
16 in the Shelter Advocacy Initiative and the Public  
17 Assistance and SNAP Project at the New York Legal  
18 Assistance Group or NYLAG.

19 Thank you, Chair, and other members for  
20 highlighting the issue of food provision in in DHS,  
21 and the questions to DSS Deputy Commissioner. I would  
22 like to offer some further reflections on the state  
23 of food insecurity in the City's increasingly  
24 multifaceted shelter system.

1  
2 NYLAG clients frequently report that the meals  
3 they are served in shelter are too small to abate  
4 their hunger, they say that they are not allowed to  
5 have more than one serving of items per meal, and  
6 that the serving sizes themselves are very small. As  
7 a result, clients residing in shelter are left  
8 perpetually hungry.

9 Inadequately feeding shelter residents only  
10 further disenfranchises them. Providing food is not  
11 the same as providing enough food. Shelter residents  
12 with a job are often faced with the impossible choice  
13 of "work or eat" . This is a result of the fact that  
14 shelter meals are served at specific and rigid times,  
15 and if the residents are not present at those times,  
16 they cannot get a meal. This difficulty is multiplied  
17 by the fact that recipients of Cash Public Assistance  
18 are not awarded the restaurant allowance supplement  
19 if they live in a shelter that that serves meals. On  
20 top of that, individuals and families who reside in  
21 shelters that purport to provide meals, have their  
22 Cash Assistance benefits reduced based on the fiction  
23 of readily available food. Further, shelter policies  
24 prevent residents from bringing in outside food,

1  
2 weakening the possible benefit of food pantries and  
3 market shares.

4 This compounding problem of hunger and shelter  
5 deserves the Council's attention and immediate  
6 action. Our most recent immigrant neighbors and  
7 clients also face extreme hunger in their new  
8 immigrant only shelter system. Those clients residing  
9 in these shelters report that they are not being  
10 provided with adequate food, not being served hot  
11 food, and that the food they are served has mold on  
12 it or is otherwise spoiled. Compounding the  
13 difficulty here for our new immigrant neighbors, most  
14 are not eligible for federal SNAP benefits. NYLAG is  
15 honored to stand in support of Resolution 57, (TIMER  
16 CHIMES) which calls for the state of New York to  
17 provide food support benefits for those not eligible  
18 to receive federal SNAP assistance. Such a local  
19 program would provide our new immigrant neighbors  
20 with essential food assistance.

21 We thank you for the work you have done to  
22 facilitate services for vulnerable New Yorkers, and  
23 we hope you we can continue to be a resource for you  
24 moving forward, thank you

1  
2 CHAIRPERSON AYALA: Thank you, and if you can get  
3 your hands on a menu...

4 MR. GRAHAM HORN: Say again?

5 CHAIRPERSON AYALA: If you can get your hands on a  
6 menu that you can send me? I wanted to go and see,  
7 because that's a really good point. The timing issue  
8 also, it's really... I didn't ask about that I  
9 didn't think about it at the time, but you're right.  
10 If you're working, and you're ,you know, you can't  
11 stay, thank you so much for bringing that up.

12 MS. NAZNEEN RAHMAN: Good after afternoon, my name  
13 is Nazneen Rahman, and I'm an Assistant Vice  
14 President at Emblem Health Neighborhood Care,  
15 overseeing our 15 neighborhood care sites across New  
16 York City. On behalf of Emblem Health, I would like  
17 to thank Chair Ayala and the Members of the Committee  
18 on General Welfare for holding this hearing.

19 Neighborhood Care is a nonprofit, operating in  
20 all five boroughs, where we provide free in person  
21 and virtual support, access to community resources,  
22 and health and wellness classes to all community  
23 members. We provide services in English, Spanish,  
24 Mandarin, Cantonese, and Haitian Creole, and 81  
25 percent of our team members are bi or trilingual.

1  
2 At Neighborhood Care, we are dedicated to  
3 addressing unmet health and well-being needs, and  
4 some of our priorities include increasing access to  
5 healthy food and nutritional guidance.

6 In 2023, nearly 72,000 individuals access care  
7 through our sites, and we reached nearly 7,500  
8 recipients at food pantry and farmers market events  
9 in collaboration with our partners at our Harlem,  
10 Crown Heights, East New York, and Jackson Heights  
11 locations. We also won support for three grant  
12 programs that increased food access and programming  
13 at our sites in Flushing, Chinatown, and Cambria  
14 Heights, thanks to Council Member Ung, Manhattan  
15 Borough President Levine, and State Senator Comrie.  
16 In addition to these events, we host nutrition  
17 classes, we run diabetes self-management courses, and  
18 we facilitate SNAP enrollment.

19 We support the City Council's efforts to address  
20 hunger and food insecurity in our city, and we hope  
21 to be a constructive partner in resource to  
22 accomplish these goals. We would welcome support and  
23 partnership from City Council Members to enhance our  
24 ability to host food distribution and nutritional  
25 education at our sites. We would be happy to share

1  
2 our findings and experiences working directly with  
3 the community, and would like to be considered as a  
4 partner in initiatives you have underway to improve  
5 access to healthy food, thank you.

6 MS. RUTH MOORE: Hi, good afternoon, thanks for  
7 having me. Thank you, Chair, for allowing me to speak  
8 at this hearing. SNAP benefits are extremely  
9 important to satisfy the basic needs to myself and  
10 people that are in my community. I live in the  
11 borough of Brooklyn, and the SNAP program assists  
12 families throughout my neighborhood. Without the  
13 benefits of the SNAP program, myself and others would  
14 not know where our next meal would have come from.  
15 Thank you for having me and hearing me out.

16 MS. SHARON BROWN: Hello, how are you? My name is  
17 Sharon Brown. Okay, this for General Welfare? This is  
18 not for welfare benefits for general welfare, but  
19 we're speaking about food also welfare?

20 CHAIRPERSON AYALA: That's right.

21 MS. SHARON BROWN: Okay, so if people aren't give  
22 monies that live in shelters for hot meals, they must  
23 stick around the shelters doing nothing, they won't  
24 be able to prosper themselves. So, they need to get  
25 cash benefits for food. They need food stamps for

1 cold food, so they can get things. They also need to  
2 be able to bring food inside and keep it. The general  
3 welfare is they should have the food... money for  
4 hot meals and food stamps. This affects the homeless  
5 military, homeless veterans, even police officers -  
6 some who were charged with crimes, going to these  
7 shelters. They don't tell people that they are police  
8 officers or former police officers, but they report  
9 to these places, too. So, it needs to be carefully  
10 handled. We have military in there. We have police  
11 officers, former police officers, police officers who  
12 will have their overturned convictions, and then be  
13 back on the force. So, we need to treat them and  
14 handle them with care. General welfare, we need  
15 places for people to be. We have the homeless  
16 population, some of them are not really homeless,  
17 they are in between places, because of landlord  
18 abuse. We need to handle the general welfare of  
19 landlord abuse period across the board. It's not  
20 being taken care of properly, and it affects mostly  
21 military, veteran, police officers, and things like  
22 that. We need to have seating for everyone -tourists,  
23 military, police officers, (TIMER CHIMES) et cetera.



1  
2 CHAIRPERSON AYALA: Thank you, so much Sharon,  
3 thank you. Thank you to this panel.

4 Okay, we're moving briefly to Zoom before we hear  
5 from our last panelist. I'd like to remind everyone  
6 that I will call up individuals in panels. Once your  
7 name is called, a member of our staff will unmute  
8 you, and you may begin your testimony once the  
9 Sergeant at Arms sets the clock and gives you the  
10 cue. All testimony will be limited to two minutes.  
11 Remember that there is a few second delay when you're  
12 muted before we can hear you.

13 First we'll hear Kathleen DiPerna followed by  
14 Egondy Onuoha.

15 MS. KATHLEEN DIPERNA: Okay, good afternoon Deputy  
16 Speaker Ayala and members of the General Welfare  
17 Committee. Thank you for the opportunity to testify  
18 today on Rethink Food's efforts to reduce food  
19 insecurity and support frontline community based  
20 organizations and our city's small minority and  
21 women-led businesses.

22 My name is Kathleen Diperna, and I represent  
23 Rethink Food, a New York City based nonprofit with  
24 the mission to create a more sustainable and  
25 Equitable food system, one where every New Yorker has

1 access to dignified, culturally competent, and  
2 nutritious food. Currently, we operate in 35 council  
3 districts across all five boroughs.  
4

5 Rethink was founded in 2017 by our CEO and  
6 Founder, Matt Jozwiak, who saw firsthand how good  
7 food from restaurants goes underutilized and to  
8 waste. He started our sustainable commissary kitchen  
9 by transforming excess food from restaurants,  
10 corporate kitchens, and grocery stores into meals  
11 delivered to CBOs - a model that concurrently  
12 tackles food waste and food insecurity.

13 Today that kitchen prepares an average of 15,000  
14 meals per week and distributes to 10 CBOs in Queens,  
15 Brooklyn, and Manhattan.

16 Our work has evolved to include another innovative  
17 solution to address food insecurity, our Rethink  
18 Certified Restaurant Program. Launched at the height  
19 of the Covid-19 pandemic, with food insecurity  
20 escalating and restaurants facing widespread  
21 closures, Rethink leveraged its experience to partner  
22 with restaurants to prepare meals for food insecure  
23 communities.

24 We had an unique opportunity to distribute meals,  
25 to keep restaurants open and retain staff and jobs in

1  
2 our community. Since the pandemic, we've engaged both  
3 of these models to respond to providing over 13  
4 million culturally competent meals for our newest  
5 asylum seeking neighbors at 34 shelters in the City  
6 We were brought in to help improve the quality and  
7 cultural competency and reduce food waste at these  
8 sites. We would like to continue to work with the  
9 City and Council to provide better prepared meals to  
10 New Yorkers in need.

11 Ultimately, the clients that we continue to serve  
12 seek food assistance at organizations like Rethink,  
13 because of an inefficient food system, and we  
14 continue to urge the City Council, agencies that  
15 procure food, and the Administration (TIMER CHIMES)  
16 to continue focusing on improving the quality of food  
17 procured, so that we can get New Yorkers the food  
18 they need, decrease the amount... (CROSS-TALK)

19 SERGEANT AT ARMS: Thank you for your testimony,  
20 your time has expired... (CROSS-TALK)

21 MS. KATHLEEN DIPERNA: food wasted and be less  
22 reliant on food access organizations, so they can use  
23 these funds for other pressing City issues.

24 And Chairperson, I just want to echo the comments  
25 that you made earlier and we'd love to continue

1  
2 working with you, Majority Leader Fariás, Council  
3 Member Won, Council Member Hudson, Council Member  
4 Hanif, and The Mayor's Office of Food Policy on  
5 improving food quality in New York City food  
6 procurement, thank you.

7 CHAIRPERSON AYALA: Thank you.

8 We will now hear from Egondú Onuoha.

9 MS. EGONDU ONUOHA: Thank you, Chair Ayala, and the  
10 Committee on General Welfare for holding this  
11 important hearing on food insecurity. My name is  
12 Egondú Onuoha, and I'm here today as a board member  
13 of the Metropolitan New York City WIC Association.

14 I will submit a written testimony in case my time  
15 runs out.

16 The Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for  
17 Women, Infants and Children, known as WIC, offers  
18 nutrition education and counseling, healthy foods,  
19 breastfeeding counseling and support, voter  
20 registration, referrals to community agencies for  
21 women, infants, and children up to the age five.

22 WIC is one of the only federally funded programs  
23 available to all residents, regardless of citizenship  
24 or immigration status. Our goal is to help women,  
25 infants, and children live stronger, healthier lives.



1  
2 SERGEANT AT ARMS: Thank you for your testimony,  
3 your time has expired...

4 MS. EGONDU ONUOHA: which has resulted in many WIC  
5 providers shutting their doors for good, including  
6 facilities at Jacobi and North Central Bronx, Kings  
7 County Hospital, Gouverneur Medical Center, East  
8 Harlem Council for Human Services, and Richmond  
9 University Medical Center. Those shuttered offices  
10 have endangered 12,000 women from getting services  
11 from WIC.

12 While remain in productive conversations with the  
13 Governor's Office about avenues for additional  
14 funding, we must make the New York City Council aware  
15 that WIC providers need the City's ongoing support  
16 and advocacy on increasing State funding and forging  
17 new partnerships that will allow us to continue our  
18 work in many of your districts.

19 I hope you will please consider us a resource as  
20 you seek ways to address food insecurity in New York  
21 City, and we look so forward to collaborating with  
22 you on ensuring the long term availability and  
23 stability of the WIC program in New York. Thank you.

24 CHAIRPERSON AYALA: Thank you. We will now hear  
25 from our final panelist, Susana Camavera.

1  
2 MS. SUSANA CAMAVERA: Good afternoon, Madam Chair  
3 Ayala, and members of the Committee. My name is  
4 Susana Camavera, and I'm the Executive Director of  
5 the Tacombia Foundation an established 501(c)(3) and  
6 Tacombia philanthropic arm.

7 As you might know, Tacombia is a New York City  
8 based company operating 21 Mexican Taquerias in the  
9 United States and a Tortilleria Factory in Sunset  
10 Park Brooklyn, 12 of which are based across  
11 Manhattan, Brooklyn, and Queens.

12 The mission of The Tacombia Foundation is to  
13 advance Mexican and Hispanic immigrant communities  
14 through food accessibility, education, and employment  
15 training, which is why I'm here today.

16 In April of 2020, the foundation launched the  
17 Tacombia Community Kitchen Program, or TCK for short,  
18 as a response to the food insecurity crisis  
19 exacerbated by the Covid-19 pandemic. Since then the  
20 Tacombia Foundation has turned TCK into a food  
21 accessibility program with partners such as Rething  
22 Food and Hispanic Federation among others, and has  
23 provided over 1 million meals since then.

24 The TCK Program has continued to grow by  
25 leveraging the kitchens of the 21 Tacombia

1  
2 Restaurants to produce over 8,000 meals every week  
3 and distribute them through a network that consists  
4 of over 30 community based organizations across  
5 Manhattan, Brooklyn, Queens, and especially the  
6 Bronx, and which are embedded in neighborhoods with  
7 large concentrations of Latino and Hispanic  
8 communities, many of whom are recent arrivals.

9       According to the latest data from the US  
10 Department of Agriculture, one in five Latinos in the  
11 United States experience food insecurity and are two  
12 times more likely to be food insecure than their  
13 white neighbors.

14       According to 2022 data from the New York State  
15 Comptroller's Office, the food insecurity rate for  
16 Hispanic New Yorkers is 22 percent. In our extensive  
17 work through the Community Kitchen Program, we have  
18 seen a bigger demand for food, one which is much  
19 larger (TIMER CHIMES) than today; it was the highest  
20 of the COVID-19 pandemic when the program launched.  
21 For this reason, we are here today to highlight the  
22 issues affecting the Hispanic immigrant communities  
23 going through food insecurity, and we call upon the  
24 City Council to consider all measures that will  
25 improve the living condition and provide (INAUDIBLE)



1 through food to all New Yorkers. To continue our work  
2 of the dignifying people through food of providing  
3 reliable, wholesome, and culturally relevant meals to  
4 families facing food insecurity, the Tacombia  
5 Foundation has requested discretionary funding under  
6 the food access and benefits, and welcome NYC  
7 Initiatives for Fiscal Year 2025, for which we hope  
8 to be considered and work alongside the City Council  
9 on this pressing an issue, thank you so much.  
10

11 CHAIRPERSON AYALA: Thank you, and with that, I  
12 want to just add that if we've inadvertently missed  
13 anyone who would like to testify virtually, please  
14 use the raised hand function in Zoom, and I will call  
15 on you in the order of hands raised.

16 (PAUSE)

17 Okay, seeing no one else, I would like to note  
18 that written testimony, which will be reviewed in  
19 full by committee staff, may be submitted to the  
20 record up to 72 hours after the close of this hearing  
21 by emailing it to [testimony@council.nyc.gov](mailto:testimony@council.nyc.gov).

22 I want to thank all of the folks that came out  
23 today to testify, and with that this hearing is  
24 closed.

25 (GAVELING OUT)

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 June 15, 2024