

Testimony of Kate MacKenzie, Executive Director, NYC Mayor's Office of Food Policy

**Before the New York City Council's Committees on Oversight and Investigations and
Economic Development**

Oversight Hearing on Food Infrastructure and Cost and Quality of Produce

April 8, 2025

Introduction

Good afternoon, Chair Brewer, Chair Farías, and members of the Committees on Oversight and Investigations and Economic Development. My name is Kate MacKenzie, and I serve as Executive Director of the New York City (NYC) Mayor's Office of Food Policy (MOFP). Joining me today is my colleague, Michele Lamberti, from the NYC Economic Development Corporation (NYCEDC). I welcome the opportunity to speak to you today about food infrastructure and the cost and quality of produce.

At MOFP, our mission is to advance the City's efforts to increase food security, promote access to and consumption of healthy foods, and support economic and environmental sustainability across the food system. Our work is guided by *Food Forward NYC*, the City's 10-year food policy plan, which lays out a comprehensive goal framework to reach a more equitable, sustainable, and healthy food system by 2031.

Food Forward NYC emphasizes the importance of equity and choice—enabling a food system where everyone is able to access nutritious, high-quality foods that are culturally relevant and affordable. The plan also highlights the ways in which the City is committed to supporting both our food workers and our food businesses, strengthening the sustainability and resiliency of our food system, rethinking our food infrastructure, and deepening our connections with the region.

A key focus of Food Forward NYC is the need to develop infrastructure that supports sustainable and equitable food production and distribution. This includes reinforcing the City's own food infrastructure while also strengthening regional partnerships to create a more resilient and interconnected food system. Another way of saying this is that through advancing the plan, we are improving food system infrastructure across urban and regional levels, including the infrastructure for managing the flows of food through primary and secondary processors and distributors serving wholesale and retail markets, the emergency food system, and city institutional food service. By taking this type of integrated approach, we achieve economic efficiency and build appropriate food supply redundancy and resilience.

When Food Forward NYC was released in 2021, it responded to lessons learned during the early days of the COVID-19 pandemic. Our food supply chains—and the infrastructure to support them—weren't yet ready to withstand major disruptions, limiting our ability to transport and store perishable foods and guarantee their quality.

Supply chain disruptions and labor shortages during the pandemic spurred widespread price volatility. While some of those immediate shocks have subsided, food prices continue to rise, straining household budgets across the country.

For example, since 2022, food prices have increased by about 2.6% annually across the United States. Between January 2024 and January 2025, grocery prices rose by nearly 2%, and restaurant prices climbed 3.4%. Notably, the cost of eggs has reached record highs, increasing by over 10% in February 2025 and 60% over the past year.

These rising prices impact the food and nutrition security of New Yorkers. A 2024 No Kid Hungry New York poll found that nearly four in five New Yorkers said that affording groceries has become more difficult, and 85% reported that rising costs of food have outpaced their incomes. According to the USDA, in 2023, the typical U.S. household spent \$75 per person per week on food—\$5 more than the previous year, and \$25 more than pre-pandemic in 2019. Overall, food prices are anticipated to increase by another 3.4% this year.

NYC Food System

Before diving into the causes and implications of food price volatility, it is important to understand them in the context of NYC's food system and the critical role of strong infrastructure. Approximately 19 billion pounds of food flow through NYC every year. This flow is the product of a complex mix of regional, national, and global supply chains that grow, process, and distribute food, and a rich local food economy that prepares food for purchase and disposes of food waste. The workings of these supply chains affect the daily life of every New Yorker.

Yet, unlike NYC's other essential systems—our road, water, and electrical networks, for example—our food system has no centralized design or management. Our food system is a “distributed” system, made up of tens of thousands of large and small businesses and nonprofit organizations—local, regional, national, and global—and millions of consumers, interacting largely independently to match food supply and demand.

NYC's food system is unique in two major ways. First, our city's ethnic diversity necessitates multiple complex supply chains that source products from across the region and the globe to cater to the distinct tastes and needs of New Yorkers. Second and relatedly, the majority of food businesses, from grocery stores to restaurants to distributors, are small-scale and independently owned, rather than national operations. This varied and nimble business landscape is well-suited to serve NYC's unique needs and supports both economic opportunity and food system resilience, but it also poses risks, including coordination challenges and the general vulnerability associated with small-scale, independent businesses.

With that in mind, NYC's food infrastructure is similarly varied and complex. Our infrastructure spans multiple phases of the food system and includes both physical spaces—such as warehouses, storage, and storefronts—as well as networks of transportation and market systems,

from farmers markets to online retail access to emergency food providers. Across these settings, the City has made significant investments to improve our infrastructure.

Hunts Point

As you know, the Hunts Point Food Distribution Center is the largest food distribution hub in the country, distributing over 2.5 billion pounds of produce annually. However, having opened in 1967, the existing Hunts Point Produce Market (HPPM) facility is beyond its useful life. It no longer adequately serves the space and operational needs of the cooperative. The existing refrigerated warehouse buildings do not have enough capacity to meet market needs and must rely on idling trucks to serve as additional warehouse storage. Infrastructure deficiencies have also created problems, leading to persistent intermodal traffic conflicts, delays, congestion, and idling. Taken together, the existing conditions result in operational inefficiencies, increased costs, and increased diesel emissions.

As part of Hunts Point Forward, a 2022 report that includes over 70 recommendations for investment in the peninsula, EDC and SBS has been redeveloping and modernizing the HPMM. To strengthen NYC's food infrastructure and increase storage capacity, NYC has dedicated \$130 million in addition to state and federal monies that will amount to approximately \$630 million in total. The project will replace the existing HPPM facility with a modern, state-of-the-art intermodal facility. It includes the replacement of all existing buildings with two new refrigerated warehouse buildings, a new administrative building, a waste management building, and a maintenance facility, totaling approximately 916,000 square feet. The new facility will expand HPPM's current capacity, increase operational efficiency, eliminate the need for the diesel-powered transport refrigeration units currently operating on the site, and keep jobs in the Bronx. The project will meet the space and operational needs of the cooperative at HPPM's current location while improving traffic patterns and sitewide circulation, addressing intermodal traffic conflicts, and encouraging rail usage.

GrowNYC Regional Food Hub

In addition to HPPM renovations, after nearly 10 years, GrowNYC's Regional Food Hub, located in the Hunt's Point Neighborhood, is set to open in May. The new 60,000 square foot food distribution hub will quadruple GrowNYC's aggregation and distribution square footage, allowing them to expand their food distribution capacity to 20 million pounds per year, a significant increase from the organization's current capacity of 5 million pounds per year. The hub will support mid-sized regional farms by connecting New York City's wholesale buyers with high-quality farm products, while ensuring all New Yorkers have access to these fresh, nutritious foods. The facility has seven produce coolers and a freezer, a biodigester onsite to reduce food waste, a grey water system, green and blue roof featuring drought tolerant plants and a rainwater collection system, permeable pavement, and EV charging stations. The facility will distribute to the current 370 food partners in NYC.

New York State produces enormous quantities of diverse food products, the majority of which are marketed nationally and internationally. With demand rising for local and regional food for urban public and private markets, there is new attention to the infrastructure gaps that limit the quantity of New York and neighboring state food supply to both public and private markets in the City.

Recent and ongoing research for and investment in infrastructure to scale up volumes of regional food supply to City markets—including public agencies serving schools, hospitals, senior and early childhood feeding and correction facilities—has resulted in State and federal investments in regional infrastructure. These projects are going forward and New York City is supportive of these investments in regional food infrastructure.

Blue Highways

Another key aspect of food distribution is transportation itself. Nearly 90% of goods in NYC are transported by truck—and roughly half of the city's food supply moves through just four major bridges and two tunnels—making the City's food distribution system vulnerable to traffic congestion and infrastructure strain. Instead of viewing our island geography as a limiting factor, we're working to capitalize on the waterways that surround us.

In 2023, DOT and EDC announced the Blue Highways initiative to shift more freight transport from congested roadways to the city's waterways. Marine transportation has the potential to reduce transportation costs, decrease roadway wear-and-tear, streamline delivery routes, and ensure more reliable distribution in the face of emergencies or road closures.

Hunts Point's proximity to the water and its position as a critical city food distribution node provide an opportunity to utilize the Blue Highways network in connection with the Brooklyn Marine Terminal. The redevelopment of the Brooklyn Marine Terminal (BMT) will invest in the site and operational upgrades to make it more efficient and competitive, allowing the marine terminal to attract more business. A Hunts Point Marine Terminal would enable the barging of perishable food into the Bronx and the nearby Hunts Point Food Distribution Center from BMT, decreasing truck traffic in the city, adding resiliency and making NYC more competitive in the food distribution supply chain as food distribution companies consider where to locate their warehouses, distribution centers, and, ultimately, where they create jobs.

By investing in infrastructure to improve port operations at Hunts Point, Brooklyn Marine Terminal, and other sites along the East River, we're increasing resiliency to ensure NYC is better equipped to move food in and around the city during times of emergency.

Cold Storage Infrastructure

Nearly half of the food distributed citywide is refrigerated or frozen, requiring specialized storage and transportation. Cold storage maintains the quality and freshness of items like

produce. However, the finite supply of real estate makes it difficult to expand or establish large-scale cold storage facilities, something we became increasingly aware of during COVID. In response, the City is exploring avenues to expand its cold storage infrastructure.

Access Infrastructure

Cold storage makes fresh produce access possible. Multiple access points to healthy and affordable food is the focus of Goal 1 of Food Forward—whether through traditional supermarkets, farmers markets, bodegas, street vendors, or through the City’s emergency food network. 2,000 stores across the city participate in Shop Healthy NYC!, which increases nutritious options in neighborhoods that other have little access to healthy foods. The Food Retail Expansion Program to Support Health (FRESH) program supports the development of full-service grocery stores in low-income areas by providing zoning and tax incentives to property owners and supermarket operators. The FRESH tax incentive program is administered by the NYC Industrial Development Agency (NYCIDA) and the FRESH zoning benefit program is administered by the NYC Department of City Planning (DCP). To qualify for NYCIDA benefits, supermarkets must make capital investments into new or existing space; dedicate 30 percent of retail space to perishable goods; and devote at least 500 square feet of retail space to fresh produce. Currently, there are 43 NYCIDA and DCP FRESH-incentivized supermarkets open, and 17 more in development.

Through zoning, we can attract supermarkets as well as other food business. Recent zoning changes through *City of Yes for Economic Opportunity* allow food production and processing in storefront space for the first time. These new regulations could facilitate multi-use food spaces. *City of Yes* is building on increasing commercial vitality. According to a DCP report last November, more than 70% of neighborhoods across the city have seen an increase in food and drink businesses since 2020, providing more options where New Yorkers can eat.

Our city’s soft infrastructure provides additional food access points. The network of 132 farmers markets serve as access points for regionally-sourced fresh fruits and vegetables. And, the network of more than 1,000 emergency food providers creates an essential safety net of support that connects some of our most vulnerable neighbors to quality, healthy food.

Given the complexity of access and affordability, MOFP launched a Food Access and Affordability workgroup last June, which convened City agencies, academic institutions, public health foundations, and community partners to coordinate information-sharing. A report later this Spring from this workgroup will outline immediate priorities. This effort is part of the Health Department’s Chronic Disease Prevention Plan and will shed light into how food pricing, retail environments, and choices and behaviors influence New Yorkers’ ability to purchase healthy food.

Factors Influencing the Price of Food

With this understanding of the City’s food system and infrastructure, I will now briefly address some of the causes of rising food prices, their impacts on City agencies, and how the City can help New Yorkers stretch their food budgets.

The rise in food prices is a complex issue that involves a mix of domestic and global factors. In the last two decades, there have been food system shocks affecting food prices and supply volatility from terrorism (e.g., 9/11), hurricanes (e.g., Irene and Sandy in particular), the COVID-19 pandemic, global conflict, and now trade tariffs. Drought, avian flu, and access to undocumented labor are contributing factors.

Climate change and extreme weather events pose additional challenges to affordability by impacting food production, storage, and distribution. Increasingly unpredictable and extreme weather conditions can both raise production costs for farmers—for irrigation, pesticides, and fertilizers—and reduce crop yields. Extreme weather events can disrupt food distribution networks and further limit the supply of fresh and available produce—all of which lead to higher food costs borne by New Yorkers. Food prices are also influenced by ripple effects from these shocks, including labor shortages, supply chain disruptions, and inflationary costs impacting every stage of food supply chains. It's often not just one factor but a combination that pushes food prices higher over time.

Generally, City policy and programs cannot address the primary drivers for price volatility, which besides the larger system shocks, are also influenced by the production and manufacturing decisions of supply chain actors, consumer demand, and by speculation in financial markets. At the City level, we do not have the ability to mitigate the impact of these costs, with the exception of the authority held by Department of Consumer and Worker Protections during a State of Emergency to enforce against price gouging. DCWP’s ability to address price gouging complaints applies to a subset of products that are deemed essential, such as milk, eggs, and bread.

Nonetheless, policy and programs that improve efficiency, expand storage capacity, and provide alternative distribution channels can have a price mitigating effect.

Agency Impacts

To turn back to the impacts of rising food prices, MOFP has been in close touch with agencies to assess the impact on meals served and their clients. While agencies are committed to maintaining their menu items, these rising food prices, especially for eggs, require staff to explore alternative solutions, including temporarily removing them from the menu.

Agencies’ food contracts account for more than food prices—they also cover logistics, labor, and meal delivery costs, all of which have risen and have put pressure on existing contracts. For example, following negotiations with its distributor, the Office of Food and Nutrition Services

(OFNS) approved an updated food distribution contract that includes a higher delivery mark-up to account for rising costs.

That said, agencies are committed to serving meals that consistently meet nutritional requirements and are closely monitoring this evolving situation to maintain the quality of meals being served.

City Programs to Support Food Budgets

While the City cannot control prices, we do administer programs that help food budgets stretch further. The NYC Health Department runs several nutrition security programs to lower barriers to fresh, quality produce for New Yorkers with low incomes. Get the Good Stuff and Groceries to Go provide discounts on fruits and vegetables at grocery stores and bodegas, and Health Bucks enable SNAP participants to access more fresh produce at all NYC farmers markets.

When New Yorkers need additional support to feed their families, they turn to the emergency food network. In FY 22, the NYC Department of Social Services transformed its 30-year-old Emergency Food Assistance Program, relaunching it as “Community Food Connection” and introducing fresh produce for the first time. In FY 24, nearly 700 food pantries and soup kitchens participated in the program, which saw more than 35 million visits and allocated more than \$43 million dollars in fresh fruits, vegetables, beans, and other staple foods.

And of course, the SNAP program, which serves roughly 1.8M New Yorkers, is the largest safety net program to provide income assistance to eligible families.

Conclusion

Rising food prices continue to pose significant challenges for food and nutrition security in NYC, making it more difficult for many residents to access fresh, healthy, and affordable food. The City remains committed to strengthening its food infrastructure and emergency food network, providing essential nutrition security programs, and serving healthy foods. That said, fluctuations in food prices are multifaceted and beyond the City’s control, largely influenced by geopolitical factors, supply chain disruptions, and local challenges and constraints. Nonetheless, we welcome this discussion and look forward to identifying opportunities for collaboration and advocacy.

Thank you for the opportunity to speak. We welcome your questions.



Written Testimony of Rachel Lyons
United Food and Commercial Workers International Union (UFCW)
Before
Committee on Oversight and Investigations and Committee for Economic Development
New York City Council
April 8, 2025

Thank you, Chair Brewer, Chair Farias and thank you to the Committee on Oversight and Investigations and the Committee for Economic Development for allowing me to submit this testimony on the city's Food Forward 10-year policy plan. I serve as the Legislative Director for the United Food and Commercial Workers International Union (UFCW) where we represent more than 1.2 million members in North America with 65,000 members in New York who work at sites across the retail, meat packing, food processing, healthcare, and cannabis industries.

This conversation about a successful food system and what it takes to make it successful is fundamentally important to members of UFCW. We urge you to include provisions that support good jobs in New York City's nearly 1000 grocery stores including food safety and delivery in your recommendations.¹ The resiliency of New York City's food system will be limited if it does not include support for the workers who help provide access to high-quality food. Worker friendly food policy ensures revenue for the city, customers for city businesses, groceries for low-income neighborhoods, and jobs for union workers.

Good jobs in grocery

Food policy that addresses access to affordable, high-quality, healthy food is of special interest to UFCW retail grocery workers. Grocery store workers are a crucial part of a healthy food supply chain; we ensure that shelves are stocked, administer SNAP, and are part of the food safety system. UFCW supports responsible policies that include labor standards that support food workers. Responsible policies are good for taxpayers, workers, and business because it ensures that companies receiving public dollars are creating quality, family-sustaining jobs.

Incredibly important here is the example of New York City's FRESH program which does not consider whether a store operates under a collective bargaining agreement or proximity to another union brick and mortar grocery store when evaluating an application.² To help ensure that tax dollars are not subsidizing non-union stores at the expense of union labor, any food policy must include labor standards and proximity considerations.

Access to healthy food is a serious challenge for many Americans, particularly those living in low-income neighborhoods, communities of color, and in food deserts. To address this food access issue, the Council should consider creating an economic development fund specifically for food retailers with collective bargaining agreements who are willing to expand into food desert communities. Not only will this make healthy food an option for those who previously did without, it will also create jobs for the community.

¹ [NYC Food by the Numbers](#)

² [Good Jobs and the New York City FRESH Program: Evaluation and Recommendations :Office of the New York City Comptroller Brad Lander](#)



The benefits of New York City's food economy are lost if the people doing the work can't earn a living wage. UFCW supports the responsible investment of public dollars in development or redevelopment in food retail.

Delivery & Food Safety

Now let's talk about food delivery and food safety. The pandemic accelerated consumer habits of ordering food to homes and has done so faster than anybody could have predicted. Nationally, online grocery sales in February 2025 were \$10.3 billion.³ Delivery sales in 2025 grew 37% to \$4.1 billion.⁴

Meat processing plants must comply with federal USDA safety regulations, grocery stores must comply with local food safety but – and this should be of tremendous concern to every policy maker – there is a lack of food safety protections that apply to the delivery of groceries from store to consumers.

Currently, there are no food safety requirements for drivers who work for third-party delivery platforms and deliver from stores to home. We encourage the Council to ensure that food originating from grocery stores is safely delivered to the front doors of consumers everywhere. To ensure food is safely delivered, UFCW supports regulations that require food delivery workers to undergo employer funded food safety training and to possess proper food safety equipment, such as cold bags.

The USDA notes that food can spoil as quickly as an hour at temperatures above 90°F.⁵ If the air conditioning in a vehicle is broken or the deliverer uses a bicycle without a cold bag, the safety of the groceries could be compromised quickly. Because of this, a grocery delivery license should also require equipment in the delivery vehicle capable of maintaining a constant, safe temperature under 40 degrees Fahrenheit for the transportation of groceries.

Food handling regulations must be extended beyond their traditional sphere of the four walls of retail food establishments, to include delivery-to-home services.

A grocery delivery license would cover delivery drivers who transport groceries in their vehicles and the cost should be borne by the employers. The elements of this license should include an active license issued by the New York City Office of Labor Policy & Standards, a signed attestation from each driver that they will maintain food protection standards, and training for each driver in the basics of food safety and handling from a credentialed provider.

Food safety is a priority for UFCW to protect both the consumer and its membership.

In conclusion, UFCW members urge this committee and the Council to incorporate strong labor standards into New York City's food policy to ensure that grocery store workers – who are essential to a successful food system – receive fair wages and protections.

³ [4 charts that show the pandemic's impact on grocery e-commerce | Grocery Dive](#)

⁴ [Trendspotting: Online grocery's strong start to 2025 | Produce News](#)

⁵ <https://ask.usda.gov/s/article/What-is-the-2-Hour-Rule-with-leaving-food-out> (“Never leave food out of refrigeration over 2 hours. If the temperature is above 90 °F, food should not be left out more than 1 hour.”)



Specifically, we are urging a policy that does not undermine union jobs in grocery stores, ensures that public investment benefits unionized retailers, and addresses food access in underserved communities through targeted economic development. Additionally, we emphasize the urgent need for food safety regulations in grocery delivery, which includes licensing, training, and proper equipment requirements for delivery workers. A resilient and effective food system must prioritize both the workers who sustain it and the consumers who rely on it.

Kommissary's Testimony to the New York City Council Committee on Oversight and Investigations and Economic Development

Hon. Gale Brewer, Chair, Committee on Oversight and Investigations
Hon. Amanda Fariás, Chair, Committee on Economic Development

April 8, 2025

Thank you, Chair Brewer and Chair Fariás, and committee members, for the opportunity to submit testimony regarding New York City's food infrastructure. My name is Eddie Song, and I am the Chief Executive Officer at Kommissary, a M/WBE food service provider committed to delivering nutritious and culturally relevant meals to food-insecure communities across New York City.

Through our contracts with NYC Health + Hospitals, Department of Youth and Community Development, and non-profits, Kommissary serves thousands of New Yorkers, ensuring that individuals in need receive high-quality, well-prepared meals that support their well-being.

Kommissary operates two major food distribution centers—our longstanding facility in Long Island City and a recently acquired, expanded facility in Hunts Point in the Bronx. Together, these strategically located centers allow us to efficiently prepare and distribute over 10,000 meals daily, including programs for the Department of Education across the city. These hubs are more than just kitchens—they are logistical centers that power our ability to respond quickly and reliably to the needs of our partners and communities.

We take immense pride in our robust distribution network and fleet of refrigerated vehicles, which are critical to ensuring that meals arrive fresh, safe, and on time. Our delivery fleet is managed with precision routing software to optimize fuel efficiency and reduce delivery times, and our team of trained drivers undergo regular quality assurance protocols to maintain the highest standards of food safety and professionalism. From our kitchens to the last mile, we are deeply committed to delivering healthy meals with dignity and care to New Yorkers in need.

We also deeply value the importance of working with partner organizations, like GrowNYC, to find opportunities where we can collaborate, share resources and use our spaces more efficiently to improve our food operations. Part of the data we collect to improve how we operate uses a multi-tiered feedback system that integrates real-time meal feedback from program staff, direct customer outreach surveys, and structured driver reports on delivery quality. All feedback is centralized and automatically organized, enabling real-time tracking, trend analysis, and data-driven decision-making to refine recipes and enhance meal quality to help us meet and go beyond our commitments to the City and those we serve.

As a M/WBE contractor, Kommissary welcomes the opportunity to expand our work throughout the City and partnership with the communities we serve to refine and enhance our food programs and food distribution network.

I want to thank the Council for acknowledging the importance of food access, especially during this time when we are seeing the cost of food skyrocket. We are committed to delivering healthy food at competitive prices, ensuring that all New Yorkers who have a need can receive meals with dignity and care.

Sincerely,

Edward ("Eddie") Song
CEO
Kommissary

Rethink Food

**Testimony from Adaeze Okoli, Chief of Staff of Rethink Food
Committee on Economic Development and Committee on Oversight and Investigations Hearing on
NYC's Food Infrastructure
Tuesday, April 8, 2025**

Majority Leader Farias, Chair Gale Brewer, and Members of the Committees on Economic Development and Oversight and Investigation,

Thank you for the opportunity to testify today. My name is Adaeze Okoli, and I serve as Chief of Staff at Rethink Food.

Since Rethink Food's inception in 2017, Rethink Food has been dedicated to creating a fairer, more sustainable food system and ensuring that every New Yorker has access to dignified, nutritious meals that reflect their cultural backgrounds.

Through our network of local independent restaurants and our Sustainable Community Kitchen, Rethink Food has delivered 40 million high-quality meals that celebrate diversity and various cultures. We've also injected \$134 million into local economies, supported 230 community organizations, and partnered with 145 local restaurants.

Our partnership with Council Members gives us keen insight into community needs, helping us ensure meals reach the families who need them the most.

This year, Rethink Food is requesting \$150,000 from the Speaker's Initiative, Welcome NYC, or Food Pantries Initiative to drive our mission forward and provide meals to communities for holiday distributions, special community-based event distributions, or emergencies that arise throughout the year, such as fires, outages, and more. We hope to count on your support.

Our collaboration with partners in government has also offered us opportunities to expand our partnerships with restaurants, a key part of NYC's food infrastructure that we are empowering to drive change by feeding New Yorkers and creating jobs in the community. While restaurants consistently rank among the top industries for creating new jobs, approximately 60% of restaurants fail within their first year, and about 80% close within five years.

To that end, Rethink is currently exploring a proposal that could mutually support the New York State restaurant and agriculture industry and non-profits while promoting less food waste and healthier food options. This would be in the form of a **federal food donation tax credit for donated meals to an independent nonprofit organization** to then distribute to communities facing food insecurity.

We believe there's a real opportunity here to incentivize even more restaurants and small businesses to make a difference by donating their surplus food. We appreciate the Council's attention to creative solutions to support our City's food infrastructure. Thank you for your partnership in feeding New Yorkers.

Rae K. Gomes

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Testimony before the Committee on Economic Development and the Committee on Oversight and Investigations- New York City’s Food Infrastructure and the Cost and Quality of Produce in NYC

4/8/25

Good afternoon Council Members,

Thank you for the opportunity to speak today. My name is Rae Gomes and I’m representing myself as a food equity consultant and community member. I’ve been involved in work around food equity for over 10 years. I’m here to offer testimony on the current state of food infrastructure and food prices in New York City, grounded in the lived realities of communities who continue to struggle with food access despite millions of dollars flowing through our emergency food system.

I want to start by pointing to several major nonprofit emergency food providers whose budgets have dramatically increased (in some cases doubled) in recent years, particularly during and after the height of the COVID-19 pandemic:

- Food Bank for New York City:
 - 2020 – \$35.4 million
 - 2021 – \$34.3 million
 - 2022 – \$97.5 million
 - 2023 – \$104 million

- City Harvest:
 - 2020 – \$209 million
 - 2021 – \$337 million
 - 2022 – \$223 million

- Campaign Against Hunger:

- 2020 – \$8.54 million
- 2021 – \$21.4 million
- 2022 – \$16.5 million
- New York Common Pantry:
 - 2019 – \$12.6 million
 - 2020 – \$17.7 million
 - 2021 – \$20.3 million
 - 2022 – \$19.1 million

These organizations have received tens—and in some cases hundreds—of millions of dollars over the last few years. Yet, for the communities they serve, little has changed. Food insecurity remains persistently high, especially in Black, Brown, immigrant, and working-class neighborhoods. This raises a critical question: **Where is the return on this investment for the people who need it most?**

This brings me to the first of two key points: **The city’s overreliance on emergency food providers has done more to stabilize their organizational budgets than to stabilize or transform community food access.** Emergency food is a stopgap solution, not a sustainable infrastructure. It doesn’t empower communities, and it doesn’t shift the root causes of food insecurity.

The second issue is the City’s tendency to swing to the opposite end of the spectrum: **supporting profit-driven food businesses, like large distributors and corporate retailers, under the assumption that they will solve our food access challenges.** One clear example is the ongoing investment and attention given to the Hunts Point Food Distribution Center. Hunts Point is located in the South Bronx, an area with 40% rate of food insecurity—one of the highest in the city. While it’s true that Hunts Point is a central hub for the city’s food supply, we have to be honest about who it really benefits. The current model prioritizes efficiency and profit margins—not equity, sustainability, or access. Upgrades to Hunts Point may move food more quickly, but that doesn’t mean it moves food more fairly.

The City must begin to distinguish between profit-based food distribution models and those that are truly invested in **building community-centered food infrastructure.** Supermarkets and bodegas are, at the end of the day, businesses. Their mission is to generate revenue, not to ensure that families in food apartheid neighborhoods have affordable, healthy, and culturally relevant food.

We need to shift our investments toward **multi-stakeholder coalitions** that center community food access and include residents, public health advocates, food justice organizations, and policy leaders. We need to uplift models that are *values-driven*, not profit-driven. That means more robust support for:

- **Cooperatives**
- **CSAs (Community Supported Agriculture)**
- **Farmers' markets and farmstands**
- **Community-based food hubs**

These models don't just feed people—they build local economies, strengthen social networks, and give communities agency over their own food systems. They also tend to reinvest in local farmers, workers, and food entrepreneurs in ways the industrial food system does not.

Finally, I want to address the City's continued promotion of food waste reduction as a primary strategy to combat food insecurity. While reducing waste is important for environmental reasons, we must acknowledge that these efforts are fundamentally **reactive and unsustainable**. Relying on surplus from a broken food system is not the same as building a just one. It's a band-aid, not a solution.

To summarize: New York City has poured hundreds of millions of dollars into emergency food providers and food businesses, yet food insecurity remains unchanged. It is time for a paradigm shift. We need to prioritize models that are rooted in justice, in community, and in sustainability. We need a food infrastructure that is built not around charity or profit, but around equity and self-determination.

Thank you for your time and consideration.

Hello:

I am writing to add my testimony to the importance of having a certified school librarian in every school. As a New York City Public School librarian for the past 17 years, I have an obvious stake in the game, but for good reason.

When I joined the New York City Department of Education, there were about 700 librarians. Our bi-annual conferences were packed, full of librarians ready to learn and network and bring exciting ideas back to our school communities. Slowly, particularly with recession era budget cuts happening, our numbers began to dwindle. During my tenure as the president of the New York City School Librarian's Association, starting in 2011, we began discussing advocating for librarianship—how can we get the NYCDOE to honor the New York State mandate which insists all secondary schools must have a school librarian. This fall, at a meeting for Manhattan school librarians, there were about 45 of us in an auditorium. To see that not only have we made no strides toward reaching our goal, but that our numbers have shrunk dramatically, to be under 300 certified librarians in the entire City, is alarming.

School librarians are more than just folks who check out books. School librarians create a safe space. School librarians carefully curate collections of materials that allow each student and staff member in their school community to see themselves in the books, to know that they belong and that they are valued. School librarians allow students the space and the resources to pursue their interests and dreams and safely explore new ideas. Over puzzles, crafts, maker spaces and more, students can find a community. School librarians provide so much more than books and the room that houses them. School librarians are certified teachers who promote digital literacy, teach students how to access reliable information and help prepare them for college and careers beyond high school. Because the vast majority of my students have never had a librarian before, I am teaching them how to be a library user, how to access research databases, how to create properly formatted citations, how to use AI as a tool to support their work rather than blindly copying and pasting information they find.

The library is a vital part of a school community and hundreds of thousands of students are not being taught these skills and are not being provided with this safe space. Many teachers have never worked at a school with a school librarian. They then become administrators who have never worked with a school librarian. They do not understand the value a school librarian brings to their staff. I understand budgeting decisions are difficult, but I do not understand not prioritizing a staff member who serves every student in the building, who provides invaluable access to books, resources, technology, grants, and community partnerships that benefit the entire school community. We do our students and staff a disservice when we do not prioritize libraries and literacy. No amount of classroom book carts can replace a hand-picked recommendation from a certified school librarian. It is time that we follow the state mandates. It is time that we push beyond that and show our youngest students that they are deserving of a school librarian too. Do the right thing.

Thank you for reading,
Teresa Tartaglione
New York City Public School parent (PS 122Q and PS 85Q)
Campus Librarian
The Martin Luther King, Jr. Educational Campus

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