



Testimony of Joel Berg, Chief Executive Officer

Hunger Free America

Hearing Before The New York City Council General Welfare Committee

Oversight: Hunger in New York City

January 25, 2017

I, Joel Berg, Chief Executive Officer of Hunger Free America, am testifying on behalf of the approximately 1.4 million New Yorkers who live in households that can't afford enough food. Formerly called the New York City Coalition Against Hunger, Hunger Free America changed its name in 2016 to better reflect the broad scope of our national work. This was also accompanied with intensifying our local efforts under the new name, Hunger Free New York City. I want to first thank Chairman Levin for his work on behalf of people in need as well as to the Committee for inviting me to testify here today.

Hunger in New York City

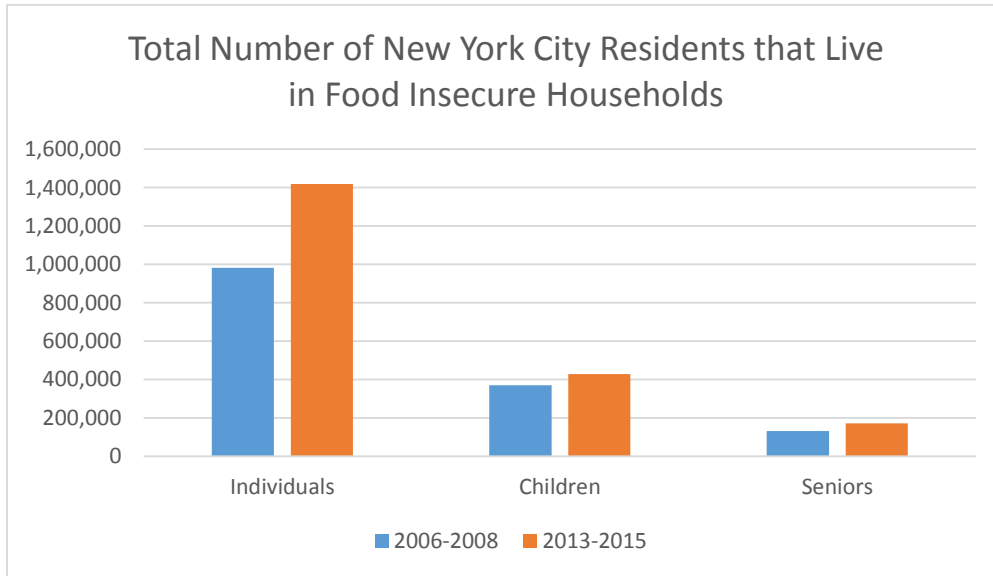
While food insecurity nationwide dropped in 2015 due to the improving economy, and there are some initial signs that it may be starting to decline in New York City, it will not be clear as to whether or not hunger has significantly decreased until the 2016 data is released by the federal government later this year. However, 2013-2015 average levels of hunger and food insecurity were at virtually the same levels as they were at the height of the recession seven years ago.

Fully, an average of 1.4 million New York City residents lived in food insecure homes between 2013 and 2015; a number 45% greater than the level of food insecurity from 2006-2008 (980,000 residents). Additionally, approximately one in five children and one in eight seniors were food insecure between 2013 and 2015.

To add to this, the reality is that nearly half of all food insecure New York State and New York City residents live in households with at least one person working. In 2013-2015, 45 percent of all food insecure New York City residents, lived in such households that included at least one working person.

Total Number of New York City Residents Living in Food Insecure Households

	Individuals	Children	Seniors
2006-2008	981,884	369,415	132,113
2013-2015	1,418,297	429,357	171,197

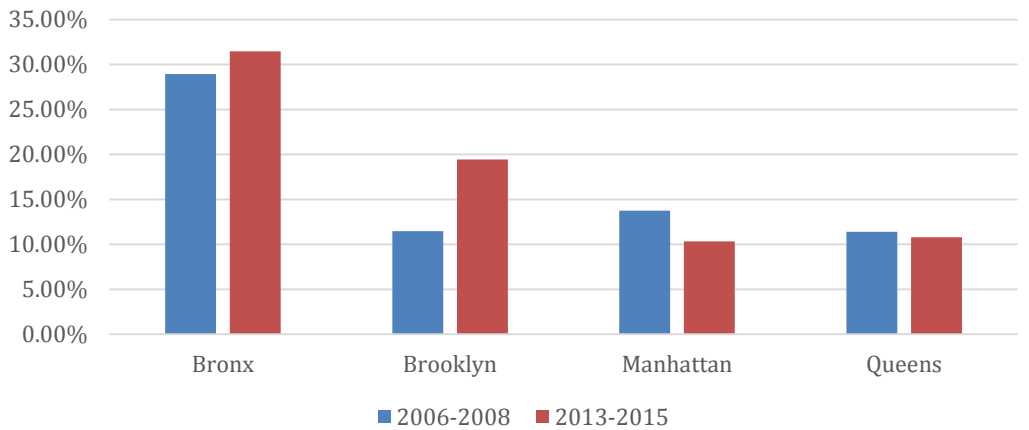


Bronx continued to be the hungriest borough, with 31 percent of its residents overall, and 37 percent of its children, living in food insecure homes in 2013-2015.

Percentage of New York City Residents Living in Food Insecure Households by Borough

	Bronx	Brooklyn	Manhattan	Queens
<i>2006-2008</i>	28.93%	11.46%	13.75%	11.38%
<i>2013-2015</i>	31.46%	19.44%	10.32%	10.78%

Percent of NYC Residents that Live in Food Insecure Households by Borough



Unfortunately, these sustained levels were compounded by significant participation decreases in essential federal nutrition programs, such as the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP). The Human Resources Administration data indicates roughly an 11 percent drop in SNAP participation from 1,898,028 in December 2012 to 1,698,133 in November 2016. In addition, according to the New York State Office of Temporary and Disability Assistance, the average monthly SNAP benefit declined from \$162 in December of 2012 to \$146 in October of 2016. That means, as a result of federal cuts, the average SNAP benefit in NYC declined from a paltry \$1.80 per meal to an even paltrier \$1.62 per meal.

Combining the declining SNAP caseload with even lower average benefit allotments means that overall federal SNAP spending in New York City declined from an estimated \$3.6 billion in 2012 to an estimated \$2.9 billion in 2016, a \$700 million drop. Furthermore, it is estimated that over 500,000 eligible low income New Yorkers are not receiving valuable benefits that would help them and to which they are entitled. The main barriers to claiming them are stigma, confusion, concerns about the process, lack of awareness, and misinformation.

It is no surprise, then, that the plight of hunger and poverty are still felt on the ground at emergency food programs, as shown by Hunger Free NYC's Annual Hunger Survey report. It found that New York City's food pantries and soup kitchens faced an increased demand of nine percent in 2016, on top of an increased demand of five percent in 2015, seven percent in 2014, 10 percent in 2013, five percent in 2012, 12 percent in 2011, seven percent in 2010, and 20 percent in 2009.

Over One in Five New York City Children – Nearly Half a Million – Are Food Insecure

Citywide in 2013-2015, about 429,000 children – or one in five – struggled against hunger. A total 16% greater than the 369,000 NYC children that lived in food insecure homes between 2006 and 2008.

To be well read, children must first be well fed. To be schooled, they must be fueled. The United States suffers from high rates of childhood food insecurity and lags behind in educational performance, two highly interconnected problems. Food deprivation in the world's wealthiest nation is not only morally unacceptable, but it also severely hampers children's emotional, intellectual, and physical development. Child hunger costs the U.S. economy at least \$28 billion per year because poorly nourished kids perform less well in school and require far more long-term health care spending. Solving this problem will cost far less than not solving it.

School meals are a critical component to fighting child hunger. In the spring of 2015, New York City's Mayor Bill de Blasio announced the introduction of "breakfast after the bell" – or serving breakfast to all kids in their classrooms or via "grab and go" – for all stand-alone elementary schools, which serve about 339,000 students. The new policy is a great opportunity for the largest school district in the nation, to increase the number of students who begin the day with a nutritious breakfast, where previously, only about 30 percent of students financially eligible to receive free or reduced-price lunches were participating in the school breakfast program.

Likewise, instituting other universal meal programs, such as the Community Eligibility Provision (CEP) program, can increase the number of children receiving nutritious, affordable school meals each day. Because of Community Eligibility, during the 2015-16 school year more than 18,000 high-poverty schools served free breakfast and lunch to more than 8.6 million low-income students across the country. Expanding the service of universal lunch, which was introduced by the City Council in 2014, to all stand-alone middle schools, should be on the agenda.

It's not difficult to connect the dots – with kids out of school and missing out on the healthy, affordable meals provided there, family expenditures increase. And for many homes, this means cutting back on other necessities. Summer meals programs can make a huge difference, but only if children are able to access them. However, of the children who depend on free or reduced-price lunch during the school year, only a fraction are participating in the summer meals program.

Nationally, only about 16.7 percent of students who received free or reduced-price lunches also participated in the Summer Food Service Program (or Summer Meals) during the summer of 2015. According to the Food Research Action Center (FRAC), while amongst one of the top performing, this number was only a little over a quarter of students in New York State. The City, however, is unique in the some of the challenges it faces with gaps in the SFSP service provision.

Whereas, outside of New York City, lack of access to transportation is often stated as the greatest barrier to participation in summer meals; this is not where we face hurdles. Based on a 2015 survey we did, convenience and not knowing hours, locations, and additional key information about programs were the top factors in determining whether parents and caregivers do or do not

take their children to Summer Meals sites. The City can redouble its efforts to spread the word about this important program and expand the number of locations where the meals are served in order to ensure that children do not go hungry when school is out.

One of the most effective programs that helps feed millions of impoverished children – including about six million in 2015 alone, according to USDA – is the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children, or commonly known as WIC. Women enrolled in WIC purchase the healthy food that they need for themselves while they are pregnant and for their young children in their formative years. The program also provides other tools, such as nutrition counseling and assistance with lactation and/or formula. These benefits can ensure families that their kids are guaranteed the proper nutrients so that they can meet all of their developmental milestones.

Percent of New York City Children that Live in Food Insecure Households by Borough

	Bronx	Brooklyn	Manhattan	Queens
2006-2008	36.47%	14.54%	23.75%	12.45%
2013-2015	36.98%	25.41%	10.85%	16.04%

Over One in Eight New York Seniors (Over The Age of 60) Are Food Insecure

In New York City, roughly 171,197 senior residents lived in food insecure households between 2013 and 2015. These numbers, are still at higher levels than they were prior to the recession between 2006-2008, where an average of 132,113 NYC seniors were living in food insecure households, representing a 30 percent difference.

Living in an urban environment presents unique challenges for seniors. Though slightly below the national levels of food insecurity and poverty, the struggles that New York City and State seniors face should not be taken lightly.

The alarming number of struggling seniors should alarm us all. Hunger and poverty for older Americans presents a unique set of challenges with decreased mobility, physical disability, possible dietary restrictions/needs, and the frequent reliance on additional outside support. Living even adequately may be quite difficult for an older individual who may be alone, homebound, and retired or unable to work (for whatever reason). And, just like other federal benefit recipients, senior citizens must comply with the arduous paperwork and bureaucratic requirements to apply/recertify for each individual assistance program. There are some jurisdictions, like New York City, that have implemented administrative processes to ease this burden (e.g. allowing the elderly and disabled to recertify every other year, rather than annually and providing applications that can be completed by telephone, rather than in person). And this should be the norm, not the exception.

Some benefits that seniors receive also face the very real threats of budgetary cuts or of funding even running completely dry. In as prosperous a location as New York, and, for that matter, in

one of the wealthiest countries in the world, no senior citizen who worked hard his or her entire life should have to live in poverty and fight to survive.

Percent of New York City Seniors that Live in Food Insecure Households by Borough

	Bronx	Brooklyn	Manhattan	Queens
2006-2008	20.03%	9.34%	11.25%	6.26%
2013-2015	22.48%	17.13%	10.81%	10.21%

Mitigated Changes – Calm before the Impending Storm

The drop in US hunger was likely caused by a variety of factors, including a decrease in unemployment and increase in wages (some of which was caused by minimum wage hikes in key states, such as California and New York), as well as increasing participation of low-income children in the federal school breakfast and summer meals programs – all of which were a result of deliberate and effective government policies. This is the most recent proof that public policy matters – big time.

In contrast to these progressive advances in New York, the federal government may soon make changes that will throw us all backwards, dramatically *increasing* hunger. We all need to fight back on the national front. That’s why the New York City Coalition Against Hunger expanded its policy and program work nationwide, and changed our name earlier in 2016 to Hunger Free America.

After the 2016 general election, we analyzed USDA caseload data for the federal Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), formerly called the Food Stamps Program. Disproving the stereotype that SNAP recipients are all in ‘inner cities’ or blue states, we found that, out of the top ten SNAP-utilizing states, eight voted for Trump in the general election. This proves that large numbers of citizens who rely on federal nutrition assistance programs live in rural, mostly white, areas. With 44 million Americans – living in suburban, rural, and urban areas of every state – relying on SNAP, the ‘they’ is really ‘us.’ America can only be truly great if it feeds all its own residents, which is why we hope that President-elect Donald Trump commits to ending US hunger by creating jobs, raising wages, and bolstering the federal food safety net. At a bare minimum, we hope President-elect Trump pledges to stop House Speaker Paul Ryan’s misguided plans to again slash food aid to vulnerable Americans in order to pay for more tax cuts for the mega-rich.

One major danger lurking in the shadows of the new presidential administration is the threat of block-granting federal nutrition assistance programs. Block-granting these programs would not only restrict and limit funding to hundreds of thousands of New Yorkers that rely on them, but would also undercut the efforts this City has made towards increasing access to benefits and nutrition programs. These are proven methods to enable healthy growth in children and provide a solid economic return to our local communities. Any cuts made rejects the conservative imperatives of protecting families and promoting local economic growth.

The soaring hunger levels in New York and throughout our country harm health, hamper education, trap families in poverty, fuel obesity, eviscerate hope, and thus drags down our entire economy and places our national security at risk. Hunger harms us all. But, ending hunger *lifts* us all. We must build a grassroots movement and force our political system to enact the economic policies and social programs necessary to end US hunger once and for all.

Partnership with the Robin Hood Foundation

In January 2017 The Robin Hood Foundation, along with a coalition of public, corporate and non-profit organizations launched a bold poverty-fighting effort. Hunger Free America is honored to be a partner in that effort.

The initiative aims to unlock as much as \$500 million in mostly federal funds for struggling New Yorkers. This campaign aims to help our fellow New Yorkers who are entitled to these benefits, but have not yet claimed them. The funds come from four federal programs – EITC, SNAP, CTC and WIC. EITC: a tax credit that could be worth over \$4,000 a year. CTC: a tax credit for parents that could be worth \$1,000 per child a year. WIC: a program for new moms and children that could be worth over \$1,800 annually. SNAP: a food program that could be worth over \$5,580 annually.

Robin Hood, the largest poverty-fighting organization in New York, is the catalyst and coordinator of this effort –bringing together partners across public and private sectors – to help New Yorkers find a way out of poverty. All of these institutions are receiving the full cooperation of the City and State of New York during this two year campaign running through 2017 and 2018.

New Yorkers can receive very helpful benefits worth thousands of extra dollars. It can be as easy as calling 311 and asking for SNAP, EITC, or WIC. A single, part-time worker making \$10K might receive a 5% year-end bonus by filing their taxes, and might receive \$140/month from SNAP to pay for food. A family of four could receive upwards of \$10K or more across these benefits. A new mother could receive \$200/month for her baby’s food and formula

It’s worth noting that many well-known, accomplished people have received benefits that helped them when they needed it. Here are some examples:

Viola Davis, Oscar-winning actress; Taraji P. Henson, actress in Empire; Mike McCue, CEO of Flipboard;

Jan Koum, CEO of WhatsApp; Bruce Springsteen, musician; Moby, performer; Oprah Winfrey; Whoopi Goldberg;

Iyanla Vanzant, life coach and best-selling author; Scarlett Johansson, actress; Carmelo Anthony and Shaquille

O’Neal, NBA stars; Lloyd Blankfein, CEO of Goldman Sachs; Howard Schultz, CEO and chairman of Starbucks;

Andy Grove, who was the founder and CEO of Intel; and Tom Hanks, the actor (community college).

Coalition partners and individual volunteers are participating in this significant movement that aims to lift hundreds of thousands of our neighbors out of poverty. Learn more about how to help at robinhood.org. This campaign will be unprecedented in scale and ambition. The coalition is using four key strategies to provide more people the benefits they've earned.

1. Tapping technology

We're using data analytics and behavioral economics to find those who need help and to assist them in securing it.

2. Building the largest coalition of its kind

Capitalizing on the City's efforts to expand benefits access, the coalition galvanizes resources, both citywide and neighborhood-based. With Interpublic Group's help, we're launching a major mass media campaign focused on increasing awareness about these benefits and catalyzing action. With support from dozens of corporations, foundations, membership organizations, and leading citizens we aim to reach hundreds of thousands of New Yorkers. With community based organizations, we're expanding service capacity to ensure that anyone who wants help receives it.

3. Simplifying the process

We're transforming the experience. We recognize navigating the process to access benefits can be difficult, so we're working hand-in-hand with the City and CBOs to make it as simple as possible. Specifically, we're:

- Expanding phone-based step-by-step enrollment assistance to those who need it
- Encouraging the city's adoption of mobile-ready applications
- Simplifying screening to move eligible people through the application process more quickly
- Using new techniques to ensure people who start the application finish it

4. Taking it to scale

The campaign will create a poverty-fighting initiative that can serve as a playbook for cities across the nation. There's \$40 billion nationwide of unclaimed funds related to these four programs available to help Americans in need.

Other Changes and Solutions

We must ensure an adequate nutrition assistance safety net and boost upward mobility through strengthening the benefits of and expanding access to SNAP, school breakfast, school lunch, WIC, and summer meals, We must make these robust and effective programs available, free of stigma and hassle, for everyone in need.

We commend Commissioner Steven Banks and his staff at the Human Resources Administration on their efforts for not only treating low-income New Yorkers, and the advocates who represent them, as trusted partners, but for significantly improving technical and service provision standards. The introduction and implementation of various outreach efforts, application processing units, and internal procedures have significantly increased access to and the retention of benefits, thus decreasing bureaucratic inefficiencies. Requesting waivers from the State to eliminate application and recertification barriers, streamlining methods of communication for claimants for phone interviews, and eliminating redundancies on both application and retention sides not only assists claimants but saves the city and state time and money. Their willingness to ensure quality assurance is also displayed through their direct discourse with community based efforts and efforts to analytically evaluate what barriers to benefits may or may not exist.

We must ensure that these efforts on HRA's behalf continue. While the implementation of the on-demand phone interviewing process for recertification has rolled out in all five boroughs, many of our clients report having to wait up to 2 hours on hold, sometimes more, to complete their interview. Senior staff at HRA have acknowledged this as a serious issue that is being internally address, we would just like to encourage that this process be expedited as soon as possible. Technological improvements can only be beneficial if they are being accessed and utilized in an effective and efficient manner

Unfortunately, while there are 1.69 million recipients of SNAP in New York City, there are still approximately 500,000 eligible New Yorkers not receiving SNAP. The public, corporate and non-profit sectors could strategically work together to unlock as much as \$500 million in mostly federal funds for struggling New Yorkers who are entitled to these benefits, but have not yet claimed them. Efforts could additionally be made to find administrative waivers to enable better access to SNAP for students pursuing higher education full time.

We also commend the Department of Education and School Food on their efforts in improving nutrition standards and the utilization of meals served to New York City school children. Access to in-classroom breakfast and universal school lunches at standalone elementary and middle school, respectively, has certainly improved the educational experience afforded to these children. Though many efforts have been made to increase access and strengthen outreach, there are still some actions that could be taken to make further improvements. Mayor de Blasio could expand universal school lunches into other schools throughout the City in his upcoming Executive Budget. Moreover, School Food could also work strategically with community based organizations, such as ourselves, to monitor and assess where improvements could be made to the Summer Food Service Program.

Hunger Free New York City/America recognizes that change does not happen overnight, especially with city bureaucracies the size of the Department of Education, and HRA, but with the number of people who need assistance, we are keenly aware that with each day that passes, people in need are waiting for benefits that could make the difference between feeding their family or going hungry.

Conclusion

Over the last few years under the de Blasio administration, New York City has made progress in the fight against hunger because we have made a concerted effort to do so. We acknowledge those efforts, as it is society's duty to care for its most vulnerable. Through continued effort New York City can continue to be more effective at assisting those in need.