Testimony of Mr. Joel Berg
Chief Executive Officer, Hunger Free America

For Hearing on “The Changing Market for Food Delivery”

Before the New York City Council Committee on Small Business General
June 27, 2019

I am Joel Berg, Chief Executive Officer of Hunger Free America, a nationwide direct service and advocacy organization based in New York City. I thank the committee for holding this hearing.

Background on Still Sky-High Food Insecurity and Food Deserts in New York City

Hunger Free America’s 2018 New York City and State report on hunger, based on our analysis of federal food insecurity data, found:

• In New York City, the number of people living in food insecure households – unable to afford an adequate supply of food – decreased by 22 percent during the past six years, declining from 1.4 million people between 2012-2014 to 1.09 million between 2015-2017; however, the number is still 22 percent higher than the level before the recession of 0.892 million between 2005-2007, and one in eight city residents still struggles against hunger. We must not accept mass deprivation in the wealthiest nation in world history as any sort of “new normal”. Hunger is unacceptable in any society, but it’s particularly outrageous in a nation as wealthy as the United States or in a city as wealthy as New York.

• Between 2015-2017, 12.8 percent of the city’s overall population suffered from food insecurity, including 18 percent of all children, 8.9 percent of all employed adults, and 10.9 percent of all seniors.

• The Bronx remains New York City’s hungriest borough overall with more than one in four Bronx residents (26 percent) experiencing food insecurity, including the highest rates of hunger among children, working adults and senior citizens; more than 37 percent of all children, nearly 17 percent of working adults, and almost 24 percent of seniors throughout the borough experience food insecurity.

• The number of children living in food insecure households in New York City is not decreasing as quickly as the overall number of food insecure people. While the number of
food insecure individuals in New York City decreased by 22 percent from 2012-2014 to 2015-2017, the number of food insecure children (324,432 in 2015-2017) fell by only 16 percent. Conversely, the number of food insecure working adults (351,912 in 2015-2017) experienced a larger drop of 26 percent in the same time period, likely due to the minimum wage increase.

- While food insecurity among working adults is in decline throughout New York City, most likely due to minimum wage increases, the area is still facing a “working hungry epidemic.” The number of adults working but still struggling against hunger between 2015-2017 was 351,912 in New York City, 666,852 in New York State, and 692,937 in the New York Metropolitan region.

**Table 1 – Food Insecurity in New York City**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>NYC Citywide</th>
<th>Bronx</th>
<th>Brooklyn</th>
<th>Manhattan</th>
<th>Queens</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2015-17</td>
<td>1,090,936 (12.8%)</td>
<td>290,469 (26.3%)</td>
<td>368,799 (11.5%)</td>
<td>180,326 (11.3%)</td>
<td>202,417 (8.7%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2012-14</td>
<td>1,403,496 (16.9%)</td>
<td>396,326 (29.6%)</td>
<td>569,659 (20.3%)</td>
<td>227,261 (13.6%)</td>
<td>192,416 (8.4%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2005-07</td>
<td>892,214 (12.1%)</td>
<td>246,128 (20.6%)</td>
<td>211,988 (9.5%)</td>
<td>179,016 (13.5%)</td>
<td>200,366 (8.8%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Even if people could afford nutritious food, it is often simply unavailable in their neighborhoods. Low-income neighborhoods where it is difficult to find fresh and healthy food are increasingly referred to as “food deserts.” The report “Measuring Food Deserts in New York City’s Low-Income Neighborhoods” (Cynthia Gordon, Marnie Purciel-Hill, Nirupa R. Ghai, Leslie Kaufman, Regina Graham, Gretchen Van Wye) also found that the highest concentrations of food deserts are “within East and Central Harlem and North and Central Brooklyn—areas with the highest proportions of Black residents and the lowest median income.”

For a community to have good nutrition, four things must happen: food must be affordable; food must be physically available; individuals and families must have enough education to know how to eat healthier; and they must have the facilities necessary to prepare their meals. If you don’t have all four legs of this table, the table will collapse. Yet all too often projects only focus on one of the four legs. Many programs provide nutritional education by lecturing people that they should eat better, but don’t make food more available nor more affordable, therefore they are destined to fail in meeting their goals. Sometimes food is brought into low-income neighborhoods but at prices too high for most people to afford: that won’t work either. The only way to truly succeed is to focus on all four aspects of this problem at once.

**Online SNAP Pilot Project**

In April of 2018, the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) announced a joint pilot project between their department and select food retailers to allow – for the first time ever – low-income
families to use their Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program benefits (SNAP for short, formerly called Food Stamps) to order groceries online and then have them delivered to their doors. This pilot program is beginning in New York City and will eventually be rolled-out to other cities and states.

The pilot will test both online ordering and payment: SNAP participants will be able to use their benefits to purchase eligible food items, but will not be able to use SNAP benefits to pay for any delivery charges. If the prices for products and deliveries in this pilot project are affordable to SNAP recipients, then this project can completely revolutionize food access for low-income Americans by making it much easier for them to obtain healthy food. This effort is particularly important because so many low-income Americans are disabled, elderly, or live in neighborhoods without easy access to healthy food at prices they can afford. If this project works as intended and is effectively rolled out to the rest of the nation, including rural areas, it has the potential to eventually wipe out food deserts in America. This would be a monumental achievement and we thank USDA and the food retailers for taking this historic step.

We strongly urge families who are in New York City who currently receive SNAP benefits to check the retailers’ websites and see if the prices, selection of food products, and delivery fees work for them; if so we urge them to test out these new avenues of food purchasing. We will be in close communication with low-income New Yorkers to obtain their feedback on how well this pilot is working for them.