



## Joint Legislative Budget Hearing on Human Services

### Testimony of Joel Berg, CEO of Hunger Free America

February 5<sup>th</sup>, 2026

My name is Joel Berg, CEO of Hunger Free America, a nationwide direct service and advocacy organization that is headquartered in New York. Even before the recent spike in hunger due to inflation, and federal cuts, about 2.4 million state residents, including nearly 650,000 children, lived in food insecure homes, unable to always afford an adequate supply of food. I am honored to submit this testimony on their behalf.

Our message is simple: New Yorkers face a massive hunger and food insecurity crises statewide, made worse by the recent passage of H.R.1, which aims to systematically remove federal nutrition program participants. With nearly three million New Yorkers utilizing SNAP, these cuts will immediately impact children, seniors, and individuals with disabilities and their food security. Specially, the federal cuts in H.R.1 will threaten SNAP access for over 300,000 New Yorkers through the expansion of time limits, endanger SNAP eligibility for 40,000 immigrants who legally reside in New York, and transfer \$200 million in SNAP administrative costs onto states and counties. This massive crisis requires serious, comprehensive support from the state government.

In the last few years, the State has tended to address this crisis in a mostly superficial matter, enacting high-profile, but rather substantively superficial, increases in funding for food charities, which address only a tiny portion of the problem. **The State has been acting as if it is mostly a food distribution crisis, when, in fact, it is a much broader problem of lack of affordability for basic costs of living, massive poverty, and historically high inequality of wealth.**

If the State were truly serious about reducing hunger statewide, it would:

- 1) Significantly raise the minimum wage, including for tipped workers, and increase the EITC.
- 2) Dramatically reduce the costs for quality housing.

- 3) Ensure all New Yorkers obtain free or very affordable health care, childcare, and public transportation.
- 4) Authorize, fund, and implement a government-wide “Assets Empowerment/Middle-Class Wealth Generation Agenda” across multiple state agencies. This will dramatically increase economic opportunity and mobility by enabling more families to transition from owing and paying interest on non-productive debts to owning assets such as first homes, small businesses, and savings accounts that can earn interest, increase in value, and/or provide profits. Stop the penalization of hard work – Enact initiatives to eliminate, or at least reduce, “benefits cliffs” in which workers who get raises or work more hours are punished by having their governmental benefits cut or stopped entirely just when they start doing a little better.

**Beyond those broad steps to reduce poverty and expand economic opportunity, the most cost-effective thing the State can do, by far, is to increase participation in and otherwise strengthen federally funded nutrition assistance programs like SNAP, WIC, school breakfasts, and Summer EBT.**

The most impactful way for the state to fight hunger is to **increase SNAP participation through the Nutrition Outreach and Education Program (NOEP)**, New York’s network of SNAP navigators. They will play a critical role in helping New Yorkers access and maintain SNAP benefits amid federal policy changes, but without additional state investment to backfill federal cuts, many communities will lose SNAP navigators when they are needed most. We urge the Legislature to fund NOEP at \$8.5M to sustain access to SNAP navigators statewide.

The State Legislature must also provide \$30M in supplemental **WIC funding to ensure local agencies can serve all eligible families seeking services** and reach more of the approximately 200,000 eligible but unenrolled New Yorkers.

Additionally, we must ensure a **\$100 per month minimum SNAP benefit**, introduced in the legislature in both houses of the State Legislature in January 2025. Raising the SNAP minimum benefit could increase SNAP participation rates, helping draw down more federal dollars into our state while also ensuring a more adequate floor in light of proposed cuts to SNAP from Congress.

The State Legislature should also **invest \$244M to launch state-funded food benefits for non-citizen households with children**—in alignment with recommendations from the Child Poverty Reduction Advisory Council—as well as for immigrant groups recently excluded from SNAP through H.R.1. Federal SNAP rules exclude people based solely on immigration status. As a result, up to 673,000 New Yorkers are shut out of SNAP even though they live, work, and pay taxes here, and many of those New Yorkers would otherwise meet the income levels to be eligible for SNAP. In July 2025, H.R.1 made things worse, cutting off an additional 41,000 New Yorkers from food assistance by limiting eligibility for refugees, asylees, and other humanitarian immigrants.

Additionally, we need to implement a comprehensive plan to help SNAP recipients meet expanded new work reporting requirements, including **funding nonprofits to help SNAP**

**ABAWDs meet the new work requirements** through disability screenings, work placements, job trainings, and volunteer activities.

The State should also greatly accelerate plans for the implementation of the NYS Integrated Eligibility System (IES) improvements and **rapidly enable joint digital applications for many benefits, including SNAP and WIC**, making it easier for eligible participants to access benefits.

The Legislature needs to **close loopholes in the State school breakfast mandate** that allows half the students who get school lunches not to obtain school breakfasts. The funding for school breakfast programs is provided federally.

The State should **fully fund both HPNAP and Nourish New York at \$75M each**. The Hunger Prevention and Nutrition Assistance Program (HPNAP) supports a statewide network of food banks, pantries, shelters, and community-based organizations working on the frontlines of hunger, allowing the network to distribute 50 million pounds of food last year. Nourish New York enables emergency food providers to purchase nutritious and culturally relevant food directly from New York based farmers, producers and vendors, supporting over 4,000 farmers with more than \$260 million in direct purchases used to feed our communities.

The Legislature must support the Executive Budget proposal to **transition to more secure, chip-enabled EBT cards**, and ensure funding for this priority remains in the final budget. EBT skimming is an appalling form of theft. Thieves steal card information using hidden devices on point-of-sale systems. When a family goes to use their SNAP benefits to buy groceries, they discover the funds have been stolen, through no fault of their own. While transitioning to chip-enabled cards is a good first step, we must also move towards cardless purchases, which would further reduce fraud, limit cards lost in the mail, and save taxpayers even more over time.

Lastly, the Legislature must **invest \$6M to sustain and expand Double Up Food Bucks NY (DUFBNY)** to meet New York residents' urgent demand for healthy, affordable food. DUFBNY is a proven, innovative food access model that offers a dollar-for-dollar match when SNAP users purchase fresh produce, up to \$20 - \$50 per day depending on retail type.

### **Background on The Current State of Hunger in New York State**

- According to USDA data, NY's change in food insecurity from 2019-2021 to 2022-2024 was an increase of 3.7 percentage points, which is higher than the national average of 2.9 percentage points.
- 14.0% of New York State residents lived in food insecure households from 2022-2024, according to USDA data.
- Across New York City, 14.3% of the population, or 1.2 million people, lived in food insecure households between 2021 and 2023, according to USDA data. The Bronx is New York City's hungriest borough in terms of prevalence, with 19.1% of residents (227,086 people) living in food insecure households. Queens contains the highest number

of individuals living in food insecure households, reaching 310,310 people between 2021 and 2023.

- In a new study by Hunger Free America, a nonpartisan nonprofit, they found that 75% of New York State families earning less than \$100,000 annually faced higher costs of living in the past year. Half of these families said that it was harder for them to afford the amount and quality of food they and/or their household needed.
- In a separate study, Hunger Free America found that 76% of New York State's charitable food pantries and soup kitchens now lack adequate resources to meet the growing demand for food.

At the same time, hundreds of thousands of New York residents eligible for federally funded benefits do not receive them. The best under-participation estimates that we have for SNAP that are official are old (for 2018, pre-pandemic). For technical reasons we would be glad to discuss; we believe USDA's estimates, even in 2018, undercounted those who are eligible but did not then receive SNAP. But even if USDA's numbers were correct, that still meant that 1 in 10 people overall, 25 percent of working people, and 30 percent of older New York State residents who were eligible for SNAP did not get it.

As for federally funded WIC benefits (for pregnant women and children under five), as of 2021, USDA estimated that whopping 45 percent of the pregnant women and children under five eligible for WIC statewide did not get it. Unlike SNAP, WIC has no immigration restrictions in the program and has slightly higher income eligibility than SNAP, so this under-participation in WIC is especially harmful.

We hope you can take all or some of these actions rapidly. Thank you for the opportunity to submit testimony.