



**Testimony Submitted by  
Chef Gregory Silverman, CEO, West Side Campaign Against Hunger  
For the General Welfare Hearing on the FY25 NYC Budget**

**March 11th, 2024**

Thank you to General Welfare Committee Chair Diana Ayala for holding today's budget hearing and the opportunity to submit this testimony. My name is Chef Greg Silverman, CEO of the West Side Campaign Against Hunger (WSCAH), an anti-hunger organization that, for 45 years, has been focused on providing access to large quantities of healthy, fresh produce and direct benefits enrollment to New Yorkers in need. Last year alone WSCAH provided support to 80,000 NYC customers, which included the distribution of over 2.2 million pounds of fresh produce - over 50% of all food we give out. Decades ago, WSCAH created the customer choice pantry model in the basement of a church on 86th St and Broadway that has been the gold standard for pantry service. We have since expanded ideas of choice to focus on what our customers demand and deserve...choice of not just apples or bananas but of location of service, delivery models, and time spent securing food.

And this choice is not just an economic win for all, it's a health win for our entire sector. *This year, research conducted via Columbia University Irving Medical Center through Dr. Jennifer Woo Baidal in partnership with WSCAH food distributions was published in Nutrients. Through a longitudinal study of a clinical-community emergency food assistance program during COVID-19, participants experienced improvements in household food security associated with increased frequency of vegetable and fruit consumption. **These findings are the first to support that an improvement in food security is linked to increased frequency of vegetable and fruit consumption, thus supporting the use of food security outcomes in future interventions to reduce diet-related chronic diseases. Investing directly in nutritious food for food pantries can lead to improved well-being for New Yorkers and therefore decrease health costs in the long term.***

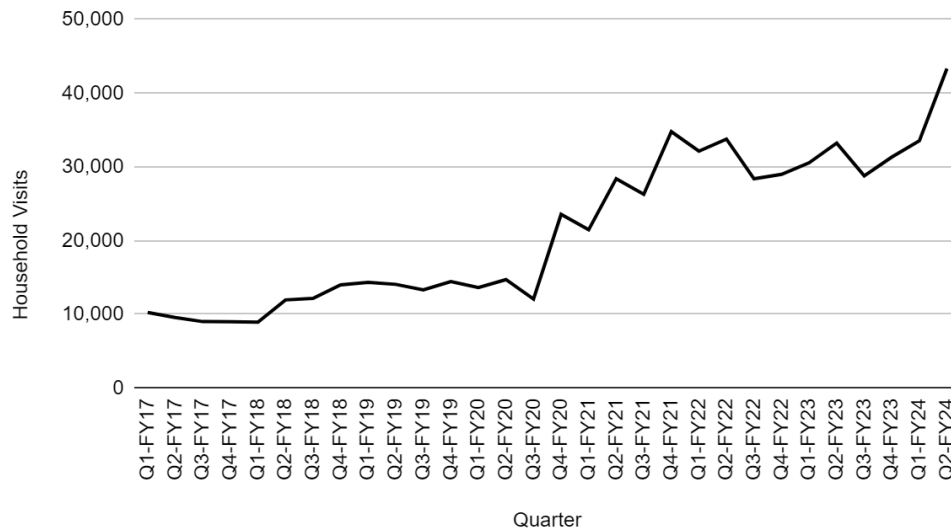
In addition to WSCAH's 45 significant years of work, we have also founded The Roundtable: Allies for Food Access. The Roundtable is a dedicated network of frontline direct service emergency food providers in New York City including: The Campaign Against Hunger, Project Hospitality, Part of The Solution, St. John's Bread and Life, Holy Apostles Soup Kitchen, WSCAH, Met Council and NY Common Pantry. This collaborative of organizations pursues opportunities for collective action with the goal of procuring more high-quality and culturally appropriate food at better prices. Last year, The Roundtable distributed 28 million pounds of produce at over 1200 sites across the city. Our efforts include collective bulk purchasing of NY state produce, beans, oats, and more, as well as ongoing price data gathering to make informed



purchasing decisions to save money and time while improving data transparency. **We are front line food fighters working together to feed our community.** This year, during the Thanksgiving season alone, members of The Roundtable directly purchased over 20,000 turkeys at a cost over 60% cheaper than advertised by the local food bank in NYC. The money we saved allowed us to purchase more food for more families in need across NYC.

But outside of the feel good story of collaboration there is a sad underbelly of growing need and lessening support. I am not shocked at the growing need, but once again I am dismayed at the lack of support. Our Roundtable members are now seeing higher demand for emergency food than ever before due to sky-rocketing food, fuel and housing prices. During this past summer, West Side Campaign Against Hunger alone experienced a 42% increase in the demand for food as compared to the previous year and the demand is nearly double what it was prior to the pandemic.

WSCAH - Total Household Visits by Quarter: 86th and Partner Distribution - FY17-Presentation



Based on our price tracking we also saw that from 2021 to 2023 the price of pasta went up 43%, canned tuna up 28% and a dozen eggs up 141%. We are seeing higher prices for food and a massive increase in need.

Current investment in fighting hunger is not just underfunded, it's a slap in the face. I appreciate everyone's efforts, but contrary to popular myth and marketing materials, we do not provide **emergency** feeding in our sector. We are part of a systemic breakdown decades in the making. Charity has never and will never solve hunger, policy will. We need to expand SNAP, raise wages, and build affordable housing and healthcare for all. Our communities are in



absolute crisis and the charity sector and irregular handouts of oft ultra processed food will not solve it, but we can help fight it. But front line food providers cannot do it alone!

It is crucial to acknowledge the challenging fiscal landscape shaped by Mayor Eric Adams' proposed 15% budget cuts across New York City's agencies and those proposed in the FY25 Preliminary Budget. The proposed \$60 million cut to the Department of Education's Office of Food and Nutrition Services (OFNS) threatens the progress made over the years to ensure healthier, more nutritious school meals. Food Pantries work as part of a web of services and supports, and when one area is cut, all the community feels the pain. We seek a FY25 City Budget that will ensure all New York City families have access to healthy, affordable food and foster long-term resilience and economic opportunity in the City's food system.

We respectfully request your support for the inclusion of the following budget recommendations in the FY25 New York City Budget:

#### **Ensure All New York City Families Have Access To Healthy, Affordable Food**

- **Increase and baseline funding to a total of \$60 Million for the Community Food Connection (CFC), formerly known as the Emergency Food Assistance Program (EFAP).** We are concerned about the apparent reappropriation of funds from last year's budget to this incredibly impactful program that addresses the ongoing hunger crises. Given rising levels of inflation and increased demand at emergency food providers across the state, we call on the Administration to increase and baseline program funding for a total of \$60 million. New data from the New York Department of Health reported that nearly one in four (24.9%) New York adults experienced food insecurity within the past 12 months. Meanwhile, according to the 2023 New York City True Cost of Living Report, published by United Way of New York City, 50% of working age New Yorkers are struggling to cover their basic needs. Families struggling to make ends meet live in every NYC neighborhood but across family composition, work status, and education, the report finds that people of color are disproportionately likely to lack adequate income. Further, 80% of households below the True Cost of Living had at least one working adult and the presence of children in the household almost doubles the likelihood that a household will have inadequate income. This alarming data aligns with testimonials from food banks and food pantries across the state, the majority of whom observed a major uptick in households served last year.



A moderate increase in funding for the CFC would accommodate the increased costs of adding fresh food into the program, rising cost of produce, and continued need, including the continuing influx of asylum seekers and other migrants seeking refuge in New York City. This increase will also help to address the inefficiencies found in using third-party vendors particularly in the procurement of kosher and halal items. In addition to increased funding, we also request that HRA work with the Administration and Comptroller's Office to speed up payments to CFC providers, ensuring they have money up front to cover the administrative costs of implementing the program and are not required to obtain reimbursement for program services. Awaiting reimbursement is especially burdensome for new and small emergency food providers that may not have a line of credit or enough cash on hand to cover up front costs of implementing the CFC program. Finally, we urge HRA to engage in an outreach and education campaign to ensure smaller, community-based providers, especially those who have begun operating since the onset of the pandemic, are able to participate in the program, and adequately supported so that they are able to continue serving their communities.

- **Restore the \$60 million proposed cut to the Department of Education's Office of Food and Nutrition Services (OFNS) to support school meal operations across the five boroughs.** During this administration, New York City has taken major leaps forward with unprecedented commitment on improving school nutrition programs and ending child hunger. Through creative menu development and service advancements, plant forward meals, the full expansion of Cafeteria Enhancement to all middle and high schools, and expansion of availability of halal and kosher meals, more children are eating nutritious school meals each and every day. Because of these advancements, meal participation is back up to pre-pandemic levels, even factoring in the drop in enrollment. The data backs up this progress - there was an 8% increase in meal participation in the first part of this school year. However, the proposed \$60 million cut is a direct threat to that progress and impact. We strongly urge the restoration of the \$60 million funding reduction to OFNS. Now, more than ever, as pandemic era programs come to an end and hunger continues to rise, we must continue to take every step possible to make sure NYC's school meals program is the best in the nation and connects more children with meals. New York City must continue to lead the nation in this work by investing resources in school meal programs.
- **Increase HRA's budget baseline to ensure it can engage community based organizations (CBOs) in benefits outreach and streamline benefits applications.** Further, we recommend additional funding to facilitate a joint application system between the SNAP program (managed by NYC HRA) and the WIC program (managed by NYS DOH), aligning with Mayor Eric Adams' pledge to develop a MyCity portal for integrated applications. This system aims to simplify the application process, making it easier and more accessible for applicants to receive the benefits they need.



● **We also urge the restoration of funding for the following City Council initiatives:**

- \$2.8 million for the Anti-Poverty Initiative
- \$7.26 million in FY24 for food pantries
- \$2.134 million for Access to Healthy Food and Nutritional Education, which funds farmers markets, urban farms, community gardens, and programs to expand the use of SNAP benefits
- \$1.5 million for the Food Access and Benefits Initiative (HRA)

Our communities are hurting and at present we see no ray of light from the public sectors. Let's all work together as one community to support all New Yorkers in need. With support for CFC, eliminating harmful budget cuts to School food and supporting HRA budgets our communities have a fighting chance for a food secure year ahead.

Please reach out with any questions about these comments as we are happy to provide additional details. Thank you for your consideration.

Chef Greg Silverman, MSc  
CEO West Side Campaign Against Hunger  
Founder and Director Roundtable NYC  
Co-Founder and Board Chair, Alliance for a Hunger Free NY  
gsilverman@wscah.org