



Promoting smart, fair food policy for New York

TESTIMONY TO THE NEW YORK CITY COUNCIL COMMITTEES ON GENERAL WELFARE, WOMEN'S ISSUES AND HEALTH ON HUNGER IN NEW YORK CITY

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Good afternoon, and thank you for the opportunity to contribute to your annual review of Hunger in New York City. I congratulate the City Council for placing a priority on this issue. I am here on behalf of the New York City Food Policy Center at Hunter College, of which I am the Policy Director. The Center was created in 2012 to develop intersectoral, innovative and evidence-based solutions to preventing diet related diseases and promoting food security in New York and other cities. The Center works with policy makers, community organizations, advocates and the public to create healthier, more sustainable food environments and to use food to promote community and economic development. We thank the City Council and the Speaker's office for their support of our center.

This is a pivotal moment in our history. The recent cuts to SNAP have made life even more difficult for the nearly 1.9 million New Yorkers who rely on SNAP to put food on the table, and they will harm many more New Yorkers as they trickle up through our economy, eliminating jobs and reducing work hours in the food sector. We are counting on you to reach out to other municipal legislators from around the nation and to work with our Congressional Delegation to undo these cuts and prevent the further damage that House and Senate Conferees are now contemplating. New York City will bear such an unconscionably large proportion of the cuts now under consideration that you should be leading the charge to avert them.

This is also, however, a time for bold, new thinking. With a new administration coming into City Hall, changes in your own body, and a vibrant food movement mobilizing around all things food, now is a time to "think big." I'm counting on other witnesses today to provide more facts about hunger and the performance of the food assistance programs that address it. I want to talk about a broader vision for eliminating hunger from our city by enhancing the public and non-profit food sectors.

Imagine restoring and revitalizing our public market spaces, like La Marqueta in East Harlem, just a few blocks from the CUNY School of Public Health, as centers for the healthy fruits and vegetables so needed by consumers in our neighborhoods, and as centers for

health education and celebrations of local arts and culture. Imagine turning the old Fulton Fish Market into the sort of vibrant incubator of local, artisanal food products that have helped to galvanize the food economies of other cities—Seattle’s Pike Place Market comes to mind. Imagine a thriving food incubator in every borough.

Imagine tapping the full potential of the school food programs to fight hunger by moving to universal free school lunches for all, removing the stigma that still attaches to school food in the minds of too many of our youth, and generating jobs—good jobs on the school calendar, and thus jobs that are particularly well suited to single parents—by harnessing the federal entitlement for school food. We estimate that each increase of participation by 10% will create approximately 500 such jobs. Imagine continuing to upgrade the skills of our school food cooks by training them in healthy food preparation techniques. Further, imagine increasing our summer meals program to reach more of the thousands of youngsters who eat free during the school year but do without during the summer.

And imagine using those school cafeterias and kitchens in the evening hours as public family dining rooms, where grandparents, parents and children can share healthy, affordable meals while local poets present and local musicians perform and writers read from their new novels in progress and aspiring film makers show their creations—and where City Council members mingle with and listen to their constituents. This could mean more labor hours for school food workers who desire them and a healthy alternative to fast food for parents juggling multiple jobs and child care roles.

Since so many New York City agencies and institutions prepare and serve meals—at least 270,000,000 of them each year—to some of our most vulnerable neighbors, imagine expanding food processing capacity in New York, so that we can process locally and regionally sourced food into the products that our institutions need. In Burlington, Vermont, the school system is the primary customer for a bean-processing facility that makes, among other products, a black bean crumble used to upgrade the nutrition quality and reduce the cost of healthy school food—and now that it is established, healthy hospital food and healthy day care food and healthy senior center food. And imagine stimulating the creation of local small businesses that can sell healthy regional fresh and processed foods to these institutions, and to the many corporate dining rooms that prepare and serve food in NYC.

Imagine converting the food services at the 17 campuses of the City University of New York that serve our 539,000 students and 40,000 faculty and staff into a self-operated system that can innovate new healthy products, teach culinary skills, make healthy eating a priority, provide convenient jobs for students, and redirect the profits that currently flow to corporations based in Warren, Ohio or Charlotte, North Carolina (and then on to the U.K.) into the economy of New York. [Note that 2 CUNY campuses are already self-ops].

Imagine providing start-up funds, technical assistance, and help with space for new food co-ops, to provide alternatives for New Yorkers, especially in low income communities.

Imagine a Healthy Food Truck and Street Vendors Project to assist aspiring entrepreneurs to prepare and sell healthy, affordable street food in New York City neighborhoods, parks and tourist venues.

By providing jobs and stimulating economic activity, we will be reducing hunger and the need to rely on the uncertain mercies of the SNAP Program, but it works the other way, too. With creative and energetic outreach to enroll an additional 250,000 eligible New Yorkers in SNAP, we can increase the federal income stream that Congress seems intent on taking away from us.

New York City faces three intersecting food crises: too many New Yorkers are hungry or food insecure, too many are at risk of diet-related diseases and too many food workers can't support themselves and their families on their current wages. The City Council, the new Mayor, the food movement—all of us have the opportunity to make real progress in transforming New York City's food environments by tackling these three problems simultaneously. It's time to think big. We at the New York City Food Policy Center stand ready to explore these ideas with you and to help in any way we can. Together we can realize the vision of a New York City without hunger, without rising rates of diet-related diseases, and without food workers who go hungry or have to apply for SNAP benefits—truly the food capital of the world.

For more information about the New York City Food Policy Center at Hunter College, visit our website at www.nycfoodpolicy.org or e-mail Nicholas Freudenberg at nf@nycfoodpolicy.org.