



Promoting smart, fair food policy for New York

Testimony to the New York State Food Policy Council 2013 Annual Winter Meeting: December 11, 2013

Thank you for the opportunity to speak on efforts to improve existing food production and delivery systems in New York City and State, and to ensure the availability of safe, fresh, nutritious and affordable food for all New Yorkers. I speak on behalf of the New York City Food Policy Center at Hunter College and my co-director of the Center, Professor Jan Poppendieck. We welcome you to our home in East Harlem. In partnership with the City University of New York School of Public Health, also located on this campus, our Food Policy Center develops 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. Through interdisciplinary research, policy analysis, evaluation and education, we leverage the expertise and passion of the students, faculty and staff of Hunter College and CUNY. The Center aims to make New York a model for smart, fair food policy.

Our testimony this afternoon summarizes recommendations from two reports our Center has prepared. The first, *[Jobs for a Healthier Diet and a Stronger Economy: Opportunities for Creating Good Food Jobs in New York City](#)*, examines current efforts to create new food jobs in New York and explores opportunities for creating additional jobs that provide a living wage and contribute to making healthy food more available and affordable. It was released last August and is available online at <http://nycfoodpolicy.org/research/>. The second, *The Public Plate in New York City: A Guide to Institutional Meals*, describes and analyzes the 260 million meals that New York City agencies serve to school children, hospital patients, jail inmates, senior citizens and others every year. It will be released early in 2014. Together these reports identify specific actions New York City and State can take to improve existing food production and delivery systems in New York City and State, and to ensure the availability of safe, fresh, nutritious and affordable food for all New Yorkers. I highlight a few here and offer our Center's assistance to policy makers and advocates to work together to further develop these proposals into actionable measures.

More Good Food Jobs

In our *[Jobs for a Healthier Diet and a Stronger Economy](#)* report, we call on the next mayor of New York to convene a partnership between city government, private employers, workforce development programs, labor unions and universities to create 10,000 new Good Food Jobs by 2020. While our

recommendations focus on New York City, we believe that the extensive scale of the city's food shed means that a city-state alliance could amplify the economic and health benefits of such an approach. Good food jobs are defined as jobs that pay a living wage, offer safe working conditions, promote sustainable economic development, and make healthier food more accessible to all New Yorkers.

With more than 326,000 workers in the city's food sector and a growth rate of 33% in the last decade, the city's food production and distribution sector provides many entry-level opportunities for low- and moderate-skilled workers, making it an important target for new job creation. The food sector also offers career paths that allow those with limited education, recent immigrants, and entrepreneurs with high ambitions but little capital an opportunity to build a career. To date, however, many of the jobs in this sector are low paying, lack benefits and expose workers to unsafe conditions. Many of these jobs also involve the production of the food most associated with diet-related disease. But the good news is that the food sector can become a setting for innovative intersectoral solutions to several of New York's most serious problems including high unemployment rates, rising rates of diet-related diseases, enduring inequalities in health and high levels of food insecurity among the poor.

Recommendations for More Good Food Jobs

To increase the number of Good Food Jobs in New York City and State, we recommend:

1. *Build new food processing plants in New York that can process regionally grown food for institutions and small retail outlets.* This would create new jobs and expand the market for New York State farmers. It would also improve the nutritional quality of food served in the city and state's institutional food programs. City and state incentive programs and a public technical assistance and support center could facilitate this process
2. *Provide additional training and compensation to home health aides to prepare them to become healthy food shoppers and cooks for people with diabetes and other diet-related diseases.* Such an approach could prevent hospitalizations, improve disease management, and reduce health care costs. An estimated 650,000 New York City residents have diabetes and the number has increased by 150% over the past 20 years. Diabetes is a leading contributor to premature deaths and preventable hospitalizations in the city. Many more city residents have other diet-related diseases such as heart disease, hypertension and some forms of cancer. The good news is that even for people who already have diabetes, making modifications in their diet can prevent complications and slow the course of the disease, thus preventing suffering and saving health care costs for families and taxpayers.
3. *Enroll an additional 250,000 eligible New Yorkers in SNAP (Food Stamps) to increase demand for healthy food in small groceries, bodegas, farmers markets and Community Supported Agriculture projects.* To support this effort, the city and state could enlist advertising agencies and food organizations in a statewide pro bono social marketing campaign to increase demand for healthy food. We applaud Governor Cuomo's appointment of the state Anti-Hunger Task Force on Monday and encourage the task force to consider new ways to use the state's commitment to reducing hunger to create more good food jobs and to better integrate our efforts to end hunger and reduce diet-related diseases. Increases in food insecurity and in diet-related diseases are two symptoms of a sick food system and we urge the city and state to better integrate its efforts to address these two signs of market failures in our current food system.

Improving Institutional Meals

In our second forthcoming report, we describe some of the ways that New York City has improved the quality of food it serves to our city's most vulnerable populations. By developing the New York City Food Standards, by appointing a Food Policy Coordinator in the Mayor's Office to coordinate food activities across more than a dozen city agencies and by requiring the city to report on its progress in achieving goals in institutional food and other sectors, New York City has begun to create an infrastructure that can help to make the city's institutional food programs more effective in reducing hunger and food insecurity and diet-related diseases and leveraging change in the city's broader food environment. In both this report and our *Good Food Jobs* report, we suggest additional steps to improve the contributions that institutional foods can make to ensure the availability of safe, fresh, nutritious and affordable food for all New Yorkers. We believe these recommendations apply to both city and state programs.

1. *Enroll more children in New York's school food programs to generate more jobs to prepare healthier food.* In New York City, increasing enrollment in the school food program by 15% would bring an additional 97,500 children into the program would create 883 six-hour a day school food jobs—union jobs with benefits. Expanding the school breakfast program would create additional new jobs. The city and state's school systems could continue to make progress in improving the nutritional quality and appeal of the food served in these schools in several ways: by providing more flexibility in menu planning and funding for additional training to existing and new school food workers to help them develop skills to further reduce salt, fat and sugar in school foods; by providing frontline school food workers with the time to engage parents and children in creating more appealing menus and food choices.

2. *Create social enterprise organizations that can win contracts for institutional food by providing affordable healthy food.* Institutional food can provide opportunities for creating good food jobs and making nutritious, locally grown food more available. Currently, many institutions (e.g., universities and hospitals) in New York City purchase the food they serve their clients or users from national food service companies with headquarters and employees outside the city. These big food service companies have centralized supply chains, making it difficult to avoid processed food; pay their workers low wages and offer few benefits. Few have made health a priority in the menus they serve. The state's universities and hospitals provide another promising market for healthier institutional food. So do those homeless shelters, senior centers, and day care centers that contract for prepared meals. Creating new incentives for social enterprise organizations and socially responsible small and middle-sized businesses could bring new suppliers to this potential new market for healthy, locally sourced institutional food. It could also help the new food processing plants described above to grow and prosper, an example of the synergy between various approaches to improving the state's food system.

Our recommendations reflect our belief that by looking at our food system as a whole, New York City and State can find new opportunities to reduce food insecurity, hunger and diet-related diseases while promoting environmental sustainability. We thank the New York State Food Policy Council for its contributions to this wider systemic perspective and we look forward to working with others to creating a healthier food system for all New Yorkers.

Testimony submitted by the New York City Food Policy Center at Hunter Colleges Co-Faculty Directors: Nicholas Freudenberg, Distinguished Professor of Public Health, City University of New York School of Public Health and Hunter College, and Professor of Sociology Emerita Jan Poppendieck. For more information contact nf@nycfoodpolicy.org or visit www.nycfoodpolicy.org.