

**Testimony Submitted by  
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on Behalf of The Roundtable: Allies for Food Access**

**For the Executive Budget Hearing of the NYC Council Committee on Finance  
May 24th, 2023**

My name is Chef Greg Silverman, CEO of West Side Campaign Against Hunger and Founding Director of The Roundtable: Allies for Food Access. Thank you to Council Member Justin Brannan and all the members of the Committee on Finance for holding today's executive budget hearing and the opportunity to submit this testimony.

The Roundtable: Allies for Food Access is a dedicated network of emergency food providers in New York City collaborating to bring more resources to communities, so none of our neighbors go hungry. We pursue opportunities for collective purchasing and collaborative advocacy work. The Roundtable was founded in 2018 by West Side Campaign Against Hunger with fellow providers New York Common Pantry (NYCP), Project Hospitality (PH), and St. John's Bread & Life (SJBL). One of the principal initiatives pursued was a purchasing pilot that tested new and expanded vendor relationships leading to 20% savings in food purchasing costs across the collective. Following the success of this pilot the group has focused on expanding opportunities for costs savings through collective purchasing and increasing membership, adding Holy Apostles Soup Kitchen (HASK), Met Council, Part of the Solution (POTS), and The Campaign Against Hunger (TCAH).

The Roundtable current activities fall into three categories:

**Strategic Purchasing:** From its inception, the Roundtable has had strategic purchasing as a cornerstone of its work, with the goal of procuring more high-quality, nutritious, and culturally appropriate food at better prices for its member organizations and the people they serve. This work includes ongoing price data gathering and aggregation from all the members to make informed purchasing decisions, save money and time, and improve data transparency. The Roundtable also engages in collective bulk purchasing - aggregating demand for select purchases, such as oats and shelf-stable milk. Initial bulk purchases have achieved successful savings ranging from 29% to 49% compared to standard distributor pricing.

**Advocacy:** The Roundtable is a voice of advocacy for direct-service emergency food organizations in New York City. Because Roundtable organizations are embedded in the communities they serve, they keenly understand the resources and policies those communities need in order to ensure that none of our neighbors go hungry. During the pandemic, the Roundtable successfully advocated for frontline worker vaccine eligibility for all emergency food workers, and played a significant role in

amending the Community Food Connection (formerly EFAP) program to include fresh produce for the first time in the program's history. Roundtable members sat on the Mayors Food Transition Team and are presently involved in the Mayor's Innovative Capacity Building Group, a collaborative effort between the city and emergency food providers to find new solutions to bring healthy food to the communities that need it most and currently have the least access.

**Mutual Support:** By creating a space for collaboration and communication among peer organizations, the Roundtable helps its members maximize their resources and find new ways of working together. The Roundtable is also exploring options for assistance for smaller pantries and food providers in NYC, sharing the collective insights and best practices utilized by Roundtable members.

Together we envision a City where emergency food providers have greater capacity and autonomy to meet the demand of their communities and offer more nutritious, culturally relevant food. At the same time we want to see NYC reimagine its investments in emergency feeding programs with reduced administrative burden, streamlined reporting and additional flexibility for providers. Finally, we urge the City to invest in and help seed innovative programs, collective action, delivery models, solutions and communication with customers within the emergency feeding system.

To help meet these collective goals, we respectfully request your support for the inclusion of the following recommendations for Administration funding in the FY24 New York City Budget:

- **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 applaud that in the Council's Response to the FY2023 Preliminary Budget its recommendation was to increase and baseline the budget for CFC to \$60 million. We also support Council's recommendation that CFC should 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 enrolled in the program, and adequately supported so that they are able to continue serving their communities.

However, we were disappointed to see the Mayor's Executive Budget simply maintains the program's level of funding next year. We urge that in the Adopted Budget, funding for CFC is increased and baselined for a total of \$60 Million, an increase that is indexed to rising inflation to 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. We also call on HRA to allow CFC providers to include an annual increase in funding for providers indexed to rising inflation, including food costs and COLA for Human Service Providers, and to tie annual funding allocations to programming levels/goals annually.

Unfortunately, although the public health emergency of COVID-19 has subsided, we are now seeing higher demand for emergency food than ever before due to sky-rocketing food, fuel and housing prices. During the last quarter of FY22, West Side Campaign Against Hunger 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. At the same time, EFPs are experiencing the impact of rising food prices. The Roundtable partnered with food systems consultancy Karen Karp & Partners (KK&P) to conduct research and develop a price tracking system will allow Roundtable members to access regular, bi-monthly analyses reporting on the current, comparative pricing landscape for market basket items across the full range of food vendors from which group members purchase, including H. Schrier. Based on this price tracking system, we can clearly see price inflation for different dry goods that are commonly purchased by EFPs in NYC.

Item	2021 Avg.	2023 Avg.	% Diff
Canned Tuna (per/5oz can)	\$ 0.90	\$ 1.15	28%
Rice (per/lb)	\$ 0.91	\$ 1.23	35%
Pasta (per/lb)	\$ 0.98	\$ 1.40	43%
Eggs (dozen)	\$ 1.64	\$ 3.96	141%
Dried Beans (per/lb)	\$ 1.25	\$ 1.55	24%
Dry Cereal (price per/oz)	\$ 0.23	\$ 0.27	17%

With these rising food costs and increased demand, the current CFC allotments are simply not sufficient. As of February 2023, many Roundtable members reported being nearly through their CFC allocations for the fiscal year. We appreciate that in partnership with the team at DSS, the Mayor’s Office of Food Policy has been monitoring the utilization closely and reallocated additional funds to select organizations last month. We want to note that slow spending does not indicate lack of need. There are several reasons why providers may not be spending down allocations at a similar rate including that the price of items varies a lot and has often been inaccurate with deliveries which makes planning ahead challenging. Also, the former iteration of the program (EFAP) allocated grant money in 6-month cycles which allowed providers to spend down the grant by planning for food 6 months at a time. CFC grants are allocated in full for 12 months and some agencies might be purposely not spending money out of fear that they might run out too soon or making decisions based on seasons, holidays, storage and transportation capacity changes or other reasons. With this in mind, we urge HRA to increase CFC allocations in FY24 but also provide more flexibility in terms of when funds are spent down.

It would also be helpful to secure a public commitment from H. Schrier that they will continue to honor the pricing available through their CFC Product list for organizations purchasing from H. Schrier's Standard list with their own funds. Based on the Roundtable's new price tracking system it appears as if H. Schrier is informally doing this, but an official commitment would ensure the practice continues.

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.

We applaud HRA for continuing the inclusion of a CFC advisory group of CFC practitioners to inform administration of the CFC program, including what foods will be provided through the program. Members of the Roundtable have been informally meeting with the CFC team on a regular basis and we respectfully request that members of The Roundtable: Allies for Food Access be officially included in this advisory group given our strong expertise in and experience implementing the CFC program. It is critical that there is accountability to this advisory group and that HRA develops a process to ensure practitioners recommendations are heard, documented, and will be incorporated into CFC operations moving forward. In addition, we are concerned that members of this advisory group are being asked to serve on a volunteer basis without compensation. This creates an equity issue by precluding some practitioners from participating in the group, especially individuals from frontline communities that have deep knowledge of CFC and food access challenges in their neighborhoods. We call on HRA to allocate funds to compensate practitioners for their time advising the agency on CFC program administration.

We greatly appreciate the regular check-ins conversations with HRA regarding the program transition and our collective experience with the new vendor, H. Schrier, and call on HRA to continue this open line of communication. We call on HRA to organize a separate meeting with the larger community of CFC emergency food providers from across the city six months following the vendor transition to collect feedback and consult on program operations and administration. We also encourage the agency to commit to an annual meeting with a broad set of emergency food providers to ensure successful implementation of the CFC program and ongoing, two-way communication. These steps will help ensure additional transparency and a commitment to publicly share program impacts, outcomes, vendor data, earlier and more info on how funding allocations to EFPs are determined.

HRA should also direct H. Schrier to seek EFP input into what foods are provided through the program and allow providers greater flexibility to select their own foods.

- **Direct the HRA to ensure that any cuts in headcount vacancy do not impact benefits enrollment and frontline positions are not eliminated.** We are very concerned with recent reporting that HRA is processing just [46.3% of applications for SNAP benefits](#) and we know agencies are already understaffed due to job vacancies. We are encouraged by the Administration and HRA's recent attempts to address these vacancies challenges and also urge HRA to increase wages to help fill critical vacancies and improve internal systems to be more efficient. At the same time, to ensure pay parity we also call on HRA to allow CFC providers to include an annual increase in funding for providers indexed to rising inflation and COLA for Human Service Providers. Committing to better wages for frontline workers both at HRA and within emergency food providers will ensure workers across the network are paid appropriately.
- **Ensure NYC food systems policy and funding decision making is more equitable and inclusive.** We applaud the City, and especially the Mayor's Office of Food Policy for coordinating regular, ongoing communication between City offices, agencies and frontline providers throughout the COVID-19 pandemic that helped inform the City's food policies and supported communication at a critical time. We urge the City to continue supporting similar levels of ongoing communication and codify inclusion of representatives from front line, direct service emergency feeding organizations, including The Roundtable members, in key NYC committees and task forces, including The Policy Committee on New York City Hunger Resources, that inform food policy and funding decisions to increase transparency. While not a funding request, directing the City to commit to this level of communication and representation this will help align resources and ensure the necessary coordination is happening to put City dollars to efficient use.

To help meet these goals, we respectfully request your support for the inclusion of the following recommendations for Council Initiative funding in the FY24 New York City Budget:

- **\$250,000 in Council Discretionary Funding to support The Roundtable's innovative collective action and purchasing efforts.** We urge the Council to support the Roundtable's continued and expanded price data gathering and aggregation to inform bulk purchasing efforts, saving money and time for frontline anti-hunger organizations. Collective bulk purchasing efforts conducted by the Roundtable in 2022 saved member organizations over \$50,000 on orders of oats and shelf-stable milk when compared to standard distributor pricing, and even \$18K when compared to prices offered by the Food Bank for NYC. Council Discretionary Funding would also support the Roundtable's efforts to scale and share its learnings to smaller food access organizations through a technical assistance program and

enable increased membership outreach and convening to expand reach and deepen engagement across New York City.

- **Maintain \$1.2M funding for the Council-funded "Welcome NYC" initiative**, a public-private funding partnership to help nonprofits on the frontlines of the crisis continue providing urgent legal services, workforce development, literacy programs, youth services, and food assistance to asylum seekers in New York City. We urge the City Council to continue funding at \$1.2 Million and for the Administration to leverage its convening power to ensure continued investment from local philanthropic foundations.

Thank you for your consideration.

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