



West Side Campaign Against Hunger (WSCAH) thanks the New York State Assembly Committee on Social Services for the opportunity to submit testimony on the current state of public assistance benefits in light of the economic instability caused by the COVID-19 pandemic and rising inflation.

WSCAH serves a New York City **community** of almost 77,000 customers who come to us from across NYC to gain access to healthy food and supportive services. Founded in 1979, WSCAH is the country's first supermarket-style, multi-service food pantry and one of the largest emergency food providers in New York City. WSCAH alleviates hunger by ensuring that all New Yorkers have access with **dignity** to a **choice** of healthy food and supportive services.

To meet the accelerated demand for emergency food and supportive services, as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, WSCAH scaled its food distribution and social service provision through partnerships with more than 50 community-based organizations across NYC. WSCAH's reach more than doubled and the total pounds of food distributed expanded from 1.6 million to 4.2 million pounds of food annually.

The economic fallout of the pandemic, now compounded by ongoing supply chain issues, rapidly rising inflation, and a reduction of COVID-relief resources, has significantly impacted our customers ability to put food on the table for their families. Wages are not keeping pace with the cost of living and public assistance benefits just do not go as far. What has resulted is an unprecedented level of need. WSCAH is experiencing the highest levels of demand for food in its 43 year history, surpassing peak levels during the height of the pandemic. In the last two months alone, at our original 86th street distribution location we have seen a 62% increase in customers compared to the same two months last year.

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WSCAH has been working tirelessly to not only scale its food distribution efforts, but to also enroll families in benefits like public assistance benefits, SNAP, health insurance programs and housing assistance. However, even with these benefits, the cost of living in New York City, which was prohibitively expensive prior to the pandemic and inflation, has left many New Yorkers struggling to meet their basic needs. A WSCAH customer, Arcely, who receives food from one of our partner sites, recently shared their struggles with us:

“The pandemic has affected a lot of things. Businesses are struggling. People are left without jobs. There are less resources available. The whole environment has completely changed. Fruits are expensive, prices are too high. Without a job, it is hard to purchase healthy food.”

WSCAH applauds New York State for expanding the State’s public assistance eligibility determination requirements to help expand access to New Yorker’s in-need. However, we urge the State to increase the cash assistance benefit amounts, as they have not increased in decades and have left those in-need with inadequate support.

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