



**Testimony: Education Committee of the New York City Council  
March 21<sup>st</sup>, 2017**

West Side Campaign Against Hunger (WSCAH) would like to thank Council Member Danny Dromm, Chair of the Education Committee, for the opportunity to submit testimony for the FY2018 Preliminary New York City Budget, and the urgency to expand universal free school lunch to **provide healthy, affordable and freshly prepared meals to all** New York City public school students.

Founded in 1979, West Side Campaign Against Hunger is the country's first supermarket-style, multi-service food pantry, and one of the largest emergency food providers in New York City. **In the last year, we provided over 1.6 million pounds of food, which included over 280 thousand pounds of fresh fruits and vegetables, to over 33 thousand people;** but our customers come to us for more than groceries. WSCAH combines access to healthy food, with support services, job training, and policy advocacy to work in partnership with our customers by emphasizing their right to self-determination and dignity.

The supermarket-style model we innovated, which allows customers to choose what's best for their families, combats the stigma of poverty among adults in the same way universal free school lunch would combat, if not eliminate entirely, the stigma of poverty among school age youth. In addition to the stigma of poverty, these customers are living in fear. WSCAH serves a diverse population of low-income New York City residents, a majority of whom are immigrants. In fact, only 24% of WSCAH customers were born in the United States. More and more every day, we receive requests from our customers to remove information from our database; some customers have stopped showing up entirely. Rather than consume healthy food and access social services, instead, our customers are consumed by fear.

Fifty-eight percent of our customers are women, a majority of whom are mothers to the 26% of children who rely on the fresh food and wraparound services we provide to help our customers not only survive, but thrive. There's no guess work to the social conditions that require people to rely on emergency food providers. When those same people, who all have significant barriers to overcome, begin to turn down the social services on which they so heavily depend because they would rather go hungry than risk being deported and separated from their families, **the urgency to expand universal free school lunch becomes resoundingly clear.**

Universal free school lunch, which does not require verification of citizenship, is more crucial now than it ever was. The expansion of universal free school lunch is also cost effective. Its implementation would cost only **\$8.7 million to feed New York City's 1.1 million public school students after state and federal funds are reimbursed.** Expanding universal free school lunch would not only help to close the **242 million meal gap** that persists in our city even after anti-hunger benefits have been secured and emergency food has been accessed, but it is a necessary step in providing sanctuary as we promised. We are now not only fighting hunger, we are now also fighting fear!

Once again, West Side Campaign Against Hunger would like to thank the City Council's Education Committee for its continued support of this issue, and the opportunity to testify about the need to **expand universal free school lunch to provide healthy, affordable and freshly prepared meals to all 1.1 million New York City public school students.**