



NY State Agriculture Hearing
Testimony of The West Side Campaign Against Hunger
Chef Greg Silverman, CEO West Side Campaign Against Hunger
February 1, 2024

My name is Chef Greg Silverman, CEO of West Side Campaign Against Hunger (WSCAH), an anti-hunger organization that, for 45 years, has been focused on providing access to large quantities of healthy, fresh produce and direct benefits enrollment to New Yorkers in need. Last year alone WSCAH provided support to 80,000 NYC customers, which included the distribution of over 2.2 million pounds of fresh produce - over 50% of all food we give out. Decades ago, WSCAH created the customer choice pantry model in the basement of a church on 86th St and Broadway that has been the gold standard for pantry service. We have since expanded ideas of choice to focus on what our customers demand and deserve...choice of not just apples or bananas but of location of service, delivery models, and time spent securing food.

And this choice is not just an economic win for all, it's a health win for our entire sector. *This week research conducted via Columbia University Irving Medical Center through Dr. Jennifer Woo Baidal in partnership with WSCAH food distributions was published in Nutrients. Through a longitudinal study of a clinical-community emergency food assistance program during COVID-19, participants experienced improvements in household food security associated with increased frequency of vegetable and fruit consumption. **These findings are the first to support that an improvement in food security is linked to increased frequency of vegetable and fruit consumption, thus supporting the use of food security outcomes in future interventions to reduce diet-related chronic diseases. Investing directly in nutritious food for food pantries can lead to improved well-being for New Yorkers and therefore decrease health costs in the long term.***

In addition to WSCAH's 45 significant years of work, we have also founded The Roundtable: Allies for Food Access. The Roundtable is a dedicated network of frontline direct service emergency food providers in New York City including: The Campaign Against Hunger, Project Hospitality, Part of The Solution, St. John's Bread and Life, Holy Apostles Soup Kitchen, WSCAH, Met Council and NY Common Pantry. This collaborative of organizations pursues opportunities for collective action with the goal of procuring more high-quality and culturally appropriate food at better prices. Last year, The Roundtable distributed 28 million pounds of produce at over 1200 sites across the city. Our efforts include collective bulk purchasing of NY state produce, beans, oats, and more, as well as ongoing price data gathering to make informed purchasing decisions to save money and time while improving data transparency. We are front line food fighters working together to feed our community. This year, during the Thanksgiving season alone, members of The Roundtable directly purchased over 20,000 turkeys at a cost

over 60% cheaper than advertised by the local food bank in NYC. The money we saved allowed us to purchase more food for more families in need across NYC.

Today I raise the following urgent needs:

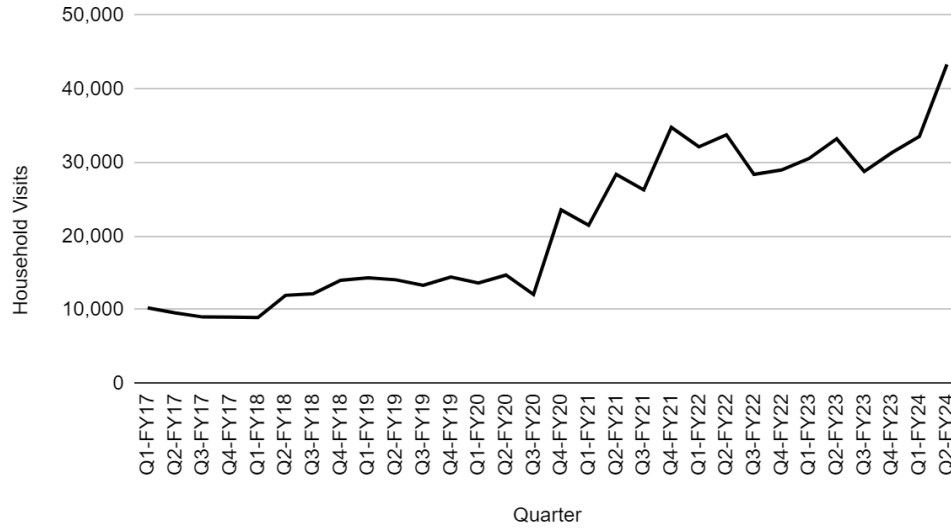
- **NY state must increase funding to the Hunger Prevention Nutrition Assistance Program (HPNAP) to \$75 million.**
- **NY state must increase funding to Nourish New York to \$75 million.**
- **NY state must focus distribution of these funds via direct contracts with emergency food relief programs.**

I am proudly born and raised in Utica, NY and spent 13 years of my culinary career running three restaurants in Ithaca, NY. I have built my career buying from farmers, selling to my customers and making sure everyone gets what they need from farm to plate. I was a small business owner who partnered with growers across the Finger Lakes – from Springflight farms who got me a cow each week to Stick and Stone farm who got me dozens of cases of salad greens every week, plus many wineries across the region. These independent businesses supported one another, building relationships and advancing a more resilient food system.

I moved to NYC in my 40's to run WSCAH and help make sure 80,000 customers get the healthiest food and benefits access anywhere. I learned the strange term "Upstate" once I moved downstate. Upstate, downstate, central – what I have learned in my time living and working across this great state is that what really matters is that teamwork makes dream work. And there is no better example of teamwork than the partnership and collaboration between NY state farmers and NYC front line food distributors that grew and flourished during the pandemic. NY state is a state of entrepreneurship, family farms, and communities, and it's how we make change.

But outside of the feel good story of collaboration there is a sad underbelly of growing need and lessening support. I am not shocked at the growing need, but once again I am dismayed at the lack of support. Our Roundtable members are now seeing higher demand for emergency food than ever before due to sky-rocketing food, fuel and housing prices. During this past summer, West Side Campaign Against Hunger alone 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.

WSCAH - Total Household Visits by Quarter: 86th and Partner Distribution - FY17-Presentation



Based on our price tracking we also saw that from 2021 to 2023 the price of pasta went up 43%, canned tuna up 28% and a dozen eggs up 141%. We are seeing higher prices for food and a massive increase in need.

In the face of this reality, the state led a truly confusing, inefficient, and inequitable HPNAP/NOURISH process this year that has led to organizations across NYC and the entire state to cut staff, cut services and delay support to communities in need. Across our Roundtable we know members in the Bronx have decreased service levels due to the cuts. In Staten Island entire pantries closed. In discussions at our newly created Alliance For a Hunger Free NY (of which I am one of founders and Board Chair) Board meeting we heard of organizations cutting staff, removing distribution points and decreasing fresh produce due to the HPNAP and NOURISH funding and contracting issues. We need a state listening tour and state hearing to understand what happened, why the system broke down, how allocations were made and how we can fix programs to get this money directly in the hands of those who know best how to serve their communities – front line emergency feeding organizations who have and will grow in collaboration with farmers across the state.

And on top of this series of missteps, the overall current investment in fighting hunger is not just underfunded, it's a slap in the face. The Nourish program's lack of direct funding streams to direct service providers truly takes choice away from communities in need. Food Banks are incredible partners in feeding our communities but are an outdated, top down, distribution system that have been faltering for decades. But HPNAP has been showing one efficient and equitable way forward through a choice of grants: direct and indirect based on organizational need and capacity. The Nourish program has taken this away from front line organizations working to obtain healthy food, and this is beyond problematic. It's a slap in the face to millions of New Yorkers in need, to front line organizations with limited budgets, and to all the supporters who are being forced to fund what should be public sector efforts.

I appreciate everyone's efforts, but contrary to popular myth and marketing materials, we do not provide emergency feeding in our sector. We are part of a systemic breakdown decades in the making. Charity has never and will never solve hunger, policy will. We need to expand SNAP, raise wages, and build affordable housing and healthcare for all. Our communities are in absolute crisis and the charity sector and emergency food will not solve it, but we can help fight it.

State Government must increase funding to the Hunger Prevention Nutrition Assistance Program (HPNAP) to \$75 million and Nourish New York to \$75 million, and focus grant distribution on direct contracts with emergency food relief programs on the front lines of fighting hunger, not regional anti hunger wholesalers.

With direct contracts at adequate levels, increased HPNAP and Nourish alongside, and foremost policies such as increasing SNAP allocations and growing wages, our communities have a fighting chance for a food secure future.

Our communities are hurting and at present we see no ray of light from the public sectors. Let's all work together as one state community to support a food insecure state, from the mountains to the city and from the lakes to the rivers all across this great state.

Please reach out with any questions about these comments that include additional detail. Thank you for your consideration.

Chef Greg Silverman, MSc
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Co-Founder and Board Chair, Alliance for a Hunger Free NY

**DIGNITY.
COMMUNITY.
CHOICE.**