



Testimony of City Harvest
Before the New York City Council General Welfare Committee
Budget and Oversight Hearing on the Preliminary Budget for Fiscal Year 2026
March 17, 2025

ASKS:

- 1. Strengthen and protect New York City's food pantry system**
- 2. Combat older adult hunger**
- 3. Support community-led solutions to food insecurity**
- 4. Restore access to healthy grocery incentive programs**
- 5. Apply a food security lens to housing stability and affordable childcare**

Thank you, Chairwoman Diana Ayala and members of the General Welfare Committee for holding today's hearing on New York City's Preliminary Budget for Fiscal Year 2026. My name is Keith Carr, and I am the Senior Policy and Government Relations Manager at City Harvest, New York's first and largest food rescue organization.

Firstly, I want to thank the City Council for its steadfast support of organizations like City Harvest over the last 4 plus decades. Year-after-year, we have been able to rescue millions of pounds of food, mostly fresh produce, and deliver it free-of-charge to a network of 400 food pantries across our city. Those efforts are only made possible because of a community of food justice leaders who run New York's pantry system, our hardworking staff and union drivers that pack our fleet of trucks that navigate our city's streets for 20 hours a day to pick up and deliver food from thousands of generous food donors, and the support of our leaders in government that have been responsive to the community's need.

Despite our efforts over the past 43 years, 2025 is showing that this year is not business as usual. In City Harvest's network of 400 pantry programs across New York City, we are seeing over 1 million additional pantry visits per month when compared to pre-COVID data from 2019 and a 10 percent increase in the number of New Yorkers experiencing food insecurity. We are also finding that nearly twice as many families with children and twice as many employed New Yorkers visited food pantries in recent years when compared to 2019.¹ In an environment in which food prices are destabilized, federal support for food security programs is unpredictable, and resilient New Yorkers are struggling to manage the cost of food with housing and childcare, 2025 requires bold investments from local government.

Visits to food pantries are at the highest level ever. In response to the growing demand for charitable food, City Harvest has increased the food we distribute by nearly 30 percent since 2019, thereby bringing us to a total of more than 81 million pounds of nutritious, high-quality food per year. But we know firsthand that charity cannot stand in the place of effective and equitable public policy. For those reasons and more, we stand in alignment with our network of food pantries and dozens of food system leaders in the NYC Food Policy Alliance in our advocacy for the FY2026 Budget to include the following investments:

1. **Strengthen and protect New York City's food pantry system** by increasing and baselining Community Food Connection at \$100 million, increasing the City Council's Food Pantry Initiative, and establishing an emergency fund.
2. **Combat older adult hunger** by investing \$57 million in congregate meals at Older Adult Centers and restoring \$100+ million in cuts to NYC Aging's overall budget in FY26.
3. **Support community-led solutions to food insecurity** by creating a Food Justice Fund, as proposed in the Mayor's 10 Year Food Policy Plan.
4. **Restore access to healthy grocery incentive programs** by maintaining funding for the Groceries to Go Program.
5. **Apply a food security lens to housing stability and affordable childcare**, thereby addressing root causes of hunger by providing more funding for programs that keep New Yorkers in their homes and puts affordable childcare within reach for millions of New Yorkers who are forced to choose between food, housing, and childcare.

Strengthen and Protect New York City's Food Pantry System

Whether it be in the context of a natural disaster like Hurricane Sandy, a pandemic like COVID-19, or the everyday affordability crisis faced by millions of resilient New Yorkers, food banks and food pantries remain at the forefront of making sure New Yorkers have immediate and dignified access to food. However, the current demand for emergency food is busting at the seams, visits to

¹ https://robinhood.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/11/PT_Food-Report-2024_FINAL.pdf

emergency food providers are up 81% over the same period (now to 2019). Despite City Harvest increasing the food we deliver to our community of 400 pantries by nearly 30 percent, New York City still faces a significant emergency food supply gap. Meanwhile, the FY2026 preliminary budget proposes to undo last year's successful advocacy for the city to fund its primary emergency food supply program, Community Food Connection (CFC), at \$57 million. In fact, it proposes to reduce the program from \$57 million to just \$21 million. These drastic cuts are incongruent with current community need and further increased demand for emergency food that is likely to occur due to Federal actions that weaken SNAP, freeze funding for pantries and farmers, and potentially raise food prices.

That is why we are asking the city to increase funding for CFC to \$100 Million. With over 700 food pantries leveraging the program to provide high-quality food for free distribution to people in need, and City Harvest using the program to supplement the food we deliver at Mobile Markets, mostly at NYCHA centers in each borough, a robust CFC program is needed now more than ever.

In addition to adequately funding CFC, the City Council can further support community programs that are uncertain about the status of federal supports for food security by increasing funding for its discretionary Food Pantry Initiative (which is currently just under \$8.5 million) and establishing emergency rapid response funding for critical services that suddenly lose federal funding due to no fault of their own. This includes several organizations that have already lost a collective \$1.5 million in payments via FEMA for the Emergency Food and Shelter Program (EFSP) and the discontinuation of the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) Local Food Purchase Assistance program, which currently provides over \$15.6 million for food providers to source local product across the State.

Combat Older Adult Hunger

In January 2025, we were all taken aback by a proposed federal funding freeze that would have potentially put programs like Meals-on-Wheels at risk. With seniors making up 15 percent of New York's population, but roughly a quarter of City Harvest's Mobile Pantry participants and nearly a third of SNAP participants, protecting programs that fight older adult hunger should be a priority for New York. Unfortunately, the FY2026 preliminary budget posed upwards of \$100 million in cuts to the Department for Aging overall, which could wind up cutting one third of the entire Older Adult Center budget, leading to disastrous impacts.

We stand in solidarity with leaders in the older adult hunger space who are advocating for \$57 million to fund congregate meals at Older Adult Centers and the restoration of \$100+ million in cuts to NYC Aging's overall budget in FY26.

Support community-led solutions to food insecurity

Modeled after the USDA's Community Food Project Competitive Grant Program² and inspired by the

² <https://www.nifa.usda.gov/grants/funding-opportunities/community-food-projects-competitive-grants-program>

City of Sacramento's successful Food Justice Grant Program³, an NYC Food Justice Grant program can provide much needed funding for innovative, community-centered solutions to hunger⁴. Examples from effective USDA Community Food Projects include community kitchens, food co-ops like the one coming into Bed Stuy on Fulton St. and Saratoga, and workforce development. While the grant program may not exist today, the concept isn't entirely new for our city. In October 2021, the former Mayor's office announced one-time funding for the Community-Led Food Project grant program through the Mayor's Fund to Advance New York City (Mayor's Fund), on behalf of the Building Healthy Communities (BHC) initiative⁵. Additionally, our current Mayor provided significant discretionary funding to support innovative food access projects and enterprises as the former Brooklyn Borough President. Supporting a Food Justice Grant, even as a City Council Initiative or other vehicle, will go a long way in building longer-term food resiliency, especially considering potential cuts to federal grants to local programs.

Restore access to healthy grocery incentive programs

Groceries to Go originally emerged in the wake of the Covid-19 pandemic as food assistance for homebound New Yorkers and has since been redesigned to provide food insecure New Yorkers who also have hypertension and/or diabetes with monthly credit to purchase groceries through an online marketplace of local grocery stores. The program directly tackles the intersection of food and medicine by leveraging the NYC Health and Hospital network to connect eligible New Yorkers with a program that is far more critical than its limited funding suggests. In the context of \$230 billion in potential cuts to families' groceries budget through USDA restrictions on SNAP, and the constant narrative of low-income New Yorkers who simply do not qualify for SNAP, Groceries to Go presents itself as a model city program to strengthen food access and agency for New Yorkers. Despite its success and opportunities to expand the program, the FY2026 preliminary budget failed to restore \$5.2 million for Groceries to Go. That is why we are calling on the Council to ensure that Groceries to Go is included in the final budget.

Applies a food security lens to housing stability and affordable childcare

Ensuring that New Yorkers have adequate and dignified access to food should be the baseline for our city. But we must also address the root causes that drive up the demand for food charities. Based on a recent survey of over 200 pantry leaders that we conducted in partnership with Food Bank for NYC and United Way of NYC, as well as a previous survey of over 2,000 pantry participants through Feeding America, we found that housing and childcare costs remain at the forefront of budget stressors that drive New Yorkers to food pantries. That is compounded by research that shows that families experiencing housing instability had 40 percent higher odds of experiencing

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[https://www.cityofsacramento.gov/content/dam/portal/cmo/OIED/Food%20Justice%20Report%20FINAL%20\(11-6-24\).pdf](https://www.cityofsacramento.gov/content/dam/portal/cmo/OIED/Food%20Justice%20Report%20FINAL%20(11-6-24).pdf)

⁴ https://www.nyc.gov/assets/foodpolicy/downloads/pdf/NYC_FoodReport_18_CB_interactive.pdf

⁵ https://www.nyc.gov/assets/fund/downloads/pdf/CommunityFoodAction_RFP.pdf

food insecurity, and research that shows that childcare costs in NYC are among the highest in the nation, having increased most significantly among other essential costs in recent years.⁶

If we want to be earnest in our efforts to end hunger, we believe that investments in housing stability programs such as the Rental Assistance program that was funded at \$325M in the active fiscal year budget, and supports for children and families through stable funding for 3K are examples of critical upstream approaches that can build food security in the FY2026 budget.

Conclusion

In an environment in which the cost of food is increasingly out of reach for far too many New Yorkers, we believe that New York City's lawmakers have an opportunity to make a value statement in this year's budget by assuring and affirming a commitment to stable and reliable funding for local programs. We cannot treat 2025 as business as usual. With 1 million more New Yorkers, twice as many of whom are working and twice as many with children, going to pantries, it is imperative that our local leaders take bold steps to protect New Yorkers and invest in food security.

We thank the City of New York — from the local pantry leaders to the kids doing food drives, and from the City Council to the Mayor's Office — for their partnership and concern for those resilient New Yorkers facing hunger over the years. We remain committed to working with all of you on budget efforts and policy solutions that help New Yorkers become more food secure.

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⁶ <https://www.cityharvest.org/reports-on-hunger/>