



Testimony of

Louise Feld  
Policy Associate for Food and Economic Security  
Citizens' Committee for Children

Before the  
New York City Council  
General Welfare Committee

Oversight – Fighting Hunger in New York City

November 21, 2011

Good afternoon. My name is Louise Feld and I am the Policy Associate for Food and Economic Security at Citizens' Committee for Children of New York (CCC). CCC is a 68-year-old independent, multi-issue child advocacy organization dedicated to ensuring that every New York child is healthy, housed, educated and safe. I would like to thank Chair Palma and the members of the General Welfare Committee for holding this hearing today, and for their continued interest in fighting hunger in New York City.

In recent years, a staggering number of New York City's families have faced increased poverty, and a sobering inability to consistently access healthy and affordable foods. According to newly-released U.S. Census data, since 2009 there has been a 7.4 percent increase in the share of New Yorkers who live in poverty, and the City's overall poverty rate was 20.1 percent in 2010.<sup>1</sup> Even starker is the City's 30 percent child poverty rate, which has grown an overwhelming 10.8 percent since 2009, and reflects the inclusion of even higher poverty rates in certain neighborhoods and boroughs, such as the Bronx (43 percent) and Brooklyn (34 percent).<sup>2</sup>

In addition, over 1.8 million New York City residents currently receive food stamp benefits from the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program ("SNAP") – a growth of almost 600,000 people since the summer of 2008 – and the share of New York City families, with children, who receive food stamps has grown more than 50% since 2007, from 19.7 percent in 2007 to 30 percent in 2010.<sup>3</sup> With so many New Yorkers struggling to make ends meet and put food on the table, and one out of every three New York City children living in poverty, it is no surprise that soup kitchens and food pantries in all five boroughs have reported a "great" increase in the number of families with children who "used their services."<sup>4</sup>

Low-income New Yorkers face serious barriers in their efforts to access fresh and affordable foods. Besides lacking adequate funds to consistently purchase healthy food, New Yorkers in high-poverty neighborhoods also have a noticeable absence of food retail options at which to shop. This resulting inability to purchase and consume nutritious foods takes both a short- and long-term toll on the overall well-being of New York City's children from low-income families. In the immediate, the inability to reliably access nutritious foods has contributed, in part, to New York City's alarming childhood obesity rates. In New York City public schools' kindergarten through eighth grades, 18 percent of students are overweight and 21 percent are obese,<sup>5</sup> while almost 11 percent of New York City high school students are obese and over 16 percent are overweight.<sup>6</sup> Also impacted in the short term are children's academic achievements, because poor nutrition affects cognitive and psychosocial development, and causes illnesses that may result in

---

<sup>1</sup> U.S. Census Bureau, American Community Survey 1-Year Estimates, 2010.

<sup>2</sup> Id.

<sup>3</sup> Id.

<sup>4</sup> "Hungry New Yorkers Barely Hang On: 2010 Annual Hunger Survey Report." The New York City Coalition Against Hunger, November 2010.

<sup>5</sup> New York City Department of Health and Mental Hygiene. (June 2009). Childhood Obesity is a Serious Concern in New York City. *NYC Vital Signs*.

<sup>6</sup> New York City High School Survey Trend Analysis Report. 2009 Youth Risk Behavior Survey Results. Available at <http://www.nyc.gov/html/doh/html/episrv/episrv-yrbsdata.shtml>.

increased school absences and decreased ability to focus in class.<sup>7</sup> With regard to long-term outcomes, it is widely acknowledged that a poor diet can have lifelong health consequences, such as increased risk of diabetes, heart disease, and stroke.

CCC appreciates that Mayor Bloomberg, Speaker Quinn, Chair Palma and the City Council have demonstrated a strong commitment to increasing New Yorkers' access to healthy foods, and improving health outcomes for New York City's children and families. Notably, we are thankful for the successful efforts in recent years to increase SNAP enrollment in New York City and the expansion of SNAP benefit use to New York City's farmers' markets. Further, CCC is appreciative of this year's passage of Council bills to increase procurement of fresh, local foods for schools and other City agencies and to issue an annual report measuring a variety of New York City's food metrics. We are also pleased with the progress made in the fight against food insecurity that has resulted from programs such as Green Carts and FRESH. Finally, we continue to support the many exciting initiatives detailed in Speaker Quinn's FoodWorks plan.

Despite these many laudable advancements, much work remains to be done in order to increase the food security of New York City's poor and working poor families and their children. Childhood obesity and hunger remain significant obstacles to child well-being in NYC. CCC respectfully submits the following proposals to make healthy food more affordable and accessible to all New Yorkers:

## **1. Protect and Expand School Meals**

CCC strongly recommends that the City increase the availability of the Breakfast in the Classroom (BIC) program to more New York City public schools. BIC currently exists in at least one classroom in about 330 New York City schools, but is only implemented school-wide in just over 30 schools. Through its in-classroom provision of a free breakfast to all children at the start of the school day, BIC both helps to eliminate the stigma a child may otherwise feel when having to go to the cafeteria to get a free meal before the school day begins, and relieves the hardship caused to parents who would alternatively have had to rush their children to school early in the morning in order to ensure that they received breakfast. BIC therefore results in more children actually eating breakfast, which is critical to children's healthy development and ability to focus in school. Further, studies have shown that students who regularly eat breakfast in their classrooms have better attendance and behavior, as well as improved cognitive function and academic achievement on standardized tests.<sup>8</sup> In short, BIC increases low-income children's consistent access to needed food, and ultimately has a positive impact on their overall physical well-being and school performance.

---

<sup>7</sup> Sell, K., Zlotnik, S., Noonan, K., and Rubin, D. The Recession and Food Security. *The Effect of Recession on Child Well-Being*. November 2010.

<sup>8</sup> Ortiz, B. (Jan. 2011). "Why Breakfast in the Classroom Should be in Every Classroom." Presented at the conference "What Must New York Do Now to Prevent Obesity? A Symposium of Good Ideas from the Field," New York Academy of Medicine, New York; see also Turque, B. (2009, Nov. 16). Meal program aims to keep kids hungry for learning *Washington Post*; Callaci, D. Breakfast in the Classroom a Hit. Retrieval at <http://www.uft.org/news-stories/breakfast-classroom-hit/>.

CCC also supports the protection and expansion of the Universal School Meals (“USM”) program. In many of our public schools, an eligible child may receive a free meal only after his or her parent fills out an application, which then needs to be properly collected and verified. Some parents have difficulty understanding the necessary application forms. Other parents may not even submit an application for fear that either their immigration status will be revealed, or that their children will be stigmatized for being “poor.” Alternatively, children who attend schools that offer the USM program are automatically provided free lunch, and therefore can more easily access food. Unfortunately, in 2010 the Department of Education announced that the USM program was going to be eliminated from 136 schools. CCC strongly urges a reinstatement of USM in the schools from which it was removed, as well as an increase in the number of schools participating in USM, as it serves as a vital and consistent source of food to school children.

## **2. Eliminate the Finger-Imaging Requirement for Food Stamp Applicants**

We also overwhelmingly support the elimination of the finger-imaging requirement for SNAP applicants. This application requirement, which does not exist in any other New York State local district besides New York City, nor anywhere else in the country besides the State of Arizona, deters at least 30,000 potential eligible from applying for SNAP benefits.<sup>9</sup> To date, finger imaging has led to the identification of negligible levels of fraud, yet its administration costs the City large amounts of money while resulting in savings only to federal funds – not City dollars. Simultaneously, this practice prevents the influx of federal dollars into New York City that would otherwise result from the increased use of food stamps in local stores and farmers’ markets. As noted in the FoodWorks report, the estimated loss to New York City markets and businesses is \$54.4 million.<sup>10</sup> Given these facts, it is no surprise that the USDA publicly recognized, in March of last year, both the chilling effect that finger imaging has on SNAP applications, and the inefficacy and unnecessary cost of the procedure.<sup>11</sup>

CCC therefore strongly supports Int. No. 696, introduced in October of this year, which seeks to establish an annual finger imaging report. We look forward to the provision of the data about finger imaging that this bill requires. We anticipate this data will serve to further underscore the above points about the damaging and ineffective nature of this practice.

---

<sup>9</sup> This number was the City Council’s own estimate. See Council of the City of New York. “Council Speaker Christine C. Quinn, Council General Welfare Committee Chair Annabel Palma, Public Advocate Bill De Blasio, New York City Coalition Against Hunger, and Elected Officials Call on Mayor Bloomberg to End Finger Imaging Requirement for Food Stamp Applicants.” (Press release, Oct. 12, 2011). <http://council.nyc.gov/html/releases/101211imaging.shtml>.

<sup>10</sup> “Food Works: A Vision to Improve NYC’s Food System.” New York City Council, Christine C. Quinn, Speaker. November 2010.

<sup>11</sup> Hagstrom, J. “USDA Criticizing Food Stamp Application Methods.” *AgWeek*, 8 March 2010.

### **3. Continue to Explore Ways to Connect Residents of Food Deserts with Food**

Many low-income neighborhoods in New York City are considered “food deserts,” meaning residents lack access to nutritious and affordable foods. Traveling on public transportation with small children exacerbates the difficulties these New Yorkers face when attempting to access markets that carry fresh and reasonably priced foods, and that accept SNAP and WIC. CCC therefore supports innovative ideas for connecting New Yorkers in food deserts with healthy and affordable foods.

For example, the New York City Economic Development Corporation, through incentives, could encourage the expansion of supermarket delivery catchment areas to include underserved neighborhoods. Notably, studies show that supermarkets offering free shuttle service to residents of low-income neighborhoods experienced increased sales and an expanded customer base, thereby demonstrating that this proposal would benefit both low-income families and our City’s food retailers.<sup>12</sup> In addition, the City has some experience in shuttle service, as there was a pilot program in which school buses transported the elderly to and from supermarkets during the school day when buses would otherwise sit idle. CCC encourages the establishment of this program for parents who may otherwise have difficulty transporting their infants and toddlers, as well as grocery bags, home from a shopping trip.

Further, the City should continue to support and further develop already existing programs that increase New Yorkers’ access to, and consumption of, healthy and fresh foods. We urge the maximization of Green Cart vendors’ abilities to serve low-income neighborhoods through the continued increase in the number of wireless electronic benefit transfer (EBT) terminals available at Green Carts and the establishment of year-round Green Cart locations in sheltered spaces on public property or at community-based organizations. We also support the further expansion and incentivizing of the use of food programs, such as SNAP and WIC, at New York City farmers’ markets, as well as the continued development of the Healthy Bodegas program.

### **4. Listen to the Voices of Youth Regarding Food Issues Impacting their Lives and Communities**

CCC’s youth program, YouthAction NYC, brings together socio-economically diverse high school students from all five boroughs to inform them about New York City government and policies, and then provides them with skills for advocacy and civic engagement. Youth enter the YouthAction NYC program after completing the YouthAction Community Leadership Course (YCLC), which is a ten-week training designed to give students the tools they need to become youth advocates. YouthAction NYC Members meet weekly after school to research an issue area, and collaboratively design and execute a strategic advocacy campaign around that particular issue. This academic semester, the YouthAction NYC Members have focused their efforts on

---

<sup>12</sup> Mohan V. & Cassady D. *Supermarket Shuttle Programs; A Feasibility Study for Supermarkets Located in Low-Income, Transit Dependent, Urban Neighborhoods in California*. Center for Advanced Studies in Nutrition and Social Marketing, University of California, Davis, CA, 2002).

hunger, and therefore felt compelled to share their concerns about food insecurity in New York City and their support of Int. No. 696 in a letter to the Council. Given that the youth are in school right now, a letter from the YouthAction students to the City Council is attached.

\*\*\*

In conclusion, New York City's low-income and working families are facing ever-growing challenges in their attempts to feed their children the nutritious and affordable meals necessary for healthy growth and development. New York City must ensure that all families are provided with, and can access, nutritious foods so that their children can thrive.

Thank you for this opportunity to testify.



November 9, 2011

New York City Council General Welfare Committee  
250 Broadway  
New York, NY 10007

Dear City Council General Welfare Committee:

We are writing to you on behalf of the Citizens' Committee for Children's (CCC) YouthAction Program, which is comprised of high school students from New York City's public and private schools. CCC is a sixty-eight-year old child advocacy organization that seeks to ensure that every child is healthy, housed, educated, and safe. Since 1999, YouthAction NYC has introduced aspiring young leaders to civic engagement and advocacy opportunities. YouthAction Members (YAMs) meet once a week after school to analyze social policies, current events, and specific community issues, and to develop policy and budgetary recommendations to improve life in New York City. YAMs conduct advocacy campaigns and meet with elected and appointed officials in Albany and at City Hall.

The recession has caused many people to lose their jobs and face financial hardship. A major concern of ours is the rising number of people in New York City that are hungry. According to the New York City Coalition Against Hunger, 1.4 million New Yorkers live in a home where there isn't always enough food. One in five children live in these types of homes. According to the latest census, there has been a 50 percent increase in the number of families with children that are receiving food stamps since 2007. In addition, there are many soup kitchens and food pantries that do not have enough food to satisfy growing demand. New York City needs to find new ways to address this issue and help New Yorkers in need access food.

YouthAction Members have been working on an anti-hunger campaign by compiling information from different sources and using what we learn to advocate about this issue. For our first project we partnered up with the Yorkville Common Pantry (YCP) to put on a Thanksgiving Food Drive. We will also be volunteering at YCP by serving meals and packing pantry boxes. The most crucial part of our hunger project is to educate the public on how to access food stamps and other food assistance programs through the creation of a public service announcement. Our aim is to distribute the video to organizations that reach large numbers of New Yorkers, especially those who may need food assistance.

Citizens Committee for Children's YouthAction members support Int. No. 696, which requires data collection and reporting on finger imaging of food stamp applicants. We think it is important to gather this information, so that the Mayor and City Council can analyze the efficiency of finger imaging. The city must determine whether this practice is effective in preventing fraud and whether it keeps qualified applicants from receiving benefits. Thank you

for recognizing the need to conduct research on the consequences of finger imaging for food stamps. We look forward to seeing this bill passed into law.

We appreciate the opportunity to share our position on such an important issue, and we urge the City Council to actively seek out the voices of young people by creating opportunities for them to participate in the development of programs related to hunger.

Sincerely,

YouthAction Members  
Citizens' Committee for Children  
YouthAction NYC