



Testimony of

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Fighting Hunger in New York City

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Good afternoon. My name is Louise Feld and I am the Policy Associate for Education, Food, and Economic Security at Citizens' Committee for Children of New York (CCC). CCC is a 67-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 sobering number of New York City's families have faced increased "food insecurity," meaning that they lacked consistent access to healthy and affordable foods. According to 2009 data in our bi-annual book, *Keeping Track*, 26.6% of New York City children, and 1.5 million New Yorkers overall, received food stamp benefits from the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP). This latter figure represents a 21% increase in the number of SNAP participants from the previous year. Further, the New York City Coalition Against Hunger's Annual Hunger Survey Report, released just this morning, revealed that soup kitchens and food pantries in all five boroughs reported a "great" increase in the number of families with children who "used their services."¹

Put simply, food insecurity is taking both a short and long-term toll on the overall well-being of New York City's children. In the immediate, a lack of access to nutritious foods has contributed to alarming obesity rates among New York City students in kindergarten through eighth grade, 18% of whom are overweight and 21% of whom are obese. Poor nutrition also impacts children's academic outcomes, as it not only effects cognitive and

¹ "Hungry New Yorkers Barely Hang On: 2010 Annual Hunger Survey Report." The New York City Coalition Against Hunger, November 2010.

psychosocial development and a child's ability to focus in class, but can lead to illnesses resulting in increased school absences as well.² Further, 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 the commitment of Mayor Bloomberg, Speaker Quinn, Chair Palma and the entire City Council 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 to increase SNAP enrollment in New York City and the expansion of SNAP benefit use to New York City's farmers' markets. CCC is also appreciative of the two recent Council bills that bring affordable and nutritious foods to low-income neighborhoods: the Green Cart legislation, which created city-issued permits for fresh fruit and vegetable carts to be located in low-income communities, and Food Retail Expansion to Support Health (FRESH), which encouraged development of supermarkets in underserved neighborhoods. Further, we are looking forward to the many initiatives Speaker Quinn discussed during yesterday's unveiling of the FoodWorks food policy plan. Finally, CCC applauds the City Council's commitment and work to encourage federal passage of the Child Nutrition Reauthorization Act, without cutting SNAP.

Unfortunately, childhood obesity and hunger remain critical obstacles to child well-being in NYC and much work remains to be done to increase the food security of New York City's poor and working poor families and their children. CCC therefore suggests the

² Sell, K., Zlotnik, S., Noonan, K., and Rubin, D. The Recession and Food Security. *The Effect of Recession on Child Well-Being*. November 2010.

following proposals, which will make a healthy diet more affordable and accessible to all New Yorkers:

Protect and Expand School Meals

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, or may not even submit an application for fear that their children will be stigmatized for being “poor.” Alternatively, children who attend schools that offer the Universal School Meals program, are automatically provided free lunch, and therefore can more easily access food. Unfortunately, this year the Universal School Meals program was eliminated from 136 schools, and is set to be eliminated at more schools in this coming year. CCC not only strongly urges the City not to remove Universal School Meals from those schools slated to lose the program, but also believes the Universal School Meals program should be expanded, as it serves as a vital and consistent source of food to school children.

CCC also recommends that the City increase the availability of Breakfast in the Classroom (BIC) programs, which currently exist in at least one classroom in 178 New York City schools, but are only implemented school-wide in 19 schools. Eating breakfast in the classroom eliminates the stigma a child may feel when receiving a free school meal and results in a demonstrated increase in the number of children who actually eat breakfast. Studies have also 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.³ BIC increases low-income children's consistent access to food, and ultimately has a positive impact on their overall physical well-being and school performance.

Eliminate the Finger-Imaging Requirement for Food Stamp Applicants

We also strongly support the elimination of the finger-imaging requirement for Food Stamp applicants. This application requirement, which does not exist in any other New York State local district besides New York City, deters potential eligible applicants from applying for SNAP benefits, and, to date, has led to the identification of negligible levels of fraud. Moreover, the City must expend its own resources in its efforts to find this minimal fraud, and the resulting savings are only to federal funds – not city dollars. As noted in the FoodWorks report, on top of these administrative costs, the City suffers an indirect economic loss, as eligible New Yorkers do not apply for food stamps, resulting in an estimated \$54.4 million loss of federal food stamp benefits that would be spent in local markets and businesses.⁴ Notably, in March of this year, the USDA publicly recognized both the chilling effect that finger imaging has on SNAP applications and the inefficacy and unnecessary cost of the procedure, and therefore has begun to explore whether it can halt use of finger imaging in the few states – four in total – in which it is actually still administered.⁵

³ Turque, B., "Meal program aims to keep kids hungry for learning," Washington Post, 16 Nov. 2009; "10 Reasons to Try Breakfast in the Classroom," at http://www.fns.usda.gov/cnd/breakfast/expansion/10reasons-breakfast_flyer.pdf, last accessed on November 22, 2010; Callaci, D., "Breakfast in the Classroom a Hit," at <http://www.uft.org/news-stories/breakfast-classroom-hit/>, last accessed on November 22, 2010.

⁴ "Food Works: A Vision to Improve NYC's Food System." New York City Council, Christine C. Quinn, Speaker. November 2010.

⁵ Hagstrom, J. "USDA Criticizing Food Stamp Application Methods." *AgWeek*, 8 March 2010.

Encourage Provision of Free Shuttle Services to Supermarkets for Consumers Residing in Underserved Neighborhoods

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. 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.⁶ In addition, the City has some experience in shuttle service, as there was a pilot program whereby school buses transported the elderly to and from supermarkets during the school day when buses would otherwise sit idle. CCC encourages the expansion of this program to include parents who may otherwise have difficulty transporting their infants and toddlers, as well as grocery bags, home from a shopping trip.

Support the Green Cart Initiative and Adopt CCC’s Recommendations for Enhancing the Initiative

CCC also urges the City to maximize the presence of New York City produce vendors (“Green Carts”) in low-income neighborhoods in order to increase families’ access to, and consumption of, healthy and affordable produce. Earlier this year, CCC issued a

⁶ 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).

report based on a qualitative study we conducted involving constituents in food deserts and Green Cart vendors to assess the impact that Green Carts had during the first year of its implementation. Our study showed that low-income neighborhood residents patronized Green Carts and found them to be a good source of affordable and fresh produce in their neighborhoods, which often lacked other nutritious and reasonably priced food-retail options.

CCC encourages the City to facilitate year-round Green Cart access for low-income neighborhood residents by investigating whether Green Carts can be located in sheltered spaces on public property or at community-based organizations during the winter months, a proposal that would also have the added impact of improving Green Cart profitability for cart vendors. In addition, the City can further improve access to produce for low-income New Yorkers and profitability for Green Cart vendors by working with the State to increase the number of wireless electronic benefit transfer (EBT) terminals available at Green Carts.

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.