



UNITED
NEIGHBORHOOD
HOUSES

Settlement Houses on the Frontlines of Alleviating Food Insecurity

Published By:

United Neighborhood Houses

October 2022

Written By:

Irene Lew, UNH Senior Research Analyst



Introduction

Even before the COVID-19 pandemic, nearly 1.1 million New York City residents were considered food insecure in 2019 (12.5 percent), equivalent to more than 1 in every 10 New York City residents.¹ Food insecurity is defined by the US Department of Agriculture as households whose access to adequate food is limited by a lack of money or other resources.² Widespread job loss and the economic downturn triggered by the COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated this problem. Due to COVID-19, an estimated 1.4 million New Yorkers were food insecure in 2021.³ Pre-pandemic, many low-income communities of color were already struggling to obtain healthy, culturally appropriate food, especially in neighborhoods where there are few full-service supermarkets with access to fresh produce.⁴ Limited access to healthy food options contribute to health disparities across our city that were laid bare and magnified by the pandemic.

Prior to the pandemic, settlement houses provided food year-round across their programs, from early childhood and afterschool programs to homeless shelters and older adult centers. As neighborhood-based organizations embedded into their communities, settlement houses were well-equipped to address the urgent need for food when the pandemic hit. During the pandemic, settlement houses within United Neighborhood Houses' (UNH) membership network intensified their efforts to address growing hunger and to feed their communities. They created or expanded food pantries; prepared and delivered hot meals; ensured that food grown on urban farms was distributed to community members in need of fresh produce; provided assistance with paying for groceries; and facilitated enrollment into SNAP (Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, formerly known as food stamps) to ensure that families were able to afford food on a longer-term basis.

This brief provides an overview of persistent food insecurity in New York City and within the communities of the UNH settlement house network, using data from a 2021 survey of 1,078 families within the UNH settlement house network and from the Census Bureau's Household Pulse Survey. The brief also highlights the ways that settlement houses stepped up to address the need for healthy food in their communities during the pandemic, and the impact of record-high inflation and inconsistent funding on the ability of settlement houses to improve food access in their communities. Finally, it concludes with key recommendations for both philanthropy and government to reduce food insecurity in New York City.

¹ Feeding America, Map the Meal Gap. Food Insecurity among Overall (all ages) Population in the Food Bank For New York City Service Area (Before COVID-19): <https://map.feedingamerica.org/county/2019/overall/new-york/organization/food-bank-for-new-york-city>

² Coleman-Jensen, Alisha, Rabbitt, Matthew P., et al. USDA Economic Research Service. "Household Food Security in the United States in 2020." <https://www.ers.usda.gov/publications/pub-details/?pubid=102075>. September 2021.

³ Mayor's Office of Food Policy. "Food Metrics Report 2021." <https://www1.nyc.gov/assets/foodpolicy/downloads/pdf/Food-Metrics-Report-2021.pdf>.

⁴ <https://www1.nyc.gov/site/planning/about/press-releases/pr-20190802.page>

Food insecurity remains highest among unemployed New Yorkers, New Yorkers of color, and low-income families more than two years after start of the pandemic

There was a significant expansion of food assistance at all levels of government during the pandemic. At the federal level, there was an increase in the total benefits provided to each individual and household receiving SNAP, as well as the creation of relief programs such as Pandemic Electronic Benefit Transfer (P-EBT) that provided eligible families with children with temporary emergency nutrition benefits. The expanded federal Child Tax Credit also played an important role in combating food insecurity, with one study estimating that the first round of Child Tax Credit advance payments helped reduce food insecurity among households with children by 26 percent.⁵ In May 2020, New York State launched Nourish New York, an initiative focused on enabling food banks to purchase surplus products from New York state food producers and farmers so that they could provide healthy food to communities while also supporting farmers who are recovering from COVID-19-related economic losses.⁶ Locally, New York City invested \$25 million in the city's pantry system, established a \$50 million emergency food reserve, and created the GetFoodNYC initiative, which included free Grab and Go meals available at more than 500 Department of Education school sites citywide, and the Emergency Food Home Delivery program (later rebranded as 60+ Recovery Meals), which delivered food directly to older New Yorkers in their homes. For older adults, GetFood's home delivery food program also served as an emergency replacement for people who received congregate meals served daily at older adult centers before the pandemic.

Despite an unprecedented expansion of government assistance to combat food insecurity at the beginning of the pandemic, much of this aid has expired two years later. The expanded federal child tax credit advance payments ended in December 2021. Grab and Go meals at DOE sites ended in fall 2021 with the reopening of schools for in-person learning, and the 60+ Recovery Meals program providing home-delivered meals to older adults ended on June 30, 2022, ostensibly due to the expiration of federal stimulus funding. Furthermore, record-high inflation (food prices have increased by more than 9 percent⁷ in the past year)—coupled with unemployment that remains nearly double the national rate⁸—are contributing to food insecurity among New Yorkers. While the City's unemployment rate of 6.2 percent is down from the May 2020 peak of 21 percent, New York City continues to lag behind the rest of the state and the U.S. in restoring pandemic job losses and in rebounding to pre-pandemic levels of unemployment.⁹ Moreover, the recovery has been uneven, with high-wage economic sectors such as information technology generally faring better than low-wage sectors such as retail and leisure and hospitality that were hit hard by pandemic-induced job losses.

⁵ McKoy, Jillian. BU School of Public Health. "Advance Child Tax Credits Reduced US Food Insufficiency by 26 Percent." <https://www.bu.edu/sph/news/articles/2022/advance-child-tax-credits-reduced-us-food-insufficiency-by-26-percent/>. January 2022.

⁶ Nourish NY was signed into law in November 2021

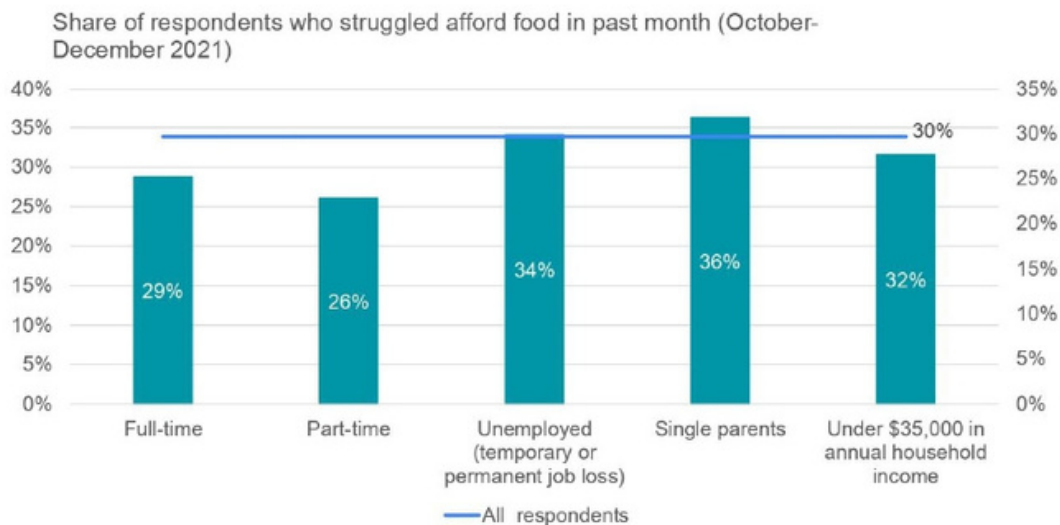
⁷ Venugopal, Arun. Gothamist. "Food prices hit both poor New Yorkers and the food pantries that support them." <https://gothamist.com/news/food-prices-hit-both-poor-new-yorkers-and-the-food-pantries-that-support-them>. July 24, 2022.

⁸ As of June 2022, the unemployment rate in NYC stood at 6.1 percent, compared to 3.6 percent for the U.S., according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics and the NYS Department of Labor.

⁹ Office of the New York State Comptroller. "New York City's Uneven Recovery: An Analysis of Labor Force Trends." <https://www.osc.state.ny.us/reports/osdc/new-york-citys-uneven-recovery-analysis-labor-force-trends>. May 2022. Unemployment data is sourced from NYS Department of Labor: <https://dol.ny.gov/local-area-unemployment-statistics>.

Data from a survey of 1,078 families within the settlement house network conducted in late 2021 by Educational Alliance (a UNH member) in collaboration with Columbia University’s National Center for Children in Poverty and UNH, found that 30 percent of respondents in the settlement house network reported difficulties with affording food in the past month. Even higher rates of 32-36 percent were reported among low-income respondents with less than \$35,000 in household income, single parents, and those who lost employment income. Even among working families, 29 percent of those working full time struggled to pay for food.

Figure 1



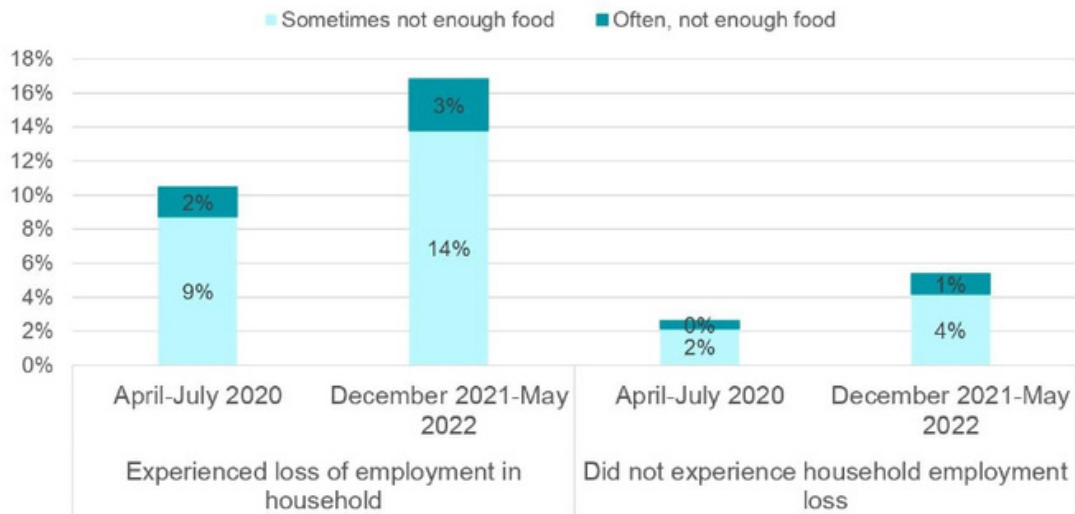
Source: UNH analysis of data from the 2021 SHARP study conducted from October 2021 to December 2021 by Educational Alliance (a UNH member) in collaboration with the National Center for Children in Poverty and UNH. Data includes only respondents affiliated with New York City-based UNH member settlement houses.

The findings from the Educational Alliance and UNH study mirror UNH’s analysis of data from the US Census Bureau’s Household Pulse Survey on food insufficiency, which refers to inadequate quantity of food intake.¹⁰ We found that rates of food insufficiency among New Yorkers who lost employment have increased since the start of the pandemic. As of December 2021-July 2022, 17 percent of residents living in the New York City metro area with loss of employment in their household reported that they “sometimes” or “often” did not have enough food in their household, up from 11 percent during April-July 2020. New Yorkers with household employment loss were three times more likely than those without household job loss to have a food hardship.

¹⁰ Baggett, T. P., Singer, D. E., Rao, S. R., O’Connell, J. J., Bharel, M., & Rigotti, N. A. (2011). Food insufficiency and health services utilization in a national sample of homeless adults. *Journal of general internal medicine*, 26(6), 627–634. <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC3101971/>

Figure 2

Share of New York City metro area residents who said that they did not have enough food in their household in the last seven days

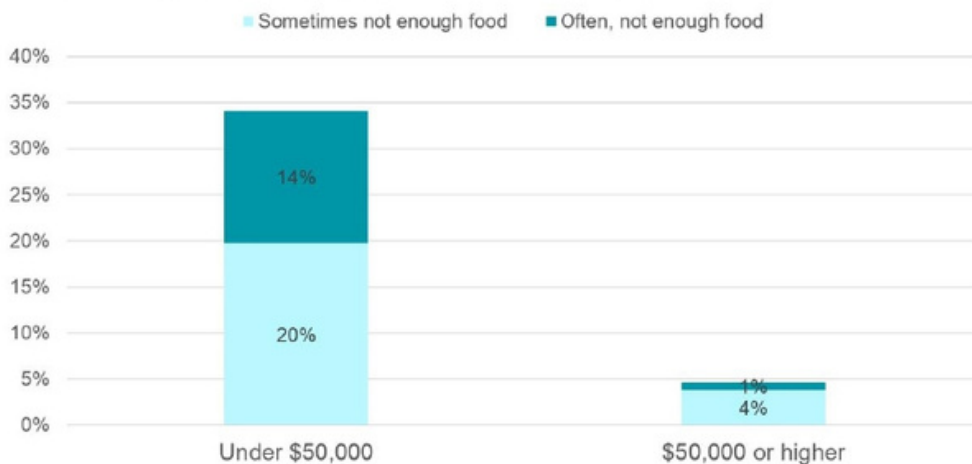


Source: UNH analysis of data from the US Census Bureau, Household Pulse Survey

Compared to those with higher incomes, households with children in the New York City metro area with annual income of less than \$50,000 were seven times more likely to report that their household “sometimes” or “often” did not have enough food to eat in the past week—more than a third of households earning less than \$50,000 a year struggled with food insufficiency, compared to only 5 percent of those with annual incomes higher than \$50,000.

Figure 3

Share of households with children who said that they did not have enough food in the past seven days (December 2021-May 2022)



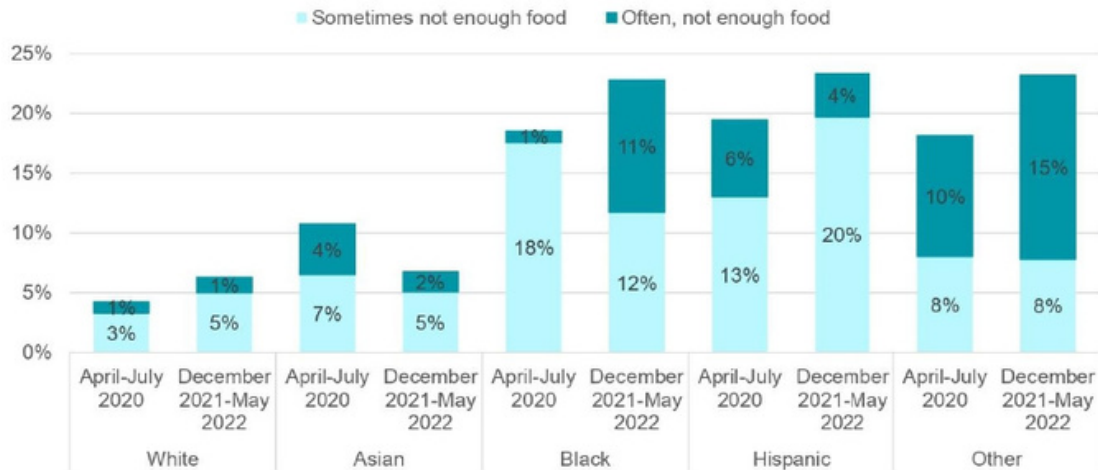
Source: UNH analysis of data from US Census Bureau, Household Pulse Survey (pooled data from December 2021-May 2022)

Furthermore, rates of food insufficiency have *increased* among Black and Hispanic residents living in the New York City metro area since the beginning of the pandemic. Nearly a quarter (24 percent) of Hispanic residents said that they did not have enough food in their household in the past seven days

(from December 2021-May 2022), up from 18 percent during April-July 2020. An even higher share—33 percent—of Black New Yorkers reported experiencing food hardship in their household in the past week, 14 percentage points higher than the share (19 percent) with food hardship during April-July 2020.

Figure 4

Share of New York City metro area residents who said that they did not have enough food in their household in the last seven days, by race/ethnicity



Source: US Census Bureau, Household Pulse Survey.

Among New Yorkers aged 60 and over, Black and Hispanic older adults are five to six times more likely than their White counterparts to experience insufficient access to food: 19 percent of Black older adults and a similar share of their Hispanic counterparts reported that their household did not have enough food to eat in the past seven days, in contrast to just 4 percent of White older adults. Similarly, data from the UNH and Educational Alliance study showed that within the settlement house network, a third of Hispanic respondents and 38 percent of Black respondents struggled to afford food in the past month during fall and winter 2021.

Financial instability and reduced incomes are contributing to widespread food insecurity

Since food can be a flexible expense, it is often one of the first expenses to be cut when households are dealing with financial instability.¹¹ As shown in Figure 5, data from the survey conducted by Educational Alliance in collaboration with UNH in 2021 revealed that among settlement house network respondents who struggled to afford food in the past month, six out of every 10 respondents reported that their household income had decreased in the past six months. Furthermore, Figure 6 shows that of respondents who experienced difficulties with paying for food, 70 percent reported that they had moderate or major financial problems. While the city’s unemployment rate of 6.1 percent (as of June 2022) is down from the May 2020 peak of 21 percent, the settlement house network continues to experience reductions in income and financial instability that contribute to heightened levels of food insecurity.

¹¹ Heflin, C., London, A. S., & Scott, E. K. (2011). Mitigating Material Hardship: The Strategies Low-Income Families Employ to Reduce the Consequences of Poverty. *Sociological Inquiry*, 81(2):223–46.

Figure 5

6-month change in household income, among those struggling to afford food in past month

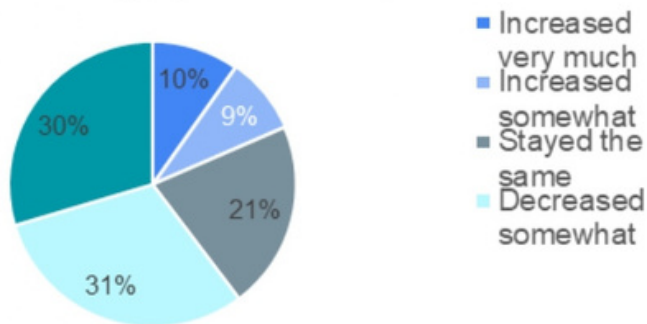
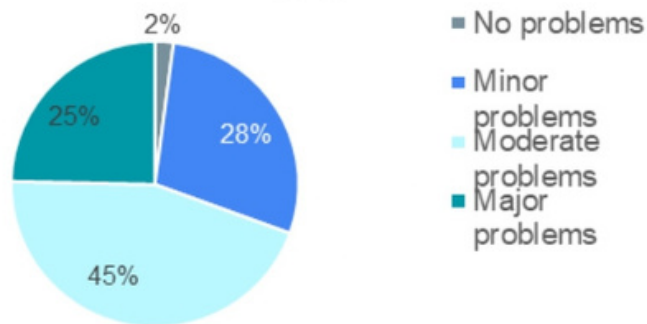


Figure 6

Family financial situation of respondents in settlement house network struggling with food costs



Source: UNH analysis of data from the 2021 SHARP study conducted from October 2021 to December 2021 by Educational Alliance (a UNH member) in collaboration with the National Center for Children in Poverty and UNH. Data includes only respondents affiliated with New York City-based UNH member settlement houses.

Need for food within settlement house network remains high—and well above pre-pandemic levels

Within the UNH network, 20 NYC settlement houses across the city operate food pantries,¹² which are pivotal to addressing the immediate need for food in the low- and moderate-income neighborhoods served by settlement houses. Before the pandemic hit, many of these communities, which often include large public housing developments, already had limited healthy food and affordable grocery store options; the onset of the pandemic exacerbated this problem. Pre-pandemic, United Community Centers (UCC), was already addressing the dearth of healthy food options in East New York through the operation of a fresh food pantry based at the Louis Pink Houses, a New York City Housing Authority (NYCHA) public housing development. In April 2020, UCC launched an additional fresh food pantry that provides 200-plus bags of produce at each distribution. Today, UCC continues to see high demand at their pantries, with families traveling long distances for a bag of fresh produce:

¹² This figure is based on applications submitted to UNH in spring 2021 for private funding of emergency food assistance.



Credit: East Side House

Ana Aguirre, UCC's Executive Director, explains:
"We have to turn people down because we don't have enough bags to distribute...we go through 120 bags in 15-20 minutes. The time to prepare and set up the bags takes longer than the distribution. Some families are coming from Jamaica, Queens [to East New York] and standing outside for almost two hours for a bag of food that is worth \$18-20."

Other settlement houses rapidly scaled up existing food pantries with the onset of the pandemic. Pre-pandemic, Queens Community House (QCH) operated two small food pantries fully staffed by volunteers, one in the Pomonok Houses, a NYCHA development in Flushing, and the other in Forest Hills. The number of households that QCH served through these two pantries grew from 100 households weekly to as many as 1,400 a week during the peak in fall 2020. QCH had to relocate staff from other programs and positions to cover food pantry operations; and established a second day of food delivery to handle increased demand. Today, traffic at QCH's food pantries remains high, with around 300 households who are in need of food each week. The Lora family, residents of the Pomonok development, noted of QCH's food pantry that "the food pantry has been such a life saver." Ms. Lora said, "the pandemic has caused a great struggle financially for my family. With the price gouging by supermarkets and being laid off from my job, the food we get from the pantry has been a great help. It's such a pleasure to know that food we get is not just canned but fresh fruits and vegetables."



Credit: Queens Community House

Kingsbridge Heights Community Center, a UNH settlement house member in the Bronx, operated a small donation-based food pantry before the pandemic. But the surge in demand for food during the pandemic prompted a rapid expansion of pantry operations. Pre-pandemic, KHCC's food pantry was serving roughly 5-20 people a week; when the pandemic hit, this surged to hundreds of people at each food distribution. Today, hundreds of families are still lining up at the food pantry operated by KHCC. Even before the pandemic, the Bronx had the highest share of residents who were food-insecure (16.4 percent) and the highest poverty rate of the five boroughs—the vast majority (97 percent) qualified for SNAP and other nutrition programs.¹³ Widespread pandemic-related job loss deepened these disparities. KHCC reports that nearly two-thirds of the families they serve experienced job loss in their household, and 75 percent became food insecure, compared to 34 percent prior to the pandemic.

Within the UNH network, other settlement houses that operated pantries prior to the pandemic have continued to report high demand. In Brooklyn, CAMBA's Beyond Hunger emergency food pantry saw a

¹³ Feeding America, Map the Meal Gap. Food Insecurity among Overall (all ages) Population in the Food Bank For Bronx County (Before COVID-19). <https://map.feedingamerica.org/county/2019/overall/new-york/county/bronx>

nearly 400 percent increase in the average number of clients served during the pandemic—at times, the pantry served more than 18,000 people a month. Even in the first few months of 2022, the number of clients using CAMBA’s food pantry is still nearly twice pre-pandemic levels. In East Harlem, the Stanley M. Isaacs Center reported that their food pantry continues to see a steady increase in clients over the past year and is now serving 1,000 clients monthly. On Staten Island, the demand at Project Hospitality’s four food pantries (two mobile pantries and two stationery pantries) remains well above pre-pandemic levels, with the number of residents they serve now still double the number they typically served before the pandemic.

While more than half of UNH settlement house members operate food pantries, settlement houses in UNH’s network also address the urgent need for food in their communities in other ways. This included distributing hot prepared meals, grocery boxes and grocery gift cards; and assistance with screening and applying for SNAP benefits. During the pandemic, 16 settlement houses¹⁴ reported providing grocery store coupons, gift cards or vouchers to their participants. Monique, a 30-year-old single mother of three young children who received a \$100 grocery gift card from Jacob A. Riis Neighborhood Settlement, said that the gift card helped fill in the one-week gap between SNAP EBT distributions. Her food budget was already stretched thin because her sister and niece had come to live with her unexpectedly. “This gift card saved my children from going hungry and they got to enjoy food they don’t get most of the time,” noted Monique. Meanwhile, settlement houses like Arab American Family Support Center (AAFSC), a settlement house serving the city’s Arab, Middle Eastern, North African, Muslim, and South Asian (AMENAMSA) immigrant and refugee communities, were able to target their gift card distribution primarily during the month of Ramadan; they also paired the gift cards with Halal food boxes donated by the Yemeni American Merchants Association.

The pandemic also triggered a surge in demand for SNAP benefits—AAFSC reported that demand for SNAP enrollment services increased by 357 percent during the pandemic. Cypress Hills has reported that the number of people they’ve served through their SNAP enrollment services has nearly doubled since the start of the pandemic.

Inflation has made it more challenging for settlement houses to alleviate hunger in their communities

Inflation is now at 40-year highs, leading to higher prices for grocery staples like meat, eggs and dairy. With higher food prices more New Yorkers are turning to food pantries. But inflation has also impacted the ability of settlement houses to meet rising demand and provide the kind of food that their communities prefer. Project Hospitality has observed that their pantries have been impacted by rising food prices, especially for dry goods, and that it has also affected the variety of food that they have been able to offer to pantry participants. BronxWorks’ Assistant Executive Director, John Weed, noted that inflation has adversely impacted their food pantry operations: “Inflation hit us hard. We’ve had to spend a lot more for the same amount [of food]. We’ve cut down to every other week because some of our donations dropped.”

¹⁴ This figure is based on applications submitted to UNH in spring 2021 for private funding of emergency food assistance.

KHCC in the Bronx has also found that prices for some food items have increased by 13 percent. Inflation is hurting both their clients and pantry operations: KHCC's food pantry manager, Caesar Tobar-Acosta, noted: "On the purchasing side, while a food item may be a couple more bucks expensive, every time I'm buying anything in scale, multiplied by 100s and 100s of items, [the increase is] notable. When inflation gets worse, we are also seeing more participants come to the pantry." Inflation has also impacted the supply chain and access to the types of culturally relevant, diverse foods that settlement houses know their communities want to eat.

Inconsistent and inadequate funding for salaries and operation costs is a challenge for many settlement houses with food pantries

Many emergency food programs operated by settlement houses operate largely with a patchwork of inconsistent public and private funding, including from the Food Bank of New York City, HRA's Emergency Food Assistance Program (EFAP), the New York State Hunger Prevention and Nutrition Assistance Program (HPNAP), discretionary City Council grants and foundation grants.

Consistent staffing also remains an ongoing challenge. Project Hospitality in Staten Island reported that by the end of 2020, they had lost 35 percent of their volunteers for food programs despite stepping up recruitment efforts to meet the increased demand for food. At the same time, many small neighborhood pantries were forced to shutter during the pandemic, which led to increased demand at Project Hospitality's pantries.



Credit: Henry Street Settlement

The private philanthropic community has recognized the critical role of settlement houses in meeting the urgent need for food throughout the pandemic. However, settlement house staff observed that institutional funders and philanthropy will often specify that 80 to 100 percent of their grants must be allocated toward food or require that food programs be staffed primarily by volunteers. However, funders are unaware of the staff capacity required to put together bags for food distribution or to facilitate deliveries. Furthermore, community residents cannot afford to work without pay. One settlement house senior staff member noted that funders “are more interested in funding the food but not the salaries.” Another settlement house staff member running the organization’s food and nutrition programs, noted that “increases in lines of funding for staff” would be very beneficial, noting that “in the emergency food world, there has been reliance on volunteers. It’s always a question of having resources where we can hire more people, whether full-time or part-time.” He added that he is seeing low staff morale and increased burnout among his team, noting that his team is “doing so much more with less people,” and that they “are serving three times the amount of people on a given food pantry distribution day with only half the amount of volunteers we used to have.” Furthermore, settlement house staff have noted that adequate funding for supplies such as bags to put the food in, tents, coolers and fridges to store the food, are necessary. Funding to address other operational costs, such as the “wear and tear” on vehicles transporting food products to pantries and other programs, is also critical.

Inconsistent funding has also impacted the diversity of food that settlement houses are able to provide through their food pantry. “We were able to provide a more varied bag of food in earlier days [of the pandemic] but that has been harder for us now that funding isn’t readily available,” noted Dennis Redmond, the Chief Strategy Officer at Queens Community House.

Settlement houses ensure that food assistance is available to all families regardless of income or immigration status

Widespread pandemic-related job losses in the restaurant and hospitality industries at the beginning of the pandemic affected many workers of color, including undocumented workers. The Mayor’s Office of Immigrant Affairs (MOIA) estimated in 2020 that 60 percent of undocumented workers in New York City lost their jobs or were at risk of losing their job during the pandemic, compared to 36 percent of all workers.¹⁵ Improving access to food is especially important for undocumented New Yorkers who have largely been left out of federal and state pandemic relief due to their immigration status. Undocumented immigrants have also been excluded from expanded unemployment insurance benefits, workers’ compensation, paid leave, and means-tested public benefits programs such as SNAP. An estimated 476,000 undocumented New Yorkers are ineligible for most relief programs and health insurance.¹⁶

Leah Gable, the Program Director of Emergency Response at Cypress Hills Local Development Corporation, a Brooklyn-based settlement house that serves residents of East New York, notes that

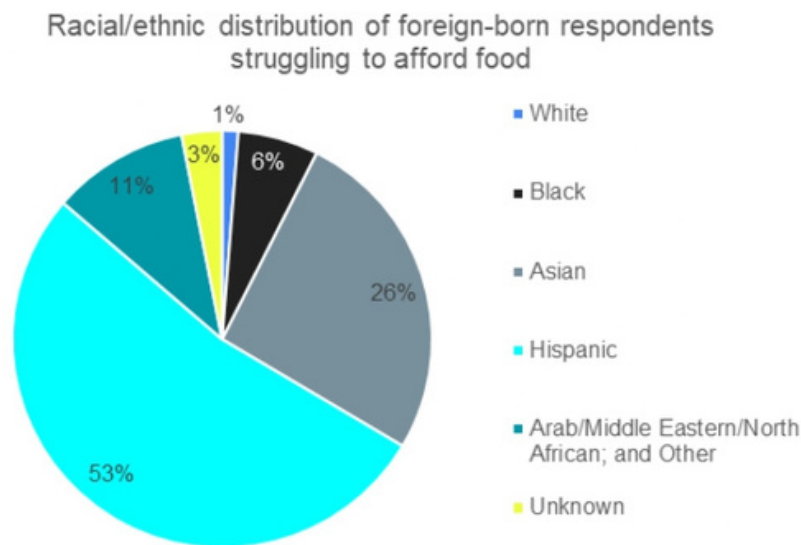
¹⁵ NYC Mayor’s Office of Immigrant Affairs, NYC Mayor’s Office for Economic Opportunity, and Department for Consumer and Worker Protection. “Factsheet: COVID-19 Health and Economic Impacts on Immigrant Communities.” <https://www1.nyc.gov/assets/immigrants/downloads/pdf/covid-immigrant-fact-sheet-20200731.pdf>.

¹⁶ Mayor’s Office of Immigrant Affairs 2021 Annual Report. <https://www1.nyc.gov/assets/immigrants/downloads/pdf/MOIA-2021-Report.pdf>

while the \$2.1 billion New York State Excluded Workers' Fund from the FY 2021-2022 State Budget did help some undocumented New Yorkers, "that money ran out very quickly," and observed that "a large portion of people visiting food pantries are undocumented and can't get access to benefits." She adds that the "typical interventions we would use to get off the pantry rolls are not available to them because they can't get SNAP or cash assistance."

According to analysis of data from a survey of 1,078 families conducted by Educational Alliance and UNH, Hispanic respondents accounted for more than half of foreign-born respondents who said that they found it challenging to pay for food in the past month (fall to winter 2021).

Figure 7



Source: UNH analysis of data from the 2021 SHARP study conducted from October 2021 to December 2021 by Educational Alliance (a UNH member) in collaboration with the National Center for Children in Poverty and UNH. Data includes only respondents affiliated with New York City-based UNH member settlement houses.

Settlement houses run food pantries that fill important gaps in assistance in their communities among immigrant families, especially those who were undocumented and were initially fearful of seeking help due to concerns around their status. Settlement houses often provide food assistance without cumbersome administrative barriers such as proof of residence or income verification, which fail to accurately capture a household's economic situation. The pandemic exacerbated hunger among undocumented families on Staten Island—in 2021, more than 80 percent of those seeking emergency food from Project Hospitality were immigrants of color, primarily from West Africa, the Caribbean, Latin American and East Asian countries. Pre-pandemic, Project Hospitality was already running two stationery food pantries and two mobile pantries. One of Project Hospitality's food pantries in the Port Richmond neighborhood of Staten Island experienced need that was, at times, triple pre-pandemic levels.

KHCC reports that more than half of the people they serve in the Bronx are immigrants or children of immigrants; and at least 30 percent of the families they serve are undocumented immigrants.

However, KHCC notes that the actual percentage is likely much higher given that people may be worried about revealing their immigration status.

Given that they are deeply embedded into their neighborhoods, settlement houses have been able to earn the trust of these families. Settlement house staff often live in and reflect the communities they serve. Caesar Tobar-Acosta, KHCC's food pantry manager, grew up in the neighborhood KHCC is based in and lives only a 10-minute walk away: "You're our neighbor, you need food. At the end of the day, your family needs to eat. We work around that."

Natalie Lozada, the Associate Executive Director of Programs at East Side House (ESH) in the South Bronx, noted that undocumented families in the Bronx are still struggling to get by due to the challenges they face with securing jobs in the formal economy. "There is an abundance of jobs, but people aren't eligible for those jobs," said Lozada. "There are undocumented people who can't be in the economic mainstream for various reasons." For example, ESH's Harvest to Haven food assistance program served a mixed-immigration status family in which the parents were undocumented, and their five children were U.S. citizens. When the pandemic hit, the father lost his job in the restaurant business and was forced to make ends meet by working as a day laborer and a street vendor. Yet his work was inconsistent, paid very little, and did not cover mounting grocery bills. Since one of the children was already enrolled in ESH's early childhood program, staff were able to ensure that the family received weekly food boxes through the Harvest to Haven program.

Settlement houses are tackling increased food insecurity among older adults

Settlement houses report that demand for food assistance from older adults has increased markedly since the start of the pandemic. Henry Street Settlement, which serves residents of the Lower East Side, noted that 90 percent of its Helpline callers at the beginning of the pandemic, including many older adults,¹⁷ were asking about how to obtain healthy food without leaving their homes and potentially exposing themselves to the virus. In response, Henry Street rapidly expanded its capacity for the Department for the Aging's (DFTA) home-delivered meals (HDM) program, which provides a daily nutritious meal five days a week to homebound older adults who have a disability or diminished mobility that makes it difficult to shop for food or prepare their meals. To alleviate food insecurity among older adults who aren't eligible for the HDM program, Henry Street created the Senior Food Delivery program, which delivers pre-made meals and grocery bags to low-income older adults living in local public housing developments.

¹⁷ <https://evgrieve.com/2020/06/how-henry-street-settlement-is-helping.html>



Credit: Stanley M. Isaacs Neighborhood Center

In the past three years, Lenox Hill Neighborhood House has experienced a spike in requests among older adults for the HDM program. Prior to the pandemic, Lenox Hill’s geriatric case management program referred 2,400 older adults to the HDM program—by last year, the number of referrals had increased by 29 percent to 3,100 older adults.¹⁸ Similarly, East Side House noted that during the pandemic, they had seen an increase in the number of home health aides who were waiting in line at food pantries on behalf of their clients who had limited mobility and were unable to visit food pantries in person. In response to the growing demand for food from homebound older adults in the Bronx, ESH applied and was awarded a HDM contract by the Department for the Aging, joining eight other settlement houses who are lead contractors or subcontractors for the HDM program. Today, ESH serves healthy, culturally appropriate meals to 900 Bronx homebound older adults per week. In addition to ensuring that homebound older adults have access to nutritious meals, the HDM program has a critical social services component that helps reduce the risk of social isolation among this population—as ESH’s Lozada put it, “Some clients only receive a hot meal if we deliver. We may be the only fresh food they get for a week. But they aren’t just getting a meal...they also receive services and a connection to the real world.”

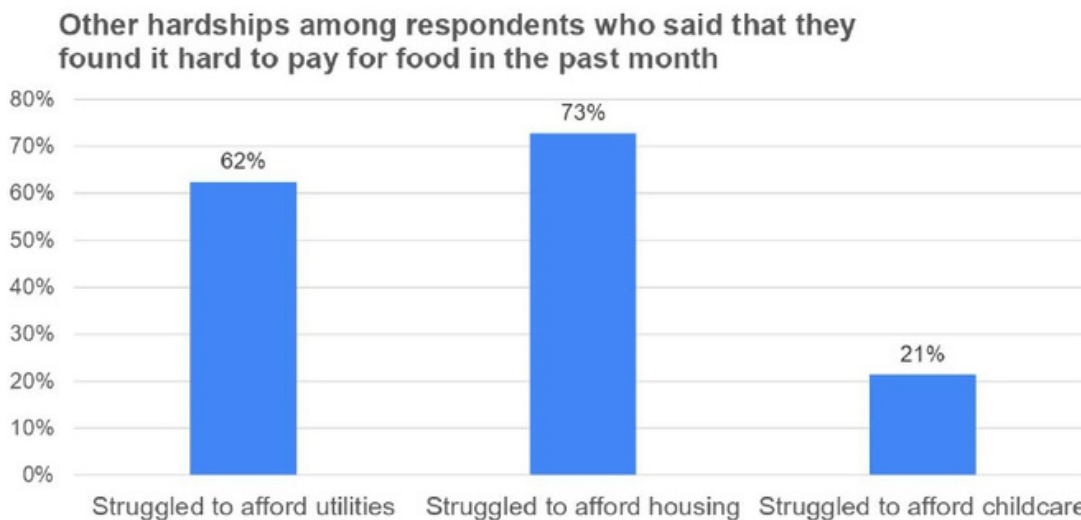
Local sustainable agriculture initiatives like UCC’s intergenerational garden, Fresh Farm, in East New York, also address the increased risk for social isolation that older adults face. UCC’s Aguirre notes that the intergenerational garden not only taps into the deep agricultural knowledge and expertise of older gardeners, but it also brings together both young people and older adults who can mutually benefit from these shared interactions.

¹⁸ Not all geriatric case management clients receive home-delivered meals.

Food assistance is often an entry point to addressing other critical needs

For more than a century, settlement houses have used a holistic, comprehensive multi-service model to support families and residents across the age continuum, and this model extends to food assistance programs run by settlement houses. Food assistance can be an entry point to additional on-site benefits and services that families may need. Conversely, families may participate in other settlement house programs and have trusted relationships with those program staff that enable them to open up to staff about their need for food. Settlement houses not only address immediate needs such as food, but they also address other critical needs such as mental health, employment, child care, health insurance coverage, and housing stability. Food-insecure families within the settlement house network are typically in an economically precarious situation and are more likely to experience other material hardships. As shown in Figure 8, data from the Educational Alliance and UNH survey found that the majority of families experiencing difficulties with affording food are also struggling to pay for other basic needs like housing, utilities and childcare.

Figure 8



Source: UNH analysis of data from the 2021 SHARP study conducted from October 2021 to December 2021 by Educational Alliance (a UNH member) in collaboration with the National Center for Children in Poverty and UNH. Data includes only respondents affiliated with New York City-based UNH member settlement houses.

All families enrolled in KHCC's Food Pantry program are screened for other unmet needs by KHCCConnect, KHCC's agency-wide case management unit. KHCCConnect follows up with families to provide referrals, information, and advocacy based on their need for other wraparound supportive services; these services can include assistance with housing and enrollment in public benefit programs such as SNAP; on-site early childhood education and afterschool programming for their children; English

for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) classes, job training, mental health counseling; and parenting education classes. Staff from other programs will often be on hand to provide information

about their programs at food distributions. As KHCC's Tobar-Acosta explained, pantry participants sometimes note that they are "just here for food," but their one-on-one conversations with program staff at food distributions reveal other needs or concerns, from ESOL classes and resume help to housing instability.

In a similar vein, Project Hospitality conducts benefits screenings at their food pantries, and allows food pantry participants to get their taxes done through the organization's free tax prep program at the same time they're picking up food. "We bring people in with offering of food, and then they see there's all these other services," explained Alex Hughes, the Director of Food and Nutrition Services at Project Hospitality. "We are trying to make sure that people are knowledgeable about what kinds of benefits are out there."

Queens Community House also views its food pantries as entry points to other services families in Central Queens might need, and strives to use a coordinated, holistic approach to providing emergency food assistance. At the start of the pandemic, QCH assigned a Family Support Coordinator (FSC) to each pantry; the FSCs engage with participants while they're on line, do informal assessments, and make appointments to meet separately with families in need of additional support and services. The FSCs then follow up with an in-depth assessment, screen families for benefits like SNAP, Medicaid, and WIC, and make internal referrals to other on-site QCH programs encompassing housing, immigration, legal assistance, mental health, youth and workforce services.

The majority of those receiving food assistance from East Side House (ESH) are already enrolled in an existing program or have children in an afterschool program. However, ESH also ensures that food assistance recipients new to ESH are aware of ESH's other programs and can access its network of on-site services. "We get to know people on the [food distribution] lines," explained ESH's Lozada. "We ask them: what else do you need? We make ourselves available and get the word out about our programs." ESH's Primary Person Model ensures that every student and family enrolled in ESH programs is connected to a staff person who is responsible for building a relationship with them and assessing their needs, including regular assessments for their need for food.

Similarly, Sunnyside Community Services (SCS) notes that SCS program participants make up at least 40 percent of their food pantry clients, with clients from ESOL classes, those attending the Cornerstone community center, and youth services participants directed to the food pantries based on their need for food. For example, Cecilia, a SCS food pantry program user and Elmhurst resident came to the food pantry in winter 2021 after a consultation with SCS's immigrant services team to apply for pandemic economic relief.

As at many other settlement houses, many families who receive food assistance from BronxWorks are also participants in other BronxWorks programs, with their children often enrolled in a BronxWorks-operated early childhood care center, afterschool/summer camp, or teen program. At the same time, BronxWorks' food pantries also reach families new to the organization. BronxWorks staff will make referrals to other programs within and outside of the organization based on information provided during an intake/assessment prior to the participant's initial receipt of pantry bags. For

example, Felicia,¹⁹ a single mother of two children from the Dominican Republic, found herself jobless for the first time in more than a decade and was worried about her children going hungry. “With no income and the bills piling up, I felt like I was in a no-win situation,” explained Felicia. Felicia visited BronxWorks’ Carolyn McLaughlin Community Center in the South Bronx and not only received food but was also screened to determine her eligibility for benefits like SNAP and health insurance. She was able to enroll into SNAP and into a no-cost health plan that enabled her and her children to continue receiving medical care. Following her visit to the food pantry, Felicia also enrolled in a BronxWorks job skills training program that eventually helped her secure a new job.

Beyond combating food insecurity, settlement house food programs also support farmers of color and strengthen the economic mobility of young people

Through its Harvest to Haven (H2H) program, East Side House purchases surplus crop from farmers, and distributes it, along with other pantry items, to South Bronx families in need of food. H2H has an important racial justice component, as the majority of the surplus farmer crop is sourced from the Federation of Southern Cooperatives, a network of Black farmers in the South. ESH feeds over 5,000 people per week through H2H. Another key part of the H2H program is youth workforce development. ESH hires and trains young people enrolled in their programs to work and volunteer in the H2H warehouse in Mott Haven. Even before the pandemic, data from the Census Bureau’s American Community Survey underscored the need for good-paying jobs for young people in the South Bronx: the share of young people aged 16-24 who were out of school, out of work in Mott Haven/Hunts Point was 26 percent, the highest disconnection rate across all New York City neighborhoods.²⁰

East Side House’s Lozada noted that the Harvest to Haven model was built on the goal of empowering and employing their students; these students had the opportunity to give back to their neighborhoods ravaged by COVID while simultaneously learning new skills that will help them secure higher-paying jobs and earn money that would support themselves and their families:

“We started off with a bunch of kids who were trying to figure out their way. College is not for everyone. We understood that before COVID. We wanted to keep them engaged. Young people were frustrated about what was happening in their communities and Harvest to Haven was a safe place where they could give back and contribute to the same community that they lived in. [With money from H2H jobs], they were paying things like Con Ed bills and contributing to other household necessities. We were also creating this new pipeline to lucrative jobs through trainings that helped them get certifications like food handlers’ and commercial driver’s license. The kids learn that no one’s going to fight for our communities more than we are. Why shouldn’t we help and support them?”

¹⁹ This is not the participant’s real name.

²⁰ Based on UNH analysis of 5 year 2015-2019 American Community Survey data from US Census Bureau.



Credit: East Side House

With a similar goal of strengthening the economic security of young people in the South Bronx, East Side House is currently in the process of building a community teaching kitchen in Mott Haven that would create an important pipeline for Bronx youth to enter the city's food industry. The teaching kitchen would provide an estimated 50 young people per year with on-site training opportunities in skills such as nutrition, culinary arts and food handling.²¹ Meals cooked by staff and trainees in the teaching kitchen would also be distributed to older adults participating in the home-delivered meals program, as well as to children in ESH's afterschool programs.

In East New York, United Community Centers' (UCC) food pantries and urban farms provide young people with valuable work-based learning opportunities, as well as income to support themselves and their families. UCC's food pantries and urban farms are partially staffed by 35 paid youth interns. Ana Aguirre, UCC's Executive Director, notes that the money youth receive from these internships was intended to be a stipend for their own expenses, but due to pandemic-related job loss, these stipends have more recently gone toward their families' household income. On the Lower East Side, Henry

²¹ Sequeira, Robbie. Bronx Times. "Mott Haven's Community Teaching Kitchen aim to produce 8,000 free meals per day in borough's major food desert." <https://www.bxtimes.com/mott-haven-community-teaching-kitchen-aims-for-8000-meals-per-week-in-boroughs-food-desert/>.

Street Settlement’s Community Response Team (CRT), which provides meaningful work and career development opportunities for low-income young adults, also engages young adults to serve as meal deliverers in their emergency food access programs.

In a similar vein, Stanley M. Isaacs Neighborhood Center’s Community Kitchen also has a critical workforce development component. The Community Kitchen is a newly renovated, commercial-grade kitchen that prepared and distributed 1,600 meals a week during May-August 2020. The Community Kitchen is staffed by young adults who recently completed Stanley Isaacs’ culinary arts training program, as well as New Yorkers who lost their jobs due to the pandemic, including displaced food service/restaurant workers.

Settlement house food programs also play key role in improving public health

Food insecurity can be a driver of poor health outcomes and chronic diseases, including kidney disease, obesity, cardiovascular disease, and diabetes.²² A 2021 New York Health Foundation survey of 1,507 New York State residents found that nearly half (48 percent) of all food-insecure respondents rated their health as “fair” or “poor,” compared to less than a quarter (23 percent) of food-secure respondents.²³ Settlement houses are not only meeting New Yorkers’ immediate need for food, but they are focused on improving the quality of the food that their communities eat, especially their access to fresh produce; and to educating and empowering their communities to consume healthier foods that will lead to better health outcomes. As of 2021, 11 settlement houses (equivalent to more than a quarter of UNH settlement house members in New York City) provide food through their own urban farms or farm stands.²⁴

For example, Lenox Hill Neighborhood House applied the farm-to-table concept to their food services program by ensuring that the estimated 400,000 meals that it serves annually through their programs—including two older adult centers, a homeless shelter, a Head Start program and afterschool program—are healthy, locally grown, and sustainable. Lenox Hill now serves more than 90 percent fresh produce and regional grains; makes nearly everything from scratch; and serves meals that are more than 60 percent vegetarian. Lenox Hill hosts a weekly Greenmarket food box program and serves or distributes more than 60 tons of fresh, local food a year.

Queens Community House (QCH) also integrates health and wellness into their food access programs. In addition to operating a food pantry in the Pomonok Houses NYCHA development, QCH operates a community garden with 21 outdoor plots and an indoor hydroponic bed. QCH also convenes community residents on a monthly basis for instructional cooking classes, nutritional discussion and healthy meal sharing.

Project Hospitality has made a commitment to increasing the amount of fresh produce it distributes through its food assistance programs and has even shifted the preferences of their pantry

²² Food Research and Action Center. “Hunger, Poverty, and Health Disparities During COVID-19 and the Federal Nutrition Programs’ Role in an Equitable Recovery.” <https://frac.org/wp-content/uploads/COVIDResearchReport-2021.pdf>. September 2021.

²³ NY Health Foundation. NYHealth Survey of Food and Health. <https://nyhealthfoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/08/NYHealth-survey-of-food-and-health.pdf>. August 2022.

²⁴ This figure is based on applications submitted to UNH in spring 2021 for private funding of emergency food assistance.

participants toward fresh product. Thanks in large part through participation in the state's Nourish New York program, produce accounted for around 40 percent of the food Project Hospitality gave out in the last fiscal year, compared to 15-20 percent in previous years. "Nourish New York has been critical for us in meeting the need [for farm-fresh product]," explained Project Hospitality's Hughes, who noted that he's made connections with farmers spanning dairy, produce, and meat so that they always have enough product for their food programs. He noted that if Nourish New York ended, this would "cause serious reverberations felt by nonprofits and farmers."

Increasing access to fresh, healthy foods at their food pantry is also a priority for KHCC. The Bronx is the unhealthiest county in New York state, ranking in last place (62).²⁵ Many residents of the neighborhoods served by Bronx settlement houses are characterized by high rates of diabetes, heart disease, hypertension, and obesity, among other chronic health conditions.²⁶ KHCC partners with other local organizations to increase nutrition education, including at Riverdale Senior Services, and works with Dewitt Clinton High School's hydroponic farms to ensure that KHCC receives at least a weekly donation of fresh produce for their pantry. As KHCC's Tobar-Acosta explains, "produce is getting more expensive...we want to remove barriers to eating healthier. We do as much work as we can to pour the best things we can in our communities. It gets difficult when produce enters the Bronx but doesn't get to communities."



Credit: Kingsbridge Heights Community Center

"We learned that people were not only looking for fresh, affordable food in their communities but the kind of food that reflect their cultures and diets; and that you can't find in large supermarkets," explained Ana Aguirre of United Community Centers, which has been a leader in growing food locally with community residents and community input.

Settlement houses strive to ensure that food is not only healthy, but culturally appropriate. Research has shown that a lack of culturally inclusive food can be a barrier to people accessing food security programs and that dietary restrictions related to cultural or religious beliefs may impact participation in these programs if more inclusive options such as halal or kosher food are not available.²⁷ For UCC, access to healthy, culturally appropriate food was an entry point to addressing the underlying health

²⁵ Nicols, Adam. Patch. "Bronx Ranked NY's Sickest County, Massive Disparity Seen In City." <https://patch.com/new-york/new-york-city/bronx-ranked-nys-sickest-county-massive-disparity-seen-city>. March 19, 2019.

²⁶ NYC Department of Health and Mental Hygiene. New York City Community Health Profiles. <https://www1.nyc.gov/site/doh/data/data-publications/profiles.page#bx>

²⁷ Northwest Harvest and Growing Food Justice Across Washington. "Community Perspectives: Improving Food Access." https://foodshopperequity.org/wp-content/uploads/Community-Perspectives-Report_Rev1221.pdf.

challenges faced by residents of East New York. UCC's two urban farms, along with their support of a network of community gardeners in East New York, help increase access to locally grown produce, especially hard-to-find ethnic produce such as long beans, bitter melon, and callaloo.



UCC's urban farms are an important source for fresh food in a community that is devoid of healthy food options. The NYC Department of Health classified Community Board 5, which encompasses East New York neighborhoods served by UCC as a "food swamp," where unhealthy food is more readily available than healthy food, and bodegas and fast-food chains make up nearly 80 percent of the direct food source.²⁸ Given ongoing food insecurity and the demand for fresh food at their

²⁸https://docs.google.com/viewer?url=https://github.com/NYCPlanning/labs-cd-needs-statements/raw/master//BK%20DNS%20FY%202023/FY2023_Statement_BK05.pdf

pantries, UCC modified their existing model so that all the food grown on any of their farm sites is provided to the community free of charge, rather than selling this produce at their farmers' markets. Investing in local sustainable agriculture run by community residents, such as UCC's urban farms, is an important part of the solution to addressing the limited access and affordability of healthy food in East New York.

Settlement houses also use food distributions as opportunities for outreach and public education around important community health issues. UCC provides information on HIV/STI education and prevention (including free pregnancy tests); and COVID-19 education and prevention, including free COVID-19 tests and a vaccine clinic at farmers' market. Project Hospitality provides COVID-19 testing, vaccines, and screening for hypertension and diabetes at two of its food pantries. Community Health Workers stationed at these pantries provide integrated screenings, workshops and referrals for clinical services in English, Spanish, Mandarin, and Cantonese.

Like Project Hospitality, Henry Street Settlement has integrated the Community Health Worker model into their Lower East Side Mobile Market, which provides bimonthly bags of healthy groceries and pantry items for families who currently reside in public housing. Community Health Workers provide case management, health care services, and referrals to various wraparound services to all public housing residents who participate in the LES Mobile Market. Marjolin, a 36-year-old mother with a lifelong case of severe asthma, and her son receive biweekly deliveries of food through the LES Mobile Market. She noted that these deliveries have "made a big difference," adding that "there are vegetables, fruit, bread, beans, tortillas—basic food that I really need for my health."

Recommendations

More than two years after the start of the pandemic, Census data shows that many New Yorkers of color, including older adults, and low-income families with children, are still struggling with sufficient access to food. Data on the UNH settlement house network demonstrate that the benefits of the improving economy are failing to reach the families UNH members serve—with reduced incomes and high levels of financial instability, many settlement house families continue to struggle with putting food on the table. Here are our recommendations for philanthropy and government to strengthen the capacity of settlement houses to alleviate food insecurity in New York City:

- **Increase government and private investment in food pantries**

Settlement houses are reporting that demand at food pantries continues to be well above pre-pandemic levels and shows no signs of abating. Yet record-high inflation and other barriers are preventing settlement houses from ensuring that their food pantries and other emergency assistance programs remain adequately staffed and have the kinds of culturally appropriate food that their communities want to eat. All of this underscores the need for increased and sustainable public and private investment in food pantries, especially for staffing and operational support. It is critical to increase funding levels for City government programs such as the NYC Council's Food Pantries Initiative and HRA's Community Food Connection program (formerly known as the Emergency Food

Assistance Program). At the state level, boosting funding for the Hunger Prevention and Nutrition Assistance Program (HPNAP) and Nourish New York would also help meet the demand for food. These programs are essential to ensuring that settlement houses and other CBOs have the capacity to provide food to all those in need of it, as well as to improve the diversity and nutrition quality of available food.

- **Ensure adequate funding for the Home-Delivered Meals Program**

To combat food insecurity among older adults of color, the City must continue to ensure adequate funding of DFTA's HDM program, which has been an important lifeline for many older adults with limited mobility issues who are unable to leave their homes or cannot prepare food on their own. The FY 2023 City budget included nearly \$12 million in funding that raised meal reimbursement rates for the HDM program to \$11.78 per meal and brings rates in line with the estimated average cost to a provider to produce and deliver a home-delivered meal in an urban area.²⁹ But there are many additional funding needs for the HDM system due to a legacy of persistent City underfunding, including much-needed infrastructure such as new vans and van repairs.

- **Continue to offer grab-and-go meals to older adults**

Congregate meals at older adult centers can help address food insecurity among this group. But many older adults are still hesitant to return to eating in congregate settings due to COVID-19. The City must allow flexibility for older adult centers and other CBO spaces to provide grab-and-go meals if that is what works best for the community, rather than solely requiring congregate meals. While the City has suggested grab-and-go meals will soon end, these meals must continue to be a viable option for the foreseeable future.

- **Invest in community gardens, urban farms and other programs that improve access to fresh produce**

To address the health disparities laid bare by the pandemic, government and private philanthropy also need to improve access to healthy, culturally appropriate food and make it accessible to all New Yorkers, regardless of where they live. This includes both public and private investment in local sustainable agriculture initiatives such as community gardens and urban farms, as well as ensuring adequate funding for the state's Nourish New York program, which has enabled settlement houses like Project Hospitality to significantly increase the amount of fresh produce distributed to their communities.

- **Improve coordination and effectiveness of food policies and programs in New York City**

The patchwork of public funding for food assistance highlights the urgent need for improved collaboration between many different city and state agencies that are involved in food policies and programs. In New York City alone, the NYC Human Resources Administration/Department of Social Services, the Department of

²⁹ Ziegler, Jessica et al. Mathematica Policy Research. "Older Americans Act Nutrition Programs Evaluation: Meal Cost Analysis." <https://acl.gov/sites/default/files/programs/2017-02/NSP-Meal-Cost-Analysis.pdf>. September 2015.

Health and Mental Hygiene, the Department of Education, the Department for the Aging, Department of Homeless Services, and the Department of Youth and Community Development are just a few of the agencies that play a key role in food policies and programs. One of the goals laid out in the City's 10-year food policy plan, *Food Forward NYC*, is strengthening interagency and cross-sector coordination around the development and implementation of food policy. In the first year of the pandemic, the City had an unprecedented level of coordination across city agencies and with settlement houses and other CBOs via the leadership of a food czar. To reduce silos between city agencies when it comes to food programming, the City should empower the Mayor's Office of Food Policy (MOFP) to oversee and support the administration of food for all City Agencies, including the DOE's Office of Food & Nutrition Services. The City should also increase resources for the MOFP to expand staffing and establish substantive experts to work with each City agency to inform contracting, procurement and nutritional standard practices. MOFP should also be empowered to administer and oversee future the city's emergency food response work so that the city does not have to establish temporary food czar positions and task forces. This could include the conversion of the director of the MOFP into a permanent food czar position with the authority to coordinate interagency food relief programming.³⁰

- **Ensure children and older adults have year-round access to food through adequate funding of the Child and Adult Care Food Program**

Even before the pandemic, UNH settlement house members ensured that children enrolled in childcare centers, home-based childcare providers, and afterschool programs received year-round access to food. In 2019, UNH settlement house members served nearly 1.4 million meals and snacks in child care centers alone.³¹ The Child and Adult Care Food Program (CACFP), a federally-funded program administered by the NY State Department of Health, enables settlement houses that operate child care centers, home-based day care providers, afterschool programs, and older adult day care centers, to be reimbursed for providing nutritious meals and snacks to eligible children and adults. New York State must advocate for adequate federal funding for CACFP.

- **Permanently extend universal school meals statewide**

School meal programs are an important safety net for families. When the pandemic shuttered public schools and millions of children lost access to school meals, Congress and the USDA provided nutrition waivers that enabled schools and CBOs to offer free meals to all children. New York State should advocate for the Universal School Meals Program Act of 2021,³² which would create a permanent federally funded universal school meals program. New York City has had a universal school meals program in place since 2017, which has increased the number of children eating school food. If the federal government does not act, New York State should cover the cost of providing free breakfast and lunch for students in grades K-12 across the state, which is estimated at roughly \$200 million.³³ States like California and Maine recently committed to provide free school meals for all students when the federal universal meals program ends.

³⁰ This recommendation was based on recommendations originally made and provided by Equity Advocates

³¹ UNH 2019 Member Survey

³² Food Research and Action Center. Support the Universal School Meals Program Act 2021.

<https://frac.org/wp-content/uploads/cnr-support-the-universal-school-meals-program-act-2019-1.pdf>

³³ The proposed legislation would cover New York City. <https://www.news10.com/news/push-for-nys-to-provide-free-breakfast-and-lunch-for-all-students/>

- **Improve participation in the Summer Meals program**

Summer is historically a difficult time for families dependent on school meals, and the City's summer meals program ensures that children are fed during the summer months. Although the program is free to all youth under the age of 19 and does not require paperwork, the program is underutilized³⁴—according to one recent study, parents found it stigmatizing or embarrassing to visit a school for a meal in the summer, and they preferred that their children ate meals at public drop-in sites such as parks or libraries.³⁵ New York City should focus on making schools more welcoming places for families to receive meals and expand the number of community sites that serve summer meals. Furthermore, given the popularity of grab-and-go-meals distributed at schools during the pandemic, New York should advocate for easing federal regulations for the summer meal program, which include the requirement that meals must be eaten on site and prohibit parents from taking food off site.³⁶

- **Provide food benefits for undocumented New Yorkers**

With the exception of the Excluded Workers' Fund, undocumented New Yorkers have been excluded from most federal, state and local pandemic relief and have been forced to turn to food pantries to fill in the gaps. The federal government allows states to administer programs to supply food benefits in lieu of SNAP to noncitizens who do not qualify for SNAP benefits, although these programs would require states to front the cost without federal support.³⁷ In June 2022, California became the first state to provide undocumented residents over age 55 with state-subsidized food assistance benefits, approving \$35 million through the 2022-23 state budget to expand benefits to this population; the funding is expected to increase to \$113.4 million annually in 2025-26 and reach about 75,000 undocumented Californians aged 55 and older.³⁸ New York State, however, does not provide a benefit to noncitizens in lieu of SNAP. To alleviate food insecurity among this population, New York State should create and fund a standalone program for an estimated 650,000 undocumented New Yorkers³⁹ covering all ages that would provide food benefits similar to SNAP.

³⁴ Community Food Advocates. "Summer Meals: We Can Increase Participation."

https://docs.wixstatic.com/ugd/008c07_b787d36640014c6ba2349d36d54ddb36.pdf

³⁵ Hill, Kathryn. "Summer Meals for NYC Students: Understanding the Perspectives and Experiences of Families."

<https://steinhardt.nyu.edu/research-alliance/research/publications/summer-meals-nyc-students>

³⁶ Proposed in Food Forward NYC: A 10-Year Food Policy Plan. February 2021.

<https://www1.nyc.gov/assets/foodpolicy/downloads/pdf/Food-Forward-NYC.pdf>

³⁷ <https://www.cunyunurbanfoodpolicy.org/news/2016/11/9/policy-brief-immigrants-and-food-access>

³⁸ Montalvo, Melissa. *The Fresno Bee*. "Historic investment.' California makes history with food benefits for undocumented residents."

<https://www.fresnobee.com/news/local/article262948208.html>. June 28, 2022.

³⁹ Passel, Jeffrey and Cohn, D'Vera. Pew Research Center. "Mexicans decline to less than half the U.S. unauthorized immigrant population for the first time." <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2019/06/12/us-unauthorized-immigrant-population-2017/>

Conclusion

Before the pandemic, settlement houses already played a vital role in strengthening the food security of their communities by providing nutritious and healthy food to hundreds of thousands of children and adults a year. Yet, the pandemic magnified the inequitable access to food throughout the city, and exacerbated food insecurity among undocumented families, older adults, and low-income communities of color. With many of their community members reporting that food was the number-one need, settlement houses immediately sprang into action to feed their communities throughout the pandemic and ensure that they had consistent access to fresh, healthy food –they launched or expanded food pantries, provided grocery gift cards, delivered prepared meals to older adults, partnered with local farmers to provide fresh produce, ensured that fresh food grown on their own urban farms was distributed to their community, and enrolled New Yorkers into SNAP. At the same time, given the comprehensive, multi-service nature of the work that settlement houses were already doing before the pandemic hit, settlement houses also integrated important racial justice, workforce development, public health, and youth development components into their food assistance programs.

Alleviating food insecurity in New York City requires a multi-pronged strategy with long-term investment by philanthropy and government. Since settlement houses are multi-service organizations embedded into the fabric of their communities, they already understand that food insecurity is often intertwined with many other issues facing their community, such as unemployment, low-wage jobs that make it challenging to pay for basic needs, housing instability, and the prevalence of chronic health conditions such as diabetes and obesity. Settlement houses are actively working to help their neighbors address these underlying needs, and we need to ensure that settlement houses have the long-term, consistent funding necessary to sustain this important work.

Published by United Neighborhood Houses | October 2022

Contact: Irene Lew at ilew@unhny.org



United Neighborhood Houses (UNH) is a policy and social change organization representing 45 neighborhood settlement houses, including 40 in New York City, that reach over 765,000 New Yorkers from all walks of life. A progressive leader for more than 100 years, UNH is stewarding a new era for New York's settlement house movement. We mobilize our members and their communities to advocate for good public policies and promote strong organizations and practices that keep neighborhoods resilient and thriving for all New Yorkers.



www.unhny.org | 45 Broadway, 22nd Floor, NY, NY 10006 | 212-967-0322 | info@unhny.org