



UNITED NEIGHBORHOOD HOUSES

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Testimony of United Neighborhood Houses Before the New York State Senate Standing Committees on Agriculture, Labor, and Social Services

**Senator Michelle Hinchey, Chair, Standing Committee on Agriculture
Senator Jessica Ramos, Chair, Standing Committee on Labor
Senator Roxanne Persaud, Chair, Standing Committee on Social Services**

Diversifying Agriculture and Addressing Food Justice alongside Continuing Inequalities on our Food Systems

**Submitted by Tara Klein, Senior Policy Analyst
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Thank you for the opportunity to submit testimony on the importance of food justice issues in New York State. United Neighborhood Houses (UNH) is a policy and social change organization representing 44 neighborhood settlement houses that reach 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.

The COVID-19 pandemic has ravaged New York's economy and safety net and has underscored the significant racial and economic disparities that have impacted our neighborhoods for decades. Just as they did through other crises our State has faced, settlement houses have been on the frontlines of the COVID-19 emergency response by continuing to deliver essential services to New Yorkers, providing emergency food, counseling, shelter, youth and family supports, and more. Significantly, there were settlement houses that previously did not engage in emergency food assistance work but began to do so after seeing the overwhelming need in their communities due to COVID-19. These organizations have been enormously creative and adaptive to meet needs on the ground, particularly in responding to the rapidly growing challenge of food insecurity, through activities such as:

- Increasing food pantry capacity and launching new pop-up pantries;
- Operating urban farms and community gardens;
- Serving home delivered meals to homebound older adults;
- Serving as close partners in carrying out the GetFood NYC emergency food initiative;
- Staffing grab-and-go meal hubs for families at NYCHA Cornerstone sites and other locations;
- Helping people access SNAP and other food benefits; and
- Exploring new private partnerships to feed communities.

There is a wide array of ways the State can support settlement houses and other community based organizations in carrying out this important work of feeding their communities, to support current COVID-related needs and into the future. The State should make a long term investment in home delivered meals programs for older adults, support the Nutrition Outreach and Education program to fully leverage federal food benefits, increase and stabilize funding for the Settlement House Program to support hyper-local

food justice solutions, and bolster existing nonprofit services in their work to feed their communities as we recover from the COVID-19 pandemic and look ahead toward long-term recovery.

Home Delivered Meals (NYSOFA)

Home delivered meals programs are a key component of community-based supportive services for older adults, with providers across New York State ensuring that homebound seniors have access to both healthy food and social supports. These programs have soared in demand during the COVID-19 pandemic, with older adults discovering they can receive high-quality food delivered straight to their doors along with case management support and regular wellness checks, all without risking exposure to COVID-19. As older adults continue to recognize the benefits of this program, and as the older adult population continues to grow, it is critical for the State to invest in a robust home delivered meals system that keeps older adults living in their homes and allows for increased capacity.

Statewide, there has been a huge uptick in demand for home delivered meals throughout COVID-19 as New Yorkers face greater financial insecurity and older adults in particular are advised to stay indoors. Advocates estimate there is now a waitlist of 11,500 older adults waiting for meals and case management services across New York.¹ In NYC, providers indicated a 20-30% increase in demand for home delivered meals early in the pandemic. Notably, matters became more complicated in the City as the NYC Department for the Aging (DFTA) instructed providers to stop signing up new people in May and instead to refer them to the broader emergency feeding program (GetFood NYC), which does not include a social service component and has faced food quality challenges. The City also re-procured its home delivered meals system in the midst of the pandemic and faces strong ongoing criticism for chronically underfunded contracts. Notably, the average per-meal reimbursement rate paid to nonprofit providers by DFTA is 20% less than the national average cost of a home delivered meal in urban areas,² leaving nonprofits with significant financial damage where contracts do not cover the full cost of the program. Despite losing money on their contracts, settlement houses continue to operate these programs because they are mission-driven, in many cases have worked with their clients for years, and recognize that this delivered meal may be the only nutritious food the available to many vulnerable homebound seniors.

The State must make a sizable, long-term investment in home delivered meals programs. While emergency federal funding has supported home delivered meals to an extent this past year, this funding is neither sufficient nor stable. We are thankful for the Legislature for increasing the budget by \$8 million this year – this will make a significant dent in clearing current wait lists. However, we know that to fully clear wait lists we need a total of \$27 million from the State, and additional support is needed for New York City contracts (advocates are currently seeking a \$16.6 million increase from the City for FY22 to fully fund contracts). This can be accomplished through several State Office for the Aging (NYSOFA) funding lines, including Community Services for the Elderly (CSE), Expanded In-Home Services for the Elderly (EISEP), and Wellness in Nutrition (WIN). As demand for these services have skyrocketed during the COVID-19 pandemic, nonprofit providers grapple with insufficient funding, and the older adult population continues to grow statewide, it is critical for the State to invest in and stabilize this system to eliminate wait lists and underfunding. In addition to increased funding, the State should consider a legislative approach to ending home delivered meals wait lists.

Nutrition Outreach and Education Program (OTDA)

Community based organizations serve a key function in addressing food insecurity through direct benefits assistance, helping clients sign up for the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), the Special

¹ Analysis by Association on Aging in New York. Note that case management programs for older adults provide access to home delivered meals and other critical benefits and supports.

² Mathematica Policy Research report, “Older Americans Act Nutrition Programs Evaluation: Meal Cost Analysis,” September 2015: <https://www.acl.gov/sites/default/files/programs/2016-11/NSP-Meal-Cost-Analysis.pdf>; compared to NYC budget, FY 2019.

Supplemental Program for Women, Infants and Children (WIC), and other government feeding programs. Understanding the importance of getting people to utilize the benefits available to them, the State operates the Nutrition Outreach and Education Program (NOEP), which is administered under the State's Office of Temporary Assistance and Disability (OTDA). NOEP currently funds one provider, Hunger Solutions, which in turn subcontracts to local organizations, including several settlement houses, that do direct benefits assistance in their neighborhoods. NOEP is intended to increase awareness and utilization of SNAP, WIC, the School Lunch and School Breakfast Program, the Summer Food Service Program, and others. It is a critical effort as food insecurity has grown during the pandemic.

NOEP underwent an RFP last year, to award a contract for the next five years. As the State faced a dire budget situation, there were rumors of the program's pending reduction in service or full elimination. However, because NOEP matches state funds with federal SNAP outreach dollars (\$3.024 million each for a total program cost of \$6.048 million), it is a cost-effective program that deserves our investment as we try to reduce food insecurity. The State must protect NOEP and ensure it continues to be funded well into the future.

Settlement House Program (OCFS)

The Settlement House Program, administered through the Office of Children and Family Services (OCFS), provides flexible funding for innovative, community-based supportive services for children and families in settlement houses across the State, including in Albany, Syracuse, Rochester, Buffalo, Utica, and New York City. The Settlement House Program remains one of the few sources of flexible funding for settlement houses, allowing each one to respond to the unique needs of its neighborhood. At a time of siloed local, state and federal resources, the Settlement House Program is the critical glue that holds together the holistic service model of settlement houses. Across the state, settlement houses have used Settlement House Program funds to support linguistically-appropriate case management services, train youth to become child and youth care professionals, fund social workers who connect people to resources, engage at-risk youth in age-appropriate enrichment and recreation, and much more.

Though not primarily a hunger relief program, many settlement houses use funds from the Settlement House Program to enhance their work in addressing food insecurity and other food-related issues. For example, one settlement house uses these funds to run their Youth Food Justice Leadership Program, which provides leadership training, gardening, cooking demonstrations, taste testing, and opportunities to make new friends and make an impact on the community. One organization supports a basic needs food pantry that provides fresh produce and personal care items. Another teaches healthy eating habits to teenagers in an after school program, and then delivers cooking classes to help contextualize the healthy eating habits they learned. Yet another uses the funds to support internships and career services in culinary arts and food services. Several settlement houses use this funding to support their case management programs, which connect people to various benefits including programs like SNAP and WIC.

For the last few years, Settlement House Program funding has been set at \$2.45 million, though historically it has been as high as \$8.4 million and recently new organizations have committed to the settlement house model of serving individuals and families in their communities. Consequently, UNH has been advocating over the last several years to increase funding to the program. Further, even though the Settlement House Program operates under multi-year contracts and is formally procured by OCFS, the funding is traditionally zeroed out by the Governor in the Executive Budget proposal and then added back in by the Legislature through negotiations. We are grateful that the Legislature once again supported the Settlement House Program this year with an investment of \$2.45 million, in addition to support in getting OCFS to issue a new RFP to support the program for the next five years (applications were due on April 9, 2021). We hope that moving forward, the Legislature will work with us to support the stability of this program, including making sure it is included in the Governor's Executive Budget so we can avoid the annual "budget dance."

GetFood NYC and the Role of Nonprofits

In response to the COVID-19 outbreak, New York City rolled out GetFood NYC, an initiative managed under the Department of Sanitation. GetFood manages several emergency food programs and ensures that food insecure New Yorkers get access to free meals. Programs include free “grab and go” meals available daily to anyone at school sites after school hours, home delivery of meals for those who are unable to leave their home due to the pandemic or cannot access food another way, and a home delivery program specifically designed for older adults. These programs are available to anyone regardless of income, and to date they have served millions of meals. It is an incredible initiative that the City rolled out quickly in light of the pandemic, and it receives federal funding support. Given that the economic impact of the pandemic continues to hit people hard, the program must continue for the foreseeable future. Additionally, the State should look for ways to replicate this model elsewhere. Unfortunately, at the same time, the initiative has been wrought with many administrative challenges, particularly in the older adult delivery program, and many of these challenges could have been avoided by working with existing nonprofit providers instead of new private vendors.

The City’s choice in using private vendors to prepare and deliver the GetFood meals has led to many significant administrative hurdles and confusion. Most notably, there were early concerns about the quality of the food, with complaints including food that was difficult for seniors to chew and low availability and quality of culturally-appropriate meals (especially kosher meals). In a well-known case, one vendor was delivering subpar snack-type food and subsequently their contract was terminated. These food quality concerns continue today, and has resulted in many older adults choosing to leave the program and look for alternatives.

By contrast, nonprofit community-based organizations have been providing food to local residents for decades, and they do it well. They serve culturally competent meals to meet local needs, can adjust individual meals to meet someone’s dietary restrictions, and respond quickly and directly to solve any problems that may arise. In building out the GetFood program, the City could have easily consulted and employed nonprofits to scale up their existing work. For example, senior centers could have prepared food in their kitchens and managed delivery to their communities, and existing home delivered meals programs could have been scaled up. Senior centers and home delivered meal programs are literally designed to do this work. Unfortunately, opportunities for nonprofits to join the GetFood program over the last year have been extremely limited. Due to stringent contract requirements such as a high number of daily meals and lack of funding for transportation infrastructure, most aging services nonprofits were unable to participate, despite their interest in serving their neighborhoods.

For future emergency feeding needs, especially as we move toward reopening and there are fewer requests for deliveries, we hope the City looks at modifying existing nonprofit contracts to scale up and appropriately fund these services. This is especially important for senior centers and home delivered meals contracts for older adults, though it can also apply to other programs that feed their communities (i.e. food pantries, after school programs, etc.).

Although GetFood is a City-run program, this last year has taught us lessons that apply to all levels of government: nonprofits serve their communities well, and they have only stepped up to serve the most vulnerable New Yorkers during the pandemic. As the State moves toward its long-term economic recovery and seeks to achieve stronger diversity in the food justice space, we should bolster these services. Above all else, the State should work in collaboration with the community-based organizations that know their communities best. Thank you.

For questions or follow-up, you can contact me at tklein@unhny.org.