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**Testimony of United Neighborhood Houses
Before the New York State Assembly Standing Committees on Social Services and
Agriculture and Task Force on Food, Farm, & Nutrition Policy**

**Assemblymember Andrew Hevesi, Chair, Standing Committee on Social Services
Assemblymember Donna Lupardo, Chair, Standing Committee on Agriculture
Assemblymember Michaelle Solages, Chair, Task Force on Food, Farm & Nutrition Policy**

The Impact of COVID-19 on Food Insecurity in New York State

**Submitted by Tara Klein, Policy Analyst
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Thank you for the opportunity to testify on the impact of COVID-19 on food insecurity in New York State. United Neighborhood Houses (UNH) is a policy and social change organization representing 43 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. The State should support and fully fund the Wellness In Nutrition budget line under NYSOFA, the Nutrition Outreach and Education program under OTDA, the Settlement House Program under OCFS, and bolster existing nonprofit services in their work to feed their communities as we recover from the COVID-19 pandemic.

Wellness In Nutrition (NYSOFA) and Home Delivered Meals

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 in their homes and allows for increased capacity.

During the pandemic, home delivered meals providers in New York City were instructed by the NYC Department for the Aging (DFTA) to continue operating programs as usual. Early in the pandemic, providers struggled to keep frontline delivery staff feeling safe as personal protective equipment was not widely available, but providers maintained their commitment to serving their communities. By late March programs had experienced a 20-30% increase in demand. At a certain point, DFTA instructed providers to stop signing up new clients and to instead refer them to the City's broader emergency food program, GetFood NYC. This program does not include a wellness check component and has been wrought with many challenges including poor quality food and delivery snafus, which will be further outlined below.

Unfortunately, many of the State's home delivered meals programs are massively underfunded, and this problem has persisted since long before COVID-19. In New York City, the average per-meal reimbursement rate DFTA pays to providers is 25% less than the national average cost of a home delivered meal, while labor and other costs are even higher in New York¹. Low meal reimbursement rates cause significant financial damage to the nonprofit providers who prepare and deliver meals. Settlement house contractors and subcontractors have individually reported losing *hundreds of thousands of dollars* each year on their home delivered meals contracts. Despite losing so much money, 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 available to many vulnerable homebound seniors. Meanwhile, programs outside of New York City have previously reported wait lists for home delivered meals, unable to even meet the demonstrated community need due to low funding.

The time is ripe for the State to make a sizable investment in home delivered meals programs, despite limited budget resources. This can be accomplished most effectively through the Wellness In Nutrition (WIN) budget line, which is administered under the State Office for the Aging (NYSOFA) and primarily funds home delivered meals programs along with some nutrition education programs via local support to counties, or Area Agencies on Aging. WIN is currently funded at \$28.3 million. Despite a slight increase in the FY 2020-2021 budget to account for actual spending, this funding has remained relatively flat for at least 20 years, especially when considering the rate of inflation. Before the pandemic, UNH was advocating to increase funding to the WIN program by \$13.5 million to support programs across the State. This number considers the slow growth in this budget line despite cost escalators, inflation, and the increased number of meals served over the last several years. Given the increased demand during the pandemic, which shows little sign of dissipating, increasing this funding is even more urgent.

¹ 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.

Finally, New York City is currently re-procuring its entire home delivered meals system, with new contracts scheduled to begin on January 1, 2021. Unfortunately, no new funding has been designated in the City budget, and in fact there was a \$2.84 million cut to home delivered meals in the FY 2021 budget. A system that was already in financial crisis now faces higher demand and less funding, and it is incumbent on the State to step in with additional support.

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 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 this 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, Westchester, 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 \$10 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. 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. Unfortunately, there is currently great uncertainty around the State's budget, and we are concerned about the continuation of legislative adds in a budget modification. This would be disastrous for settlement houses, putting services to 15,000 New Yorkers at risk and threatening 75 jobs.

Further, OCFS was set to re-procure the Program this year, but due to COVID-19 this did not move forward, and instead, on August 31, 2020, all Settlement House Program contracts were allowed to expire, and programs are unsure if they will be paid to continue services, despite funding currently still existing in the State budget. It is critical that the State protect the Settlement House Program and its funding to enable settlement houses to respond to evolving needs in their communities.

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 its new Food Czar, NYC Department of Sanitation Commissioner Kathryn Garcia. 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 (which will be transitioning to non-school hours as students return to school), 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 over 1.3 million meals. It is an incredible initiative that the City rolled out quickly in light of the pandemic. Given that New York City is still experiencing virus cases, social distancing remains the norm, and the economic impact of the pandemic continues to hit people hard, the program must continue for the foreseeable future. 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.

When the emergency food initiative rolled out, the City noted that existing nonprofits did not have "adequate staffing or financial capacity" to run the programs on their own. However, these nonprofit programs generally operate on government contracts issued by the City, meaning their staffing levels and financial capacity are predetermined by the City agency that procures the contract. As the City invested new resources into the GetFood program, it could have easily consulted and employed nonprofits to scale up their existing work, for which they have a proven track record of success. However, instead of utilizing existing senior centers to prepare food and manage delivery to their communities, or exploring scaling up home delivered meals contracts which serve food and provide wellness checks to homebound older adults (and have been operating as normal, outside of the Food Czar's purview, with increased demand throughout the pandemic), DFTA issued an emergency RFP with an extremely tight deadline that was not directly publicized to those organizations. Several private vendors were selected to prepare and deliver the meals, while senior centers were instructed to staff their buildings to act as holding areas for the food. As these private vendors began to work to deliver meals to older adults autonomously from the senior centers, many significant administrative hurdles and confusion arose.

Among these major barriers to service deliveries, there were 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. Older adults were inundating senior centers with phone calls: some did not receive their meal while their neighbor got one, some wanted to know when the meal would be delivered, some wanted to make sure they were signed up, etc. Unfortunately, senior centers were unable to answer most of these questions because they were not managing the program administration or given access to rosters. While some of these challenges have gotten better over time (i.e. senior centers can now enroll older adults directly), reports indicate there are still some problems, including poor quality food and delivery mistakes.

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. Senior centers and home delivered meal programs are literally designed to do this work.

Notably, in late July the Food Czar collected responses to an RFP for nonprofits who are interested in being part of the City's emergency food response. While we are glad the City has recognized the critical role of nonprofits in providing for their communities, this RFP came fairly late in the progression of the pandemic. And unfortunately, we know that many aging services programs that are experienced in preparing or distributing meals did not apply due to stringent requirements they could not meet, especially the high number of daily meals. The RFP gave no assurances that programs would receive the financial or technical support to scale up their work, so many opted not to attempt an expansion.

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 services, make slight modifications to food distribution mechanisms as needed, and appropriately fund these services; instead of issuing brand new contracts and programs that may bring new administrative challenges. 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 the community (i.e. food pantries, after school programs, etc., including State-funded services. Further, it is important that we build a strong system with nonprofits now, in case we face a second wave of the virus and must quickly scale the emergency feeding program up once again.

Although GetFood is a City-run program, these last few months have taught us lessons that apply to all levels of government: nonprofits serve their communities well, and they've only stepped up to serve the most vulnerable New Yorkers during the pandemic. As the State moves toward reopening and economic recovery, we should bolster these services, not slash their budgets. 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.