



Testimony submitted to the NYC Council Committee on General Welfare

Oversight Hearing: Hunger and Food Insecurity in New York City

April 3rd, 2025

Introduction and Thanks: My name is Eric Lee, and I am the Director of Public Policy for Volunteers of America- Greater New York (VOA-GNY). We are a local affiliate of the national organization, Volunteers of America, Inc (VOA). I would like to thank Deputy Speaker Ayala and members of the General Welfare Committee for the opportunity to testify today.

About Us: VOA-GNY is a 129-year-old anti-poverty organization that aims to end homelessness in Greater New York through housing, health, and wealth building services. We are one of the largest human services providers, impacting more than 12,000 adults and children annually through our 70+ programs in New York City, Northern New Jersey, and Westchester, and thousands more students living in shelter through our Operation Backpack® initiative. We provide shelter and transitional housing for families and individuals including survivors of domestic violence and are an active nonprofit developer of supportive and affordable housing, including for senior citizens and veterans.

Thank you, Deputy Speaker Ayala and Members of the Committee, for your steadfast commitment to protecting the human services safety net for New Yorkers. Hunger and food insecurity for low-income households is already all too common and only going to get worse.

Food Insecurity Concerns:

VOA-GNY is gravely concerned about anticipated federal cuts to the Safety Net Assistance Program (SNAP). **We urge the City Council to use your voice to call on Congress to maintain or increase funding for SNAP, a critical lifeline for low-income households across the city and nation.** Per DSS Commissioner Park, approximately 1.8 million New Yorkers rely on SNAP, with one third of them being children, and another third being older adults, and estimated SNAP cuts could cost the city \$900 million a yearⁱ if Congress does not change course. At a time when New York City has a 25% poverty rateⁱⁱ, reductions in this critical program, in addition to directly increasing food insecurity for one in four New Yorkers, will have devastating secondary effects, including lower school attendance and academic achievement, worse health outcomes from challenges managing chronic health conditions and lowered nutrition, and reductions in spending/reinvestment in local businesses.



Given the threats to the SNAP program, pantries and other hunger relief programs are going to be more important than ever but even these programs are under threat. **We urge the City Council to use your voice to call on Congress to restore funding for the Emergency Food and Shelter Program (EFSP), which provides essential food and housing assistance services throughout New York City.** Beginning on January 27th, 2025, FEMA halted Congressionally approved funding for EFSP, an unauthorized withholding of \$3.9 million, which administered through the United Way of NYC, funds ninety-seven community-based organizations in NYC, including VOA-GNY, to provide emergency meals, food pantry items, and eviction prevention services, and other critical resources to keep households stable.

Given these dire cuts to federal resources for feeding programs, we urge the Council and administration to bolster support for local resources to keep New Yorkers fed. **VOA-GNY greatly appreciates the Brooklyn Delegation for its current support of our Food Pantries program, and we kindly request the Council to consider our Bronx Delegation (Ref 187658), Brooklyn Delegation (Ref 181379), and Manhattan Delegation (Ref 187632) FY26 Requests of \$20,000 per borough to further expand this critically needed program.** VOA-GNY utilizes Food Pantries expense funding to stock food pantries within our supportive and affordable housing buildings and shelters in Brooklyn where residents prepare their own food. This supplemental funding plays a vital role in alleviating the financial pressures and stresses of low-income tenants, as well as enhancing our limited DHS shelter food budgets to offer culturally appropriate and nutritious foods for people who cook within our facilities. Our FY26 requests would enable VOA-GNY to further expand our food pantries to more of our sites within Brooklyn, as well as establishing pantries at our sites in the Bronx and Manhattan.

Legislative Efforts to Improve Access to Public Benefits:

VOA-GNY is supportive of improving access to public benefits for everyone who qualifies for them and streamlining the overly bureaucratic application and recertification processes to minimize delays and interruptions in benefits. Connecting households to public benefits is core to stabilizing families and individuals to exit shelter as well as remain in their housing. Delays accessing benefits mean people who cannot afford food go hungry, and people who cannot afford rent are stuck in shelter longer or fall further into arrears. Every effort must be made to ensure that people are prioritized above paperwork.

Int 245: VOA-GNY is supportive of DSS exploring the feasibility of creating a universal benefits application, as the Department is well-situated to understand the capabilities and limitations of



existing city databases and public benefits technology infrastructure. One flag we have, is that it is not clear to us how “city benefits” is defined based on the cited administrative code of the city of New York, section 21-151 (Training and supervision of housing specialists).

Int 1028: VOA-GNY supports streamlining access to public benefits, but we recommend that any enrollment in public benefits must include an opt-in requirement for each adult in the household to affirm that they wish to receive them to avoid inadvertent harm to their personal situation. The step to verify household composition under the current process, in addition to seeking to determine appropriate benefit levels, seeks to understand the individual dynamics of each household to detangle sometimes complicated interpersonal dynamics and larger looming concerns for the household and individual members.

Automatically enrolling all members of a household without manually gaining their consent could hinder or delay individuals from obtaining their own benefits independent of other family members. For example, survivors of domestic violence who are trying to leave their abuser would be unable to open their own benefits case if they or their children are automatically added to the household benefits case of their abuser. Young people seeking to emancipate themselves from their parent/legal guardians, including runaway and homeless youth, would also have a more difficult time obtaining public benefits if they are automatically added to their parents’/legal guardians’ benefits case.

Certain immigrant households may also be eligible to receive benefits but prefer to decline enrollment for concerns related to public charge. Given recent federal enforcement actions against immigrant communities, households may be even less inclined to accept public benefits which they qualify for and are entitled to receive, if there is a possible risk of imperiling their ability to obtain permanent residency status.

Int 1148: VOA-GNY strongly endorses this legislation to require DSS to provide receipts for applications for benefits or services. While clients can currently request receipts when going to HRA Centers, it is not a standardized requirement to provide one unless you are using the automated kiosk to upload documents or know they can ask for one when meeting with HRA staff. We have had clients who were denied benefits because HRA maintains they missed an appointment which the client did attend, or for missing documents which the client submitted to HRA multiple times. Having a receipt would help to prove that applicants have done everything necessary to qualify for assistance, when their case falls through the cracks.



The receipt, in addition to a paper print out, should also be automatically uploaded to the applicant's Access HRA account, and capable of being viewable to HRA workers as well as downloadable for the applicant and their case manager. Currently, if applicants lose their paper receipt, they have no way of accessing a copy, which is crucial evidence for a fair hearing.

We recommend that the receipt also includes the name and email address of the HRA caseworker who met with the applicant, to enable more timely follow up on next steps outlined in the receipt and foster additional transparency and accountability.

Thank you, Deputy Speaker Ayala and Members of the General Welfare Committee, for your unwavering leadership protecting the cornerstones of the human services safety net for New Yorkers. In this moment of uncertainty, we must ensure the continued support of all New Yorkers who need assistance. Thank you for the opportunity to testify today.

Testimony respectfully submitted by Eric Lee.

ⁱ Ngo, Emily, Coltin, Jeff, and Reisman, Nick. (Feb. 27, 2025) *Standing up in the Adams admin*, Politico Playbook, <https://www.politico.com/newsletters/new-york-playbook/2025/02/27/standing-up-in-the-adams-admin-00206390>

ⁱⁱ Lily Bushman-Copp, Chloé Cargill, Eunho Cha, Anghelo Chavira-Barrera, Sophie Collyer, Lolita Colon, Qin Gao, Irwin Garfinkel, Janira Gayle, Sofia Giorgianni, Sonia Huq, Yajun Jia, Stephen, Karlya, Anastasia Koutavas, Michael Langburd, Isabel Laus, Helen Leon, Xiaofang Liu, Sally Ma, Fatoumata Magassa, Angie Moran, Max Moran, Kathryn Neckerman, Conner Radke, Olga Rios, Gerardo de la Rosa, Schuyler Ross, Daniel Salgado, Nadia Schwingle, Jingjing Tang, Julien Teitler, Ryan Vinh, Lauren Voss, Jane Waldfogel, Kahlen Washington, Jacob Westjohn, Christopher Wimer, Christopher Year, (Feb. 2025) *Annual Report: The State of Poverty and Disadvantage in New York City Vol. 7*, Robin Hood Foundation, <https://robinhood.org/reports/poverty-tracker-annual-report-vol-7/>