



November 24, 2014

Stephen Levin
Chairman
Committee on General Welfare
New York City Council

Re: Oversight: Hunger Hearing in New York City – Single Stop comments

Dear Chairman Levin,

On behalf of Single Stop, I wish to thank you and the Committee for the opportunity to submit comments on the issue of pervasive hunger in New York City. We know that you and the committee together with the Human Resources Administration have worked diligently on this issue and I respectfully offer our observations and recommendations for consideration.

Hunger in New York City

Hunger does not have a face. Hunger affects children, teenagers, adults, seniors and even college students. Between 2010 and 2012, one in six New Yorkers, including one in five of our city's children and one in ten of our city's seniors, lived in households that were food insecure because the family could not afford enough to eat. These levels remain unchanged since the start of the recession in 2008¹. New York City's food pantries and soup kitchens are facing so much demand that many were forced to turn people away in 2013. Moreover, food insecurity disproportionately affects minorities. Among Single stop clients, 52% are Hispanic/Latino, 25% are non-Hispanic black, and 9% are white.

Single Stop uses a "one-stop shop" model to coordinate access to resources that help low-income New York families secure public benefits, access higher education opportunities, and achieve financial self-sufficiency. We partner with community-based organizations and community colleges to operate 65 sites in all five boroughs through which we served 150,000 households last year alone. Six of those are located at the city's largest food pantries. Single Stop is proud to be the city's largest single network of Paperless Office System sites that allow eligible people to apply for SNAP directly from Single Stop locations.

So far in 2014 alone, Single Stop has helped 12,755 New York City households enroll in SNAP. Additionally, 5,408 were referred to food pantries, and even more accessed pantries located in the same place as the Single Stop site. Single Stop also connects people with other food assistance programs such

¹ New York City Coalition against Hunger. <https://nyccah.org/files/FINAL%20Hunger%20Survey%20Report%20Web%20Site.pdf>



as the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants and Children (WIC) and school meals.

The Single Stop Model

Single Stop's model is designed to help low-income families and individuals reach financial stability and lift them out of poverty by providing them access to the full spectrum of benefits and resources available to them. Our services include public benefits screening, application assistance, and holistic case management.

What we are able to observe through our work in the community is that clients are struggling to put food on the table each month even though they are in receipt of SNAP benefits. Single Stop continues to counsel SNAP clients who are often forced to turn to food pantries to be able to provide for their families. As you know, food pantries do a tremendous job providing for thousands of hungry New Yorkers each day, but the bottom line is that there are a host of other issues that need to be addressed to complement benefits like SNAP and services like food pantries. Low-income individuals must be given the opportunity to access all of the benefits and services that exist to help them.

As such, Single Stop also provides the following in order to address the full spectrum of need:

- Eligibility screenings for tax credits like the Earned Income Tax Credit and the Child Tax Credit, child care subsidies, or rental assistance;
- Free legal, tax, and financial counseling;
- Free screenings for college students who may be eligible for federal grants such as the Pell grant;
- Assistance with enrollment into programs like the New York State Health Exchanges and Cash Assistance; and
- Follow-up to ensure receipt of benefit and/or service.

When New Yorkers arrive at a food pantry where a Single Stop site is located, they not only get access to food, but are able to access a wide variety of other financial supports that allow them to be able to afford food on their own in the future. In 2014, Single Stop clients filed 79,295 unduplicated tax returns. Our model takes into consideration the idea that SNAP alone cannot solve the broader issue of hunger; families need to build up a foundation for economic security which includes access to a host of other benefits and resources. Far too often, we come across situations of mothers unable to afford day care services and forced to take leave without pay, exacerbating the issue of not having enough money to pay for food. And more recently, we are beginning to see the issue of food insecurity and hunger pop up on college campuses. Until we take a holistic approach to attacking poverty as the root cause of hunger, it will be very difficult to envision an end to hunger in this city.



Hunger among College Students

An issue of late that has been getting some media attention is the idea that hunger exists where we least expect it: college campuses. The stereotypical college student is no longer just the 18-year-old without dependents and with no real need to work at all because of familial financial support. Nontraditional students, on the other hand, tend to be older, have their own families to care for, and are usually forced to work at least one job in order to make ends meet while making an investment in their education and future. Recently, more and more colleges are reporting that their students struggle with balancing school, work, and having enough money to eat three times a day. According to a recent scholarly article², college students are subject to a high number of potential risk factors for food insecurity and hunger. College students face increased tuition and housing costs, the need to work at least part-time to make ends meet while receiving low wages that do not represent the actual cost of living. To add insult to injury, the federal government has put restrictions on SNAP eligibility that prevent many college students from receiving SNAP benefits. As more and more students attend college with the idea that a college education is the solution to break out of the cycle of poverty, they are sometimes pulled back in due to the universally hefty price tag of postsecondary education.

There are colleges in New York that are making significant adjustments in addressing this silent problem. Take Kingsborough Community College (KCC) in Brooklyn and Hostos Community College (HCC) in the South Bronx for example. In partnership with the Food Bank for New York City, KCC and HCC have piloted campus food pantries that are available for all students³. Pantries coordinate their hours of operation with class schedules so that more students can be accommodated throughout the day. In addition, some colleges offer food preparation classes, meal vouchers for students in dire need, and on-site nutritionists. Many also partner with on-campus child care centers to ensure that student-parents and their children have access to food. The success of these programs has resulted in the Food Bank beginning to launch more programs in at least 10 other schools.

Recommendations and Broader Policy Issues

Single Stop offers four specific policy recommendations. Two of these—universal school meals for K-12 students and increased access to food pantries on college campuses—have the potential to give low-income students immediate relief from food insecurity during the day. Our third recommendation seeks to maximize participation in federal and state programs so that more families can begin to build a foundation for economic security, which also means the ability to put food on the table each day. Finally, we recommend raising the minimum wage as a long-term solution to ensure that no working individuals and their children have to face hunger and food insecurity.

² Gaines et al. (2014). Predicting the role of financial factors, resources and skills in predicting food security status among college students.

³ West, Melanie. (Oct. 9, 2014). [Food Pantries Grow on New York Campuses](#).



1. Make K-12 school meals universal and free

The fact that half of all SNAP participants are children is staggering⁴. Hunger prevents children from reaching their full potential in school and otherwise. The trajectory of hungry children looks like this: children who do not have enough to eat are not going to be able to focus and do well in school. They are

more likely to get sick more often. They are less likely to graduate from high school and go on to college in order to build a foundation for economic security and provide for their children down the line⁵. This is what is at stake. An endless generational cycle of poverty.

Earlier this year, the New York City Department of Education approved free lunches for most middle school students. This was a significant victory for anti-hunger advocates but some of this work still needs to be translated into elementary and high schools. Overall participation in school meal programs is low—but not because a lack of need; many students whose family incomes are above the \$36,000 per year cut-off for free or reduced-priced meals are still struggling to meet basic needs which include providing a lunch box of food for their children⁶.

Providing free and nutritious meals at school can have a dramatic impact on a student's academic, health, and economic futures. Children that are fed well will foster a more vibrant learning experience whereby every student can and will participate. Students would no longer have to feel ashamed that they receive vouchers because their families are "poor." Universal school meals means no student will be judged for eating subsidized meals and the stigma is eliminated. We must advocate for universal school meals for all students (K-12) all year round.

1. Food pantries and EBT-accepting food stores should be the norm across New York college campuses

If colleges can support their students through periods of tough economic conditions, they will have a greater chance of graduating and pursuing careers that build the foundation for economic security and the middle class. Therefore, as the number of food pantries on college campuses in New York City begins to rise through the work of private partnerships, we recommend the city continue to promote them. We also ask that the city consider funding Single Stop as part of CUNY's 2014 budget priorities to ensure that students are getting all of the supports and coordinated services they need to graduate. In addition, we urge colleges to allow on-campus food stores to accept EBT cards as an additional way to ensure that students do not go hungry.

2. Maximize participation in all federal programs to address the full spectrum of difficulties faced by low-income individuals and families

Social safety net programs are designed to alleviate poverty in this country. Yet an overwhelming number of Americans, including New Yorkers, are not participating in federal programs that are available to them. In New York City, for example, HRA reported that in 2010 more than 2 million

⁴From the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities. [SNAP is the nation's biggest child nutrition program.](#)

⁵From [NoKidHungry.org](#)

⁶From Lunch 4 Learning. [A campaign for free and healthy school lunch for all.](#)



residents were eligible to receive SNAP but did not apply—that’s roughly 25% of the eligible population⁷. The bottom line is that we should prioritize ending the dependence on food charities and to do so we must address ways to empower potential clients and make it easier to enroll into federal programs.

Single Stop commends the city for its efforts to modernize its Access NYC portal to streamline access to federal programs. Single Stop strongly encourages the city to continue investing in Access NYC and its ability to allow clients to apply for Cash Assistance and other programs under the city’s control. Moreover, we encourage the city to continue using aggressive efforts to use data collected from a wide array of programs to pinpoint populations that are underutilizing services. A myriad of data sources from NYCHA data to information on unpaid utility bills could be used to pinpoint individuals that are eligible but not actually receiving federal support.

The city cannot do this work alone. Many of the programs that clients are eligible for require application through the state (i.e. health insurance) or the federal government (i.e. tax credits). Single Stop calls on the city to continue working with Single Stop and other efforts to create technology and human service platforms that allow clients to access all available federal resources in a single place. Single Stop is currently engaging strategic leaders to discuss ways to transform the delivery of services. We know that too often vulnerable and hungry New Yorkers face a maze of city offices and complex rules when they seek aid. We aim to transform these systems to take a “client first” approach, reimagining a city in which those seeking help with hunger are treated with dignity, transparency and respect. Advances in technology and a robust network of human service partners and a committed administration make this transformation possible.

3. Raise the minimum wage

Mayor Bill de Blasio recently signed an executive order that raised the minimum hourly wage to \$13.13 for thousands of city contract workers working in the city. The raise applies to workers employed by large businesses that are tenants of buildings developed with the help of city subsidies. This initiative is a huge step in the right direction and will likely help the city’s most vulnerable populations and may in some cases raise families above the federal poverty threshold. However, we believe that the order does not quite go far enough. For instance, de Blasio’s plan excludes employees of small businesses with gross incomes of less than \$3 million annually. We would like to see the \$13.13 rate increase be applied universally in the city and encourage city lawmakers to lobby state lawmakers for the authority to do so. Assembly bill 8343, for example, would accelerate these approved increases and would link both the minimum wage and the tip-wage to the rate of inflation by December 2016. This would be a tremendous feat but would give the disadvantaged a fair shot at rising above poverty and moving into the middle class

⁷[New York City Estimated Food Stamp Participation Rates: 2006-2010.](#)



Conclusion

In conclusion, if we are to address hunger in this New York City, it is imperative to include the broader issue of poverty into the conversation. In order to reverse the cycle of generational poverty, the diverse and valuable organizations that exist today and others who are in the fight to reducing hunger and poverty in New York City should continue to advocate for the following: increasing the minimum wage and adjusting it to inflation; maximizing client participation in federal and state safety net programs, and allowing no child or young adult go hungry in the classroom.

Again, I wish to thank Councilmember Levin, his staff, and the Committee for the opportunity to comment on this important issue. I also wish to thank HRA on its commitment to alleviate poverty in New York City. We applaud HRA's initiatives to better coordinate and streamline the access points to receiving public benefits and services.

Sincerely,

Andrew Stettner
Chief Program Officer
Single Stop