



January 13, 2016

Councilman Stephen Levin
Chairman, Committee on General Welfare
New York City Council

Re: 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 we respectfully offer our observations and recommendations for consideration, with a particular focus on the issue of food insecurity among college students.

Hunger in New York City

New York City is facing a growing crisis of poverty, inequality, and associated hunger. By 2013, some 45.1 percent of New Yorkers lived in households with incomes no more than 1.5 times greater than the city's official poverty threshold, or \$38,787 for a household with one adult and two children.¹ If those 3.7 million people came together, they would form the city's most populous borough—a borough with more people than the Bronx, Manhattan, and Staten Island combined.²

This poverty translates directly to hunger and food insecurity. According to the New York City Coalition Against Hunger, between 2012 and 2014, over 1.4 million New Yorkers—including nearly one in four of the city's children—lived in households that lacked sufficient food. Year after year, New York City Emergency food providers report a continued increase in need for their services.³ These providers are facing so much demand in fact, that many are forced to turn people away.

To help make ends meet, low-income households often turn to government resources and local services. Consequently, the number of New Yorkers participating in the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), a main source of food aid, rose to 1.8 million from 1.3 million—or 36.2 percent—from late 2008 to 2013.⁴ By one count, this program alone lowered the number of New

¹ New York City Center for Economic Opportunity (2013). [The CEO Poverty Measure, 2005-2013](#).

² U.S. Census Bureau, Population Estimates Program, 2014.

³ New York City Coalition Against Hunger (2014). [Hunger in New York City](#).

⁴ New York City Department of Social Services (2013). [HRA/DSS Fact Sheet: December 2013](#).

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Yorkers who would have been poor in 2013 by 296,000 persons.⁵ However, trends shifted in 2013 and 2014.

The NYC SNAP participation rate declined from 2013 to 2014 (1.9 million to 1.78 million). In that same time period, the NYC unemployment rate declined (8.8% to 6.8%). Many attribute improving economic conditions to the decline in benefit participation. However, the number of people in NYC homeless shelters in October 2014 was 56,000—a record high. In this same time period, soup kitchens and pantries remained at capacity.⁶

Experts have hypothesized that there is more to this seemingly contradictory story—it is likely that more people are working so they no longer qualify for food stamps. Unfortunately, however, much of the job expansion has primarily been among part-time and/or low paying jobs. In other words, families are caught in between a “rock and a hard place,” earning too much to qualify for benefits, but not making enough money to feed their families adequately.⁷

Hunger among College Students

Today, three-quarters of college students are considered “non-traditional.”⁸ Students of today tend to be older, financially independent, have their own families to care for, and are usually forced to work at least one job in order to make ends meet, all while attempting to invest in their education and future. More and more colleges are reporting that their students struggle with balancing their varied obligations, in addition to having enough money to eat three times a day.⁹ According to a recent scholarly study, 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, and the need to work at least part-time to make ends meet while receiving low wages that do not cover the actual cost of living.¹⁰

While evidence is mounting, it is hard to know just how many undergraduates struggle with food insecurity. National education surveys, such as those administered by the National Center for Education Statistics, do not include questions on food insecurity. The best available evidence on college student food insecurity comes from independent researchers, whom increasingly are turning their attention to this important matter. In December 2015, the Wisconsin HOPE Lab, in collaboration with the Healthy Minds Study, the Association of Community College Trustees (ACCT), and Single Stop released a new research report that assesses food and housing insecurity among community college students utilizing a national sample of more than 4,000 students at 10 community colleges. According to the report, half of

⁵ South by North Strategies, Ltd. (2015). Analysis of New York City Center for Economic Opportunity, *The CEO Poverty Measure*, 20 and 56.

⁶ Politico New York (2014). [Advocates: Drop in food stamps about more than job growth.](#)

⁷ Politico New York (2014). [Advocates: Drop in food stamps about more than job growth.](#)

⁸ Wisconsin Hope Lab (2015). [Public Testimony on Hunger in Higher Education Submitted to the National Commission on Hunger.](#)

⁹ The Washington Post (2014). [More College Students Battle Hunger as Education and Living Costs Rise.](#)

¹⁰ Gaines et al. (2014). [Predicting the role of financial factors, resources and skills in predicting food security status among college students.](#)

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all community college students are struggling with food and/or housing insecurity; fully 20 percent are hungry.¹¹ Evidence of college student food insecurity has also been documented in New York City. One of the most comprehensive studies of food and housing insecurity among college students, a report from the City University of New York found that 39.2 percent of its students experienced food insecurity in the previous twelve months.¹²

High rates of food insecurity have far reaching implications for college students in terms of their more immediate academic success and long-term physical and financial health. Several studies show an inverse relationship between food insecurity and academic achievement. For example, a study using data from two community colleges in Maryland found that 56% of students in the sample were food insecure and food insecure students were 22% less likely to report a 3.5-4.0 GPA rather than a 2.0-2.49 GPA.¹³ Additionally, food insecurity negatively impacts mental and social health, dietary choices and overall health status among adolescents and young adults.¹⁴

One of the most important programs to curtail hunger in the United States is the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), which exists as a safety net program for millions of needy individuals. A study by the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities found that household food insecurity decreased nearly 10 percent after six months of SNAP benefit receipt.¹⁵ These results show that SNAP has the great potential to minimize the risk of students facing undue hardship. However, the federal government has put restrictions on SNAP eligibility that prevent many college students from receiving SNAP benefits. Students 18-49 who attend school half-time or more are ineligible for benefits unless they meet an exemption. Additionally, students under the age of 22 living with their parents must be part of their family's SNAP household, even if they meet the student eligibility rules, and even if they purchase and prepare food separately.¹⁶

Our Single Stop sites at CUNYs report that the complicated student eligibility rules for SNAP result in many students mistakenly believing that students can never get SNAP, and lack of understanding of complicated rules is another barrier that prevents many low-income college students from accessing benefits. Single Stop caseworkers are skilled in helping eligible low-income students apply for and secure benefits, however, students attempting to apply without the aid of a caseworker may prove unsuccessful. Therefore, we believe that SNAP eligibility outreach efforts be enhanced to help students understand their unique circumstances and corresponding SNAP eligibility.

¹¹ Wisconsin Hope Lab (2015). [Hungry to Learn: Addressing food & housing insecurity among undergraduates.](#)

¹² Freudenberg, N., et al. (2011). [Food Insecurity at CUNY: Results from a survey of CUNY undergraduate students.](#)

¹³ Maroto, M.E., Snelling, A., & Linck, H. (2015). Food insecurity among community college students: prevalence and association with grade point average. *Community College Journal of Research and Practice*, 39(6).

¹⁴ Murphy, JM, Wehler, CA, Pagano, ME, Little, M, Kleinman, RE, & Jellinek, MS (1998). Relationship Between Hunger and Psychosocial Functioning in Low-Income American Children. *Journal of American Academy of Child & Adolescent Psychiatry*, 37(2): 163-170.

¹⁵ Feeding America. (August 18, 2014). [More Than 46 Million People Turn to the Feeding America Food Bank Network to Make Ends Meet.](#)

¹⁶ CLASP (2014). [SNAP Policy Brief: College Student Eligibility.](#)

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To attempt to address the issue of student hunger, colleges themselves have worked to develop creative student support programs. Kingsborough Community College (KCC) and Hostos Community College (HCC) in partnership with the Food Bank for New York City, applied for campus food pantries through their Single Stop sites, and piloted pantry services made available to all students. At KCC, students can visit the pantry once weekly and take enough for three days of meals. In 2013, this amounted to over 21,000 visits to the campus food pantry, highlighting the need for this service.

Food pantries are an important presence on campuses because of rules in place preventing many students from being deemed eligible for SNAP benefits, and because for those that are fortunate enough to meet SNAP eligibility requirements, many find they do not receive enough assistance to cover food expenses throughout the entirety of the month. We will not solve the problem of hunger overnight, but food pantries have the potential to give low-income college students immediate relief from food insecurity during the day.

We know that many other schools are interested in developing campus pantries, but despite low startup costs, have difficulty establishing a consistent funding stream. The ultimate cost of supporting a campus food pantry will depend on how each school structures their program. However, a conservative estimate for providing 100 students with enough food to share with one other person in their household for 12 months would cost just over \$14,000.¹¹

The premise of campus pantries, and other student support services, is that students who are more financially stable and have access to support services are more apt to persist in and to complete a course of study. And ensuring that students complete their course of study is a good investment. Even after factoring in the costs that graduates incur when earning the degree, the median earnings of associate's degree holders during their careers is about \$259,000 more than for high school graduates.¹⁷

The Single Stop Model

Single Stop is a national nonprofit organization that harnesses America's most effective anti-poverty tools to create economic mobility for low-income families and individuals. Our "one-stop shop" 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 resources available to them, including free tax preparation, legal services, financial counseling, and public benefits counseling and application assistance, all at once. We partner with community-based organizations and colleges to operate 65 sites in all five boroughs through which we served over 1 million low-income householdsⁱⁱⁱ since 2007. Seven^{iv} of those sites 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. In 2015 alone, Single Stop estimates that we have helped over 20,000 New York City households enroll in SNAP. Single Stop also connects

¹⁷ American Institutes for Research (2013). [What's the Value of an Associate's Degree? The Return on Investment for Graduates and Taxpayers.](#)



people with other food assistance programs such as the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) and school meals.

As you know, food pantries do a tremendous job providing for thousands of hungry New Yorkers each day, and food pantries on college campuses are an important targeted extension of this emergency support, 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. To begin with, low-income individuals and families 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—free of charge— in order to address the full spectrum of need:

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

The premise of the Single Stop model is straightforward: accessed individually, these resources can serve as “Band-Aids”, but accessed in concert, they can begin to address the underlying causes of intergenerational poverty, inoculate against future setbacks that might otherwise be catastrophic - a sick child, car trouble, temporary job loss - and constitute a bridge towards self-sufficiency and economic mobility.

While many are aware of Single Stop and its individual community partners, they often overlook the impact of the entire network and its potential to connect low-income New Yorkers to economic opportunity in even greater numbers. In many ways, the Single Stop network has just begun to tap its potential in a city where almost half of all residents live in low-income households.

Single Stop on Community College Campuses

In 2009, Single Stop launched the Community College Initiative to increase completion rates of low-income community college students by addressing financial barriers facing students. Single Stop college sites enable students to tap into existing unspent federal and local resources that can be used as a supplemental form of financial aid, thereby hopefully preventing students from being forced to choose between a degree and basic necessities such as buying groceries. Currently, we have sites at community colleges in 9 states (NY, NJ, CA, MA, LA, PA, MS, FL, and NC), including all the community colleges in the CUNY system. Last year Single Stop introduced our model at John Jay College of Criminal Justice, our first site serving students at a four-year institution. Since the inception of the initiative, Single Stop has served over 72,000 families and individuals at CUNY sites, connecting them to \$173,055,355 in

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additional resources—tax credits, health insurance, nutrition assistance, and more—that students are using to support themselves as they pursue a postsecondary degree. In that time period, there were 4,588 approved SNAP applications from CUNY sites connecting these individuals and families to \$12,670,026 in SNAP benefits. Nationally, we have reached over 178,000 students and families at college sites through the Community College Initiative.

Currently, only twenty-nine percent of students seeking associate degrees at community colleges obtain one within three years. By providing Single Stop services to students and households of students in need, the percentage of students who stay on through completion can be dramatically increased. By partnering with colleges and integrating Single Stop with student service centers and financial aid departments, Single Stop seeks to harness two of the country's most effective anti-poverty tools: coordinated access to America's safety net and post-secondary education. Single Stop's Community College Initiative breaks the cycle of intergenerational poverty in two ways: first, in the short term, by providing students and their families with access to critical benefits and services proven to alleviate poverty, and in the long run, by helping students stay in school through completion and thus increasing labor mobility and lifetime earnings.

Through our work at college sites, we find that few people associate students with hunger, despite growing evidence of food insecurity on college campuses. However, to reemphasize the lived experience of poverty on college campuses and the importance of student support services, please consider Ben's story.

One of our clients, referred to as Ben throughout, is a single father caring for his young daughter, referred to as Maria throughout. Ben is attending a nursing program at Kingsborough Community College (KCC). Despite the intense demands of the program, Ben is determined to secure an education that will give his daughter a chance at a bright future. But, Ben lost his job, fell behind on rent, and was facing eviction. Ben is not an anomaly—there are thousands of stories like Ben's.

And what is the most probable end for a story like Ben's? Should Ben attempt to work full-time while attending school, he may become overwhelmed with all of the obligations he is being forced to juggle. As a result, Ben is likely to drop out of college. And that would be a tragedy—not just for Ben and his daughter, but for all of us concerned with the future of our country.

Fortunately, Ben was connected to a Single Stop office on campus. Hattie, our site lead who worked with him, said Ben had a lot of pride, but she could tell that despite his burdens he always made his daughter feel loved.

Ben never missed an appointment, and Hattie connected Ben with a lawyer to stave off eviction, got his daughter into child care, helped him secure SNAP and WIC benefits, and used the school's resource book to help him find a part-time job. Additionally, Hattie referred Ben to the campus food pantry, which he and Maria needed right away before their SNAP and WIC benefits kicked in, and which they continued to use as an important supplement when the benefits still weren't enough. Hattie says she was excited every time Ben showed up and that at the beginning of the next academic year, when she ran into him

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at nursing orientation, she witnessed that despite all his struggles, he was still there working on his degree. She said, "He was smiling and I was so happy."

Hattie likes to say that a lot of her students just need a break. We must do our best to give it to them. By providing coordinated access to all of the supports and resources available to students, like Ben, is critical. We must do our best to support those that are working hard to invest in their futures, and allow individuals from economically vulnerable backgrounds a fair shot at an education, and subsequently, social mobility.

Recommendations and Broader Policy Issues

Single Stop offers three specific policy recommendations. The first—make K-12 school lunch universal and free—recognizes that for students to be successful enough to make it to college, adequate nutrition is a crucial prerequisite. The second—increased access to food pantries, EBT-accepting food stores, and other student support services on college campuses—has the potential to give low-income college students immediate relief from food insecurity during the day and increase the chances of college completion. The last recommendation is more comprehensive, recognizing that finding more efficient and effective ways to link low-income individuals and families to social safety net programs increase the chances that we alleviate poverty in this country.

1. Make K-12 school meals universal and free

The fact that nearly one in four of the city's children lived in households that lacked sufficient food in 2014 is staggering.¹⁸ Hunger prevents children from reaching their full potential in school and otherwise. Simply put, when children do not have enough to eat, they cannot come to school ready to learn. They are more likely to fall ill. 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 line.¹⁹ This is what is at stake; an unfair trajectory of continued poverty.

In the 2014-15 school year, the New York City Department of Education approved free lunches for most public middle school students. This was a significant victory for anti-hunger advocates but this work needs to be better publicized to families with middle school students, especially community college students with children, a potentially economically vulnerable group. Further, this program needs to be made available to public elementary and high school students.

Universal school meals means students will be encouraged to eat school lunch without the fear of bullying or harassment. By ending the poverty stigma around school lunch and putting all students on equal footing, more students can eat school lunch and benefit from this important meal. We must advocate for universal school meals for all K-12 students.

¹⁸ New York City Coalition Against Hunger (2014). [Hunger in New York City](#).

¹⁹ No Kid Hungry (2014). [Hungry Kids Aren't Getting the Resources they Need](#).

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2. **City Council should support the expansion and long-term sustainability of campus food pantries.**

Post-secondary education is largely viewed as a means through which students can improve human and social capital and higher levels of education are associated with decreased food insecurity.²⁰ 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. Therefore, as the number of food pantries on college campuses in New York City begins to rise, traditionally through the work of private partnerships, we recommend that additional partnerships are formed or strengthened, including between CUNY and the city, to continue to expand this important program model. We also ask that the city consider funding Single Stop services as part of CUNY's 2017 budget priorities to ensure that students are getting all of the financial supports and coordinated services they need to graduate.

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

For all of their power and promise, government resource programs fail to reach as many New Yorkers as they could, as effectively as they could. Fragmented delivery mechanisms, conflicting eligibility rules, and complex renewal processes are just some of the factors that prevent sizable numbers of households from receiving all of the resources for which they are potentially eligible or from receiving any resources at all. In New York City, for example, only 77 percent of eligible New York City households participated in the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program in 2013.²¹ Further, almost 20 percent of New York tax filers eligible for the Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC) fail to claim it.²² To address participation rates in safety net programs, here below are several areas that Single Stop Site Leads have identified as potential areas for improvement.

Streamlining and improving ACCESS NYC:

Single Stop commends the city for its efforts to modernize its ACCESS NYC portal to streamline access to federal public benefit programs. Single Stop strongly encourages the city to continue investing in NYC, as it completes plans to allow clients to apply for Cash Assistance and other programs under the city's administration, and add additional functionality to help reduce churn.

Outreach:

We encourage the city to continue using 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. Using this data, we would recommend that outreach materials for multiple programs be presented to likely eligible populations, at once.

²⁰ U.S. Department of Agriculture (2014). [Household Food Security in the United States in 2013](#).

²¹ City of New York, Human Resources Administration (2014). [SNAP Program Access Index and Participation Rates: 2002-2013](#).

²² IRS (2015). [EITC Participation Rates by State](#).

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Improve processes:

Site Leads have reported improvement with the New York City Human Resources Administration's (HRA) On-Demand Interview recertification process. We recognize that HRA's SNAP telephone interview staff have worked diligently to meet demand. However, clients are still reporting difficulty getting through to an HRA representative for an interview or to reschedule an interview. We encourage continued improvement of the On-Demand Interview process.

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 others 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 leaders to discuss ways to systematically 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.

Conclusion

In conclusion, Single Stop believes that hunger is one symptom of the larger issue of poverty, and that resources to fight hunger such as SNAP, WIC, and food pantries, must be accessed in concert with other resources proven to alleviate poverty such as free tax preparation, health insurance, and financial counseling. Our recommendations to tap into the country's underutilized resources designed to help low-income individuals and families have the potential to help thousands of low-income college students attain the credentials they need to lift themselves out of poverty. The reforms and recommendations we envision do not require the allocation of significant new funds but reimagine the use of existing dollars to increase our nation's college completion rate and bolster the earning potential of our workforce.

Again, thank you for the opportunity to comment on this important issue.

Sincerely,

Sophia Heller
Managing Director, New York

Emily Marano
Policy Analyst

Lindsey Evans
Policy and Research Fellow

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ⁱ Food insecurity on college campuses is increasingly on the radar of administrators, who report seeing more hungry students, especially at schools that enroll a high percentage of youths who are from low-income families or are the first generation to attend college. Evidence of this can be seen in the following trend: the number of university food pantries has shot up, from four in 2008 to 121 in 2014. See: https://www.washingtonpost.com/local/more-college-students-battle-hunger-as-education-and-living-costs-rise/2014/04/09/60208db6-bb63-11e3-9a05-c739f29ccb08_story.html.

ⁱⁱ The amount of food is based on the New York State Hunger Prevention and Nutrition Assistance Program's guidelines for packing pantry bags. A spreadsheet provided by the Food Bank indicates low, mid, and high cost estimates for bags of dry goods that supply one, two, or three people with the equivalent of three meals a day for three days. Based on this information, and the assumptions here below, a conservative estimate for serving 100 students, along with one other person in each of their households, for 12 months would cost just over \$14,000.

Assumptions:

- Student population of 100
- Average household size of 2 persons
- Mid-cost price point
- Providing three meals a day for three days

ⁱⁱⁱ The number of clients served by Single Stop in NYC alone between Q4 2014 and Q3 2015 = 189,362

^{iv} Single Stop is co-located at the following food pantries in New York City: Food Bank, New York Common Pantry, Part of Solution, Project Hospitality, St. John's Bread & Life, River Fund, and West Side Campaign Against Hunger.

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