



**Statement of
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ENDING HUNGER IN AMERICA: LOCAL INNOVATIONS TO INFORM A NATIONAL STRATEGY

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Introduction

Good afternoon Chairman McGovern, Ranking Member Cole and all the members of the Committee here today. My name is Kate MacKenzie and I am the Executive Director of the New York City Mayor's Office of Food Policy (MOFP). Thank you for inviting me to testify at this important hearing, I am honored to be joining you today.

The right to food is a fundamental human right. I am grateful for this opportunity to share with you the work that my office has been doing to address the current state of hunger across New York City, including our programs created specifically to address the City's emergency food needs created by the COVID-19 crisis, as well as our pathway forward as we transition from emergency to recovery.

In February of this year, my office issued Food Forward NYC, the City's first ever 10-Year Food Policy Plan. This report provides a comprehensive policy framework to reach a more equitable, sustainable, and healthy food system by 2031. At the same time, my office was overseeing the COVID-19 food response, and the experiences of that time made the report even more urgent. We experienced in real time the need for an improved food system - one that aimed to solve hunger, not just temporarily address it with emergency food; a system that ensures food system resiliency, and the need for urban policy to support rural food economies. Not only has food become an important policy issue to strengthen in relation to other priorities in the City, but agriculture has become an important urban issue, thus bringing new attention to regionality and rural producers and communities in the context of resilience and long term food security for New York City.

In this testimony, I will share my perspective along five themes:

- Overview of food insecurity in New York City and the City agencies that touch food – from meals served to water supply, food jobs and wages, health, environment and more.
- Understanding food insecurity as a food system challenge in recovery and planning for resilience
- Impetus for Food Forward NYC and lessons learned
- Importance of the region and the rural food economy to City food policy
- Lessons learned from COVID-19 in Food Forward NYC and recommendations to align city and federal policy

To truly have a transformative impact on the food system, partnerships at all levels of government are needed. The success of transforming the country's food landscape depends on the partnership of everyone involved in the food system. Food businesses large and small, community-based organizations and advocates, philanthropies and academic institutions, regional partners and the state and federal government all have a critical role to play. As the City seeks to implement its 10-Year Food Policy Plan, we will work with partners to make the policies and strategies in this document their own and to implement them in ways that reflect their vision for their communities.



And together we can push for change in federal, state, and local policy, leveraging all of these tools together under a single strategic framework, in partnership with the many players in the food system, including yourselves - we can transform the food system.

Food Insecurity in New York City

We know that food insecure New Yorkers come from all over - they are school age kids, college kids, seniors, and working adults - they are all of us. While the long-held approach has been to focus on traditional solutions such as food pantries, soup kitchens and SNAP, we know that these programs are not reaching all food insecure New Yorkers. A Columbia University study from 2018 found that of New Yorkers facing severe food hardship, only 1 in 4 use food pantries and only 1 in 2 are enrolled in SNAP. While this is one study, I am emphasizing it because when we think about food insecure New Yorkers, we should think about helping them get food where they are: in their local bodegas or grocery stores, on their way to work, prepared food as well as groceries. This integrative, cross-systems approach that focuses on individuals' experience of the food system, not simply thinking program by program, is a hallmark of Food Forward NYC.

Even before the pandemic, New York City had more than 1.1 million food insecure individuals. That number swelled to roughly 1.6 million at the height of the pandemic. Fortunately, that number is starting to decline in large part due to the Federal Stimulus payments to families. Feeding America is now projecting that 1.39 million New Yorkers are food insecure in 2021.

Not unlike other parts of the county, our food workers often experience food insecurity themselves. We have hundreds of thousands of food workers here in the City - it is hard to provide a precise estimate because of the many undocumented workers, as well as delivery workers categorized as independent contractors, but it is safe to say it is more than 400,000 individuals. We also have many food businesses; one out of six businesses in NYC is a food business, and over 70% of NYC's food businesses have fewer than 10 employees. The experience of the past 18 months has shown us that these businesses are truly essential, and that these essential food workers deserve good wages, fair working conditions and career pathways. Food Forward NYC assumes that supporting food workers and businesses is the pathway to not only a stronger food system, but also to a more economically and racially equitable NYC.

Planning for Resilience

On average, 19 billion pounds of food comes into the New York City annually through a highly fragmented distribution system. The implications of this are vast. From an environmental perspective, there are the carbon emissions from food production and the use of pesticides and runoffs. Our food spends a lot of time sitting in polluted, refrigerated units, whether located in trucks standing in traffic or as sitting in distribution areas. The air pollution from these units and other elements of the food supply chain is disproportionately concentrated in communities, such as Hunts Point in the south Bronx, that also suffer from a disproportionate burden of respiratory ailments. And if the human costs were not



enough, the inefficiencies of our system impose costs on food businesses and the City overall, contributing to congestion and noise. The plan therefore for the first time in a City document ties together these threads and offers a policy framework for the food system that looks at our local, regional, and in some ways national food infrastructure through a lens of sustainability and resiliency.

A resilient food system is also one that can depend on short supply chains if necessary. A resilient food system can also connect multiple food suppliers of differing sizes and offering types to many different end-users, ensuring adaptability in the case of changing circumstances. At the start of the pandemic, we closely monitored the food supply chain to spot any disruptions. While there were some initial disruptions largely because of panic buying and workforce disruptions, we fortunately did not experience anything that caused widespread issues to our food supply. As a precautionary measure, Mayor de Blasio called for the creation of a food reserve to provide immediate access to sufficient, nutritious food supply to support emergency feeding operations resulting from the COVID-19 response in the event of supply chain disruptions, extreme increases in demand, or another emergency event.

The most distinct feature of this program is that it intentionally sourced produce from our region. Many of the producers who sold to restaurants or other large institutions saw their markets evaporate. To help the industry, we sought to source from the region. Since September of last year, the City has distributed over 6.7M pounds of fresh produce via the Pandemic Food Reserve Emergency Distribution (P-FRED), along with over 7.6M pounds of high-quality shelf-stable food. It is encouraging to see the Federal TEFAP program mirror this type of operational change.

Building a stronger regional food system

As a direct consequence of taking the resilience of New York City's food supply seriously, regionality of the City's food policy has become a greater priority. The food supply shock effect of the pandemic has taught us that we need to be more deeply engaged in improving regional coordination, including by increasing procurement of regional food, advocating for regional food infrastructure, and developing additional partnerships with regional actors. This is an important area for coordination between City, State and national government as many programs are limited to either rural or urban applications. What is needed are integrated urban-rural policies that serve to integrate food and agriculture programs. We also want to support increased urban food production, including removing regulatory barriers from urban agriculture and promoting innovation in technology and use of space.

For the City to address the intersection of challenges to provide stable and high-quality food related jobs, ensure the security of the City's food supply even in the midst of shocks to the food system, and to provide healthy and affordable food access while supporting a climate-friendly, diverse, scaled up agricultural landscape requires a holistic and collaborative approach to the Northeast region's food system. The City's levers of food systems change extend beyond its borders in numerous ways, impacting production systems, distribution and processing, market access, waste management for nutrients, and more. The challenges are complex and multi-faceted, which is reflected in the approach taken to create the first 10-



year food policy plan for New York City that also embraces regionality for the first time in a serious manner.

FOOD FORWARD NYC: A 10-Year Food Policy Plan

Food Forward NYC emphasizes the importance of both equity and choice - enabling a food system where everyone should be able to access the food, they want wherever they may want it. To enable this choice, we need to support both our food workers and our food businesses. To strengthen the sustainability and resiliency of our food system, we need to rethink our food infrastructure and deepen our connections with the region. This plan was also deeply influenced by the collective lessons learned throughout the pandemic as well as the work of the Taskforce on Racial Inclusion and Equity convened by the Administration last fall. As the City seeks to implement this long-range and ambitious plan, we are continuously working with our partners both within government and outside of government, urban and rural, to make the policies and strategies in this document their own and to implement them in ways that reflect their vision for their communities

NYC's food system is complex, both influenced by and influencing the built and natural environment and people's lives in multiple ways. In Food Forward NYC, we are addressing all phases of the food supply chain; from production, to processing, to distribution, to retail, to consumption, to post consumption.

When we were developing this plan, we were very mindful that the implicit charge of a 10-year food policy plan was to re-set food policy in NYC and provide a systems approach. We needed to move away from a program by program, agency by agency approach and plan for food at the same scale that New Yorkers interact with food. Accordingly, despite operating during an emergency - and running several emergency programs - we took engagement for the plan very seriously. We engaged with 300 individuals from all across the food sector, including food workers and business owners, experts in infrastructure and sustainability, academics and advocates - people from all over the City representing many different communities, and many people with experience thinking about economic democracy projects such as coops and land trusts. We also built on existing expertise at the Mayor's Office of Food Policy and across a variety of city agencies that touch food systems. We also utilized community engagement lessons learned from the City's Take Care New York and insight gained from the Mayor's COVID-19 Task Force on Racial Inclusion and Equity.

One question we heard a lot while working on the plan was given that the food system is highly fragmented, privately owned and dependent on food coming from outside the City, the State, the Country - how can the plan have an impact? Well, we know that the City has many levers for changing the food system. We can shape how federal benefits, programs like SNAP and WIC, are administered. We can use our status as one of the largest food purchasers in the country to reshape markets. The City's regulatory policies and investments in infrastructure can be leveraged to support the food sector. We can support minority and women-owned businesses. We can leverage the power of convening and fostering partnerships. We can push for change in federal and state policy, leveraging all these tools together under a single strategic framework, in partnership with the many players in the food system, including yourselves - we can transform the food system.



And of course, City government on its own has an extraordinary role to play. New York City has dozens of City agencies that engage in food. Some agencies directly provide food for New Yorkers - a total of half a billion dollars annually, while some agencies such as my office set the City's food policy and others agencies support the City's food supply in myriad ways - from the City's Small Business Services to the Department of Environmental Protection.

By providing a systems approach - a unified framework for City government, Food Forward NYC represents a sea change in MOFP and City Hall's approach to food policy. The plan is organized along the following categories five overarching goals with sub strategies and actions. As this is a long-range policy plan, the types of actions in the plan vary greatly. Some are actions that we have already launched or are about to launch. Others require studies or longer-term planning efforts to determine an implementation study. Yet other actions are partnerships we are interested in exploring or depend on the results of long term federal and state advocacy.

The first goal is: All New Yorkers have multiple ways to access healthy, affordable, and culturally appropriate food. We want to move away from the traditional focus on emergency food and emphasize that all New Yorkers, including food insecure New Yorkers, deserve dignity, choice, convenience, health, affordability. Let me give you some highlights from this goal - going forward, I'll be highlighting strategies that I think might be of particular relevance for this audience, but I should stress that there are 71 actions in the plan and I will not be reviewing them all. We are reiterating in the plan our sustained focus on transforming the emergency food system. The work we are doing now is really revolutionizing the emergency food system, bringing more equity and efficiency as well as improving the actual food offerings. We are committed to continuing this good work. We are interested in pushing forward ways to instill similar principles in farmers' markets. How do we make sure that we create sustainable and equitable supports for farmers markets that serve the communities that need them the most? There may be interesting lessons to learn from the work we are doing on the emergency food system and we see a clear role for federal funding and innovation here. We are also looking to launch a new food program that starts addressing specific unmet needs revealed by the pandemic - the needs of people who cannot leave home, and/or are not eligible for SNAP for whatever reason and still need food assistance. We also identified infrastructure as a major barrier and will discuss it further under goal 3. We want to find new ways to improve access to space and particularly cold storage in underserved communities to reduce costs and operational burden of fresh, high quality food. We also want to study the viability of food hubs that expand public schools' access to cold storage, processing space, and preparation capacity.

The second goal is: New York City's food economy drives economic opportunity and provides good jobs. The recent crisis really demonstrated the need to support both our food workers and our small food businesses. In fact, one of the most interesting things that emerged from our engagement was that supporting both small businesses and workers together was necessary - there was no antagonism but a spirit of collaboration. First and foremost, we want to strengthen the ways in which we protect food workers, improve their pay and benefits. Some key ways of doing this are strengthening enforcement of worker rights within the City and, leveraging City procurement to support food workers that serve New



York City. We are also interested in increasing supports for worker cooperatives and innovative social enterprises. One of the things I'm particularly excited about is exploring innovations such as portable benefits. That's a good example of a potential win-win for workers and small businesses. We also want to sharpen our focus on supporting small food businesses by streamlining both regulations and enforcement and making it easier to operate in the City. New York is a tough city to do business in and we want to help them. We also want to explore ways we can assist food businesses and customers to reclaim their data. Another way to provide win wins for both workers and businesses is to invest in worker training. That includes developing career pathways in the food sector, training around food and technology, as well language training opportunities.

Goal three is that the supply chains that feed New York City are modern, efficient, and resilient. To be able to provide healthy, affordable food to New Yorkers and leverage the food sector as an engine of economic opportunity, we need more space and infrastructure within the City that is dedicated to food and we need to strengthen our regional connections. We really need to start thinking more like urban and regional planners - and asking urban and regional planners to think of themselves as food policy people. Firstly, we want to strengthen the City's food infrastructure, including continuing to modernize Hunts Point Market, investing in neighborhood and borough-based distribution facilities. We will be working very closely with NYC Economic Development Corporation on this issue. We are also excited to explore ways in which zoning - a powerful regulatory tool, if used right - can help us protect and expand the available space for different types of food uses. Regionalism is core to every element of this plan. Sourcing regionally not only reduces food miles but improves accountability and strengthens connections between the City and the region it is located in.

Goal four is that New York City's food is produced, distributed, and disposed of sustainably. As part of that we will work to integrate sustainability and animal welfare into City food programs, including City food procurement, integrating sustainability criteria into commercial waste contracts, and increasing composting. We also seek to reduce the environmental burden and carbon footprint of the food system by making the transportation and cold storage systems more efficient and increasing electrification. This ties directly to the space and infrastructure issues that I mentioned in Goal three, we see it as important that we minimize the environmental impact of food distribution within the City. We will also seek to promote community and business innovation around food and sustainability. One area we are excited about that emerged as a strategy as part of our engagement is bolstering community-owned waste management initiatives.

Finally, Goal five is about supporting the systems and knowledge to implement the 10-year food policy plan. This really is about our collective capacity - not just MOFP, not just the City but the whole food world to deliver the plan. Currently, few systems are in place, whether in City government or outside of it, that have the capacity and the knowledge to alone implement a comprehensive food policy. Some of the and of course there are many other dimensions of the food system we might want to explore. We committed to being proactive in looking for ways to partner with the non-governmental sector to maximize community participation in food policy decision-making. In the longer term, we are also interested in exploring the creation of a food justice fund.



Good food purchasing (GFP) is a major theme across the plan and there are multiple recommendations related to it under every goal. For those of you not familiar with this framework, it provides a methodology to quantify the impact of the food an institution purchases along five core values - no matter where across the country the food comes from or how complex the supply chain. The five core values are: local economies, nutrition, valued workforce, environmental sustainability, and animal welfare. The City is working to implement the framework across several dimensions: first, whenever legally possible, we are working to include GFP into current City contracts. We are also working to create the governance to support the program - whether it is legislative change or procurement centralization. We are also working to invest in City government-owned food infrastructure, starting with a shared commercial kitchen for providers serving older New Yorkers. Finally, as mentioned before we are embracing regionalism by strengthening our connections with the region and eventually our food sourcing.

We talked a lot about the “what”. This is the “how” we are going to implement. First, we will work with City agencies to identify near term implementation priorities. We will partner to develop funding sources for food programs. We also need to expand the capacities of the MOFP and improve our data collection. We will continuously partner with advocates to identify community engagement opportunities around food and - frankly - advocate for the plan’s implementation. In 2023, we will be releasing our first two-year progress report. With that being said, so much is already happening right now. We are working on including developing a new food program, transforming the emergency food network, and continuing to implement Good Food Purchasing.

Lessons Learned

Food Forward NYC

The creation of Food Forward NYC relied heavily to only on the decades of work on food policy that took place in New York City but also relied on the relationships the City built during COVID-19 with communities, advocates, businesses and regional partners. These pre-existing relationships and the deep knowledge that we gained from the crisis allowed us to work well together on the development of this 10-year strategy.

For those seeking to develop a similar strategic plan, I want to share some lessons that my team and I learned while developing Food Forward NYC:

- Food plans differ in important ways from other plans such as land use plans or transportation plans – they do not rely on a centralized implementing power, but rather the collaborative and creative implementation of policy levers and partnerships. For that reason, we recommend that at the onset of planning be sure to set the clear expectation that other strategies will naturally emerge while some may fall off– as new policy is set, and new opportunities take shape. We see Food Forward NYC as a living document, one that adjusts to new and changing markets and political landscapes.



Food Policy

- Next, planning is important, but it should not get in the way of releasing a report that sets a path forward. Many government documents take years to develop, and by the time they are released, the food landscape has already shifted. While I strongly recommend engaging with as many key stakeholders as possible, it would be advantageous to keep a tight focus on charting a shared vision and strategies, rather than detailed implementation plans, in order to keep stakeholders engaged and momentum going.
- Be thoughtful in the language you use. For example, in New York City we have a historically black-led community gardens movement which grows food, as well as a newer trend of indoor agriculture start-ups. The term urban agriculture is seen as exclusionary by some, so we preferred to use the term urban farming to acknowledge the full range of urban food production activities.
- One challenge we faced was that consistent data about the food system is fairly scarce. This can make planning difficult, in that it can be a challenge to turn a need stemming from food insecurity into a detailed operational plan. Data should not, however, be a limiting factor in developing a plan. The focus should be on developing sustainable, scalable solutions for food insecurity. That said, going forward, a national effort to improve the data on the needs of food insecure individuals and the availability of different foods can greatly aid in maximizing the efficiency and success of future initiatives.

Urban-Rural Policies

I also want to strongly recommend a greater focus on urban-rural policies. New York City successfully launched an NYC-Regional Food Working Group, which serves as a forum for exchanging information and developing solutions. This group was invaluable in providing feedback for Food Forward NYC, and we hope to sustain it going forward. However, currently, it is sustained on a voluntary basis. Generally speaking, while there are many programs with either a rural or urban focuses, few programs support urban-rural collaboration, and those that do so do not provide consistent capacity to the wide range of organizations need to make it a success. Given that, I recommend integrated urban-rural policies, including the following:

- Consistent funding for convening and relationship building between multiple urban and rural partners, governmental, NGOs, institutions, and the private sector, at the regional scale.
- Investment in the entire length of the supply chain, from rural production and processing to aggregation, transportation, and finally distribution at the urban scale.
- Support for innovative programming that connects urban farmers and rural farmers

Conclusion

Again, I am grateful for this Committee's focus on ending hunger nationwide. Thank you for your time, and I will be happy to answer any questions you may have.