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Testimony prepared by

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for the

Committee on Health

on a

Preconsidered Resolution to reauthorize an adequately funded Farm Bill that creates a strong and healthy food system.

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on behalf of

Food Bank For New York City

INTRODUCTION

Good afternoon and thank you, Chairperson Arroyo and members of the Health Committee. My name is Triada Stampas and I am the Senior Director of Government Relations at the Food Bank For New York City. The Food Bank appreciates the opportunity to present testimony today to the City Council in support of this Resolution, which calls for the reauthorization of an adequately funded Farm Bill that creates a strong and healthy food system.

First, the Food Bank thanks the City Council for your attentiveness and advocacy in the face of threats to federal nutrition assistance programs in Congress over the past year. In particular, we are grateful for the message you sent to the Joint Select Committee on Deficit Reduction (known as the "Super-committee") during the deficit reduction process urging that these programs, particularly the Food Stamp Program (known federally as the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, or SNAP), not fall victim to cuts or restructuring.

In addition, the Food Bank thanks the City Council for your ongoing efforts to address the issue of hunger and ensure all New Yorkers have access to affordable, nutritious food. The City Council's consistent support for increasing enrollment of eligible households in the Food Stamp Program and expanding the in-classroom School Breakfast Program, as well as funding to expand the supply of food available at emergency food programs are especially appreciated and needed as the recession has left elevated levels of food poverty in its wake.

We are fortunate to be holding this hearing just days after Governor Cuomo has announced an end to finger imaging for SNAP, and we thank you as well for your leadership and years of advocacy that helped bring about the elimination of this barrier to access.

Food Bank For New York City works to end hunger and food poverty by increasing access to nutrition, education and financial empowerment. Approximately 1.5 million New York City residents rely on our programs and services. We distribute food and provide support services to approximately 1,000 emergency and community food programs citywide; manage nutrition education programs for schools and community-based organizations (CBOs); operate income support programs including food stamp outreach & enrollment assistance and one of the largest Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC) programs in the country; and conduct research to inform community and government efforts to end hunger in New York City.

With indicators of need in New York – including poverty, food insecurity and unemployment – remaining entrenched at high levels since the start of the recession, the Congressional reauthorization of the Farm Bill this year takes on added importance, as it will set policy and funding for the safety net of federal nutrition assistance programs for the next five years. **The decisions made in Washington, DC this year will directly impact the ability of low-income New Yorkers to feed themselves and their families for years to come.**

With policy, program and funding implications that will be deeply felt in urban areas like New York City, the term "Farm Bill" can be misleading. My testimony will focus on the federal nutrition assistance programs in Title IV of the Farm Bill, the Nutrition Title. As you will undoubtedly hear today, these are by no means the only programs of interest to New Yorkers; they are, however, the ones that will have the most significant and widespread impact.

THE FARM BILL UNDERPINS OUR COUNTRY'S HUNGER SAFETY NET

The Farm Bill represents our nation's most significant investment to prevent hunger. Title IV, the Nutrition Title, constitutes more than 70 percent of the spending in the Farm Bill and includes two key programs: SNAP and the federal Emergency Food Assistance Program (TEFAP).

Food stamps are our nation's first line of defense against hunger. A federal entitlement program, SNAP now provides food assistance to 46.3 million, or one in seven, Americans.¹ Available to any household that meets the eligibility criteria (most importantly, income and immigration status), SNAP is *countercyclical*, meaning when the economy shrinks, it has the flexibility to grow to meet rising need. SNAP enrollment in New York City first exceeded 1.8

¹ United States Department of Agriculture (USDA). February 2012.

million residents – approximately one in five – in December 2010 and has not dropped below that threshold since, evidence that recession has left elevated need in its wake.²

SNAP is highly targeted to reach people in need. A large majority, 85 percent, of SNAP households have income below the poverty level. One in five have no cash income whatsoever; for them, food stamp benefits are their *only* resource to purchase food. Nearly half of SNAP recipients (47 percent) are children.³

SNAP provides timely, and in most cases, temporary assistance. SNAP benefits quickly reach people in their time of need – in most cases, within 45 days of application, though in emergency cases, benefits are delivered within a week – and the average length of time households receive benefits is only nine months.⁴

Emergency food is our last line of defense against hunger. When cash, benefits and the generosity of family and friends have been exhausted, the emergency food network of food pantries, soup kitchens and shelters is the resource of last resort for those struggling to put food on the table. Approximately 37 million Americans rely on emergency food at some point over the course of the year.⁵

In New York City, 1.4 million residents rely on the network of nearly 1,000 food pantries, soup kitchens and shelters across the five boroughs that provide emergency food to neighbors in need. TEFAP is the single largest source of emergency food, accounting for approximately half the food distributed by the Food Bank For New York City in recent years. TEFAP is made up of two funding components: mandatory baseline funding set by the Farm Bill; and discretionary funding used by the United States Department of Agriculture to purchase food from farmers when agricultural markets are weak in order to stabilize prices. Over recent years, the discretionary component of TEFAP has roughly equaled (and, in some years, exceeded) the baseline funding.

As a result of strong agricultural markets in the past year, however, the USDA has not exercised its administrative authority to purchase food. TEFAP consequently lost \$173 million last year, and losses continue. **In New York City, food pantries, soup kitchens and shelters have lost nearly 10 million meals this year alone as a result of these cuts.**

If the first line of defense is weakened, the last line will not hold. New York City's emergency food network is already struggling to meet heightened levels of need that have persisted past the end of the recession.⁶ More than 50 agencies have closed their doors over the past year; many of those that remain open report insufficient food and other resources at a time of unprecedented need. While the Farm Bill presents a window of opportunity for improvements to SNAP and other nutrition assistance programs, it also exposes a moment of vulnerability to threats of funding cuts, caps and restructuring. *Any* cuts to SNAP will deprive low-income individuals and families of much-needed food assistance and force more vulnerable New Yorkers into an emergency food network ill-equipped and under-resourced to meet additional need.

² New York City Human Resources Administration (HRA). March 2012.

³ USDA. Characteristics of SNAP Households: Fiscal Year 2010. September 2011.

⁴ USDA, Food and Nutrition Service. *Fact Sheet*. <http://www.fns.usda.gov/cga/FactSheets/SNAP.htm>.

⁵ Feeding America.

⁶ By economists' definitions, the recession, which began in December 2007, ended in June 2009.

With SNAP cuts already featuring prominently in the ongoing Farm Bill negotiations, the City Council will be sending Congress an important message at an opportune time by passing this Resolution as quickly as possible.

CURRENT THREATS TO ANTI-HUNGER FUNDING IN CONGRESS

The Farm Bill is drafted by the Agriculture Committees of the Senate and the House of Representatives. Once committee members in each house vote to pass their bill, it proceeds to the floor of the respective house of Congress, where it comes to a vote before the full body. Before votes in committee and on the floor, members have the opportunity to offer amendments to the bill. As with any federal legislation, any differences between the Senate and House versions of the Farm Bill will be reconciled in a Conference Committee made up of members of both houses.

At this moment, the Senate Agriculture Committee has passed its draft of the Farm Bill, while the House Agriculture Committee is still completing hearings and collecting public comment. Both bodies, however, have offered damaging proposals that would cut SNAP benefits deeply for some or all recipients.

IN THE SENATE

The Senate Agriculture Committee Farm Bill draft (called a “mark”) contains a \$4.49 billion cut to SNAP benefits over ten years. This cut would impact residents of federally subsidized housing in 14 states, including New York. The Congressional Budget Office has estimated that the loss to affected households would be, on average, \$90 per month in benefits.

In New York City, 190,000 households would experience a decrease in SNAP benefits as a result of this cut.⁷ They are residents of New York City Housing Authority (NYCHA) housing developments – where the average household income is approximately \$23,000⁸ – or recipients of federal Section 8 vouchers. The New York State Office of Temporary and Disability Assistance estimates conservatively that the loss of federal benefits across the state would be at least \$150 million per year.

This loss would not only harm vulnerable New Yorkers, it would have a broader economic impact as the buying power for food in many communities would be significantly decreased. It is estimated that every billion dollars cut from SNAP benefits results in the loss of more than 13,000 jobs.⁹

Helpfully, the Senate Agriculture Committee Farm Bill Mark includes an increase in TEFAP baseline spending of \$160 million over the next ten years, and clarifies the USDA’s discretionary authority to purchase food in response to high unemployment. These funding increases and policy changes are much needed improvements to the program. It should be noted, however, that any beneficial impact will likely be lost if these changes are paired with the deep cuts to SNAP benefits proposed.

⁷ According to analysis by the New York State Office of Temporary and Disability Assistance. Across New York State, approximately 275,000 households would be affected.

⁸ NYCHA Facts.

⁹ Center for American Progress.

The Senate Agriculture Committee's draft of the Farm Bill awaits debate on the floor of the Senate.

IN THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

While the Agriculture Committee of the House of Representatives has yet to produce its Farm Bill draft, there have been disturbing indications that the Committee is willing to entertain even deeper cuts than those contained in the Senate draft. As part of the House Budget Resolution, a majority of House members voted to eliminate SNAP's entitlement status and cut benefits by a shocking \$133 billion over the next ten years. In addition, as part of the framework created by the Budget Resolution to avoid cuts to security and defense spending, the House Agriculture Committee – the same Committee with responsibility for the Farm Bill – adopted a plan to reduce SNAP benefits by an additional \$36 billion. The full House also approved this plan. The cuts proposed in **the House would reduce benefits for every SNAP recipient in the country and remove some from the program entirely.**

SUMMARY

While the Farm Bill process has thus far seen distressing proposals to strip vulnerable individuals and families of the food assistance they rely on, it is far from over. The Food Bank applauds the City Council for its advocacy today to protect and strengthen SNAP and the rest of the hunger safety net. The Resolution under consideration will provide support to the work of champions in Congress like New York's Senator Kirsten Gillibrand, who are working tirelessly to fight SNAP cuts and make the most of available opportunities to improve and strengthen anti-hunger programs. Senator Gillibrand, who sits on the Senate Agriculture Committee, spoke forcefully against SNAP cuts before the Committee, and was instrumental in securing inclusion of the amendment that, if passed in the final Farm Bill, will increase the amount of food in TEFAP, particularly in times of need.

Food Bank For New York City strongly supports passage of this Resolution and thanks the Health Committee and the entire City Council for the time and attention it is giving to this critical issue.