



Testimony of
Coalition for the Homeless

on

Oversight - The Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic on SNAP Administration, Food
Pantries, and Soup Kitchens

submitted to

The New York City Council's Committee on General Welfare

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Thank you for the opportunity to submit testimony on the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on SNAP administration, food pantries, and soup kitchens. As an advocacy and direct service organization, we have seen firsthand the tremendous increase in food insecurity since the start of the pandemic. Homeless and unstably housed New Yorkers were already struggling with hunger prior to this past spring, but the economic impact of the pandemic has exacerbated the hunger crisis throughout the city.

As the pandemic continues, few are at greater risk of the virus than families and individuals experiencing homelessness. Homeless New Yorkers have nowhere to self-quarantine, cannot practice social distancing, and those on the streets lack even regular access to a sink with running water and soap to wash their hands. Furthermore, homeless New Yorkers are far more likely to have the types of underlying medical conditions that result in high mortality rates from COVID-19.

The Coalition for the Homeless operates 11 direct service programs, serving approximately 3,500 homeless and low-income New Yorkers each day. Our Grand Central Food Program is the largest nightly mobile soup kitchen in the United States, and in 35 years has never missed a night of operation – including during the height of the pandemic. Before the pandemic, we typically served 800 to 900 meals per night at our stops in Manhattan and the Bronx. However, we have witnessed a significant surge in need as other soup kitchens and food pantries suspended their operations during the crisis, and now we regularly serve more than 1,100 meals per night. At just one of the program's 25 nightly stops, the number of people lining up for a meal increased from roughly 180 to over 400 during the first weeks of the crisis. We have increased meal production by 40 percent and handed out more than 200,000 emergency meals since the onset of the crisis.

In addition to food, we also began distributing essential items to help homeless New Yorkers follow public health guidance, such as by handing out more than 50,000 bottles of hand sanitizer and more than 130,000 surgical masks to stem transmission of the virus. To help people meet their immediate needs while encountering closed or reduced services and unprecedented economic upheaval, we also distributed 500 prepaid cell phones and thousands of prepaid cash cards that homeless people could use to purchase essentials like hygiene items, OTC medications, food, and clothing. Our staff have created and continually update accurate resource guides by borough that allow both service providers and homeless people to remain informed about what frontline services are open and closed during the crisis. Furthermore, we partnered with Doctors Without Borders and Shower Power to open and operate two Relief Centers – one in Midtown West, the other in Harlem – which offer unsheltered homeless people showers, toilets, PPE, clothing, bottled water, snacks, and resource guides. The Midtown West location has since closed, and we are actively looking for another second Relief Center location. Additionally, we opened a Crisis Services hotline so that hundreds of people in need of shelter and referrals get the help they need, seven days a week, and we regularly inform the people we serve through our food program of these other resources.

Our work distributing food and essential items to the most vulnerable New Yorkers would not be possible without the generous support of the New York City Council. Although the number of people lining up at the street sites where our Grand Central Food Program hands out meals each night has

decreased slightly from the peak in April, the need remains elevated far above normal levels. We are still struggling to provide enough food for the significant number of people in need, and too often must turn people away unfed. With the economic impact of the pandemic promising to linger for months or years to come, the need for services like the Grand Central Food Program is of utmost importance. No one should have to go to sleep hungry and homeless in our city.

We thank the Council for your attention to the urgent hunger crisis throughout the city, and for the Council's continued support of the Grand Central Food Program and other vital frontline services.

About Coalition for the Homeless

Coalition for the Homeless: Coalition for the Homeless, founded in 1981, is a not-for-profit advocacy and direct services organization that assists more than 3,500 homeless and at-risk New Yorkers each day. The Coalition advocates for proven, cost-effective solutions to the crisis of modern homelessness, which is now in its fourth decade. The Coalition also protects the rights of homeless people through litigation involving the right to emergency shelter, the right to vote, the right to reasonable accommodations for those with disabilities, and life-saving housing and services for homeless people living with mental illness and HIV/AIDS.

The Coalition operates 11 direct-services programs that offer vital services to homeless, at-risk, and low-income New Yorkers. These programs also demonstrate effective, long-term, scalable solutions and include: Permanent housing for formerly homeless families and individuals living with HIV/AIDS; job-training for homeless and low-income women; and permanent housing for formerly homeless families and individuals. Our summer sleep-away camp and after-school program help hundreds of homeless children each year. The Coalition's mobile soup kitchen, which usually distributes about 900 nutritious hot meals each night to homeless and hungry New Yorkers on the streets of Manhattan and the Bronx, is now regularly serving more than 1,100 meals per night and distributing PPE and emergency supplies during the COVID-19 pandemic. Finally, our Crisis Services Department assists more than 1,000 homeless and at-risk households each month with eviction prevention, individual advocacy, referrals for shelter and emergency food programs, and assistance with public benefits as well as basic necessities such as diapers, formula, work uniforms, and money for medications and groceries. In response to the pandemic, we are operating a special Crisis Hotline (212-776-2177) for homeless individuals who need immediate help finding shelter or meeting other critical needs.

The Coalition was founded in concert with landmark right-to-shelter litigation filed on behalf of homeless men and women (*Callahan v. Carey* and *Eldredge v. Koch*) and remains a plaintiff in these now consolidated cases. In 1981, the City and State entered into a consent decree in *Callahan* through which they agreed: "The City defendants shall provide shelter and board to each homeless man who applies for it provided that (a) the man meets the need standard to qualify for the home relief program established in New York State; or (b) the man by reason of physical, mental or social dysfunction is in need of temporary shelter." The *Eldredge* case extended this legal requirement to homeless single women. The *Callahan* consent decree and the *Eldredge* case also guarantee basic standards for shelters for homeless men and women. Pursuant to the decree, the Coalition serves as court-appointed monitor of municipal shelters for homeless adults, and the City has also authorized the Coalition to monitor other facilities serving homeless families. In 2017, the Coalition, fellow institutional plaintiff Center for Independence of the Disabled – New York, and homeless New Yorkers with disabilities were represented by The Legal Aid Society and pro-bono counsel White & Case in the settlement of *Butler v. City of New York*, which is designed to ensure that the right to shelter includes accessible accommodations for those with disabilities, consistent with Federal, State, and local laws.