



GOAL 2

# NY FOOD 2025

*Improving Healthy Food Access  
for All New York City Residents*



**HUNTER COLLEGE  
NEW YORK CITY  
FOOD POLICY CENTER**



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## NEW YORK FOOD 2025 GOAL 2

### Improving Healthy Food Access for All New York City Residents

[New York Food 2025](#) is a collaborative effort by the Hunter College NYC Food Policy Center, The Laurie M. Tisch Center for Food, Education & Policy, and The CUNY Urban Food Policy Institute to examine the effects of the pandemic on New York City's food policies and programs and propose specific policy measures the NYC Mayor and City Council can consider and implement to build a stronger, healthier, more just, and sustainable food system in New York City. This policy brief is one part of a 7-part series of policy briefs and recommendations and builds on our group's earlier report, [New York Food 20/20: Vision, Research, and Recommendations During COVID-19 and Beyond](#), on the impact of the pandemic on New York City's food system and food workforce.

#### Background

Full-service food retail that is accessible and affordable is associated with healthier food intake and lower rates of diet-related chronic disease in communities.<sup>1</sup> However, research has highlighted socioeconomic disparities in food retail environments in the United States and found predominantly low-income and minority neighborhoods have less variety of healthy food items, lower quality produce, and inconsistent pricing.<sup>2,3,4,5,6</sup> Inequities in food retail environments in New York City (NYC) are well documented and impact the availability and affordability of healthy food items across neighborhoods.<sup>7</sup> For example, bodegas are less likely to have healthy food options compared to full-service supermarkets.<sup>8</sup> Yet, across NYC, there is wide variability in the bodega-to-supermarket ratio across neighborhoods. In the Upper West Side, the ratio is three bodegas for every supermarket, where-

as in Bedford-Stuyvesant, the ratio is 57 to one.<sup>9</sup> As a result of long-entrenched structural racism, Black and Latinx residents are disproportionately affected by inequities in food retail environments and bear the greatest burden of food insecurity and diet-related diseases in NYC.<sup>10</sup> In October 2021, the NYC Department of Health and Mental Hygiene (DOHMH) passed a resolution declaring racism a public health crisis.<sup>11</sup>

The COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated existing inequities in food environments and also created new problems. Disruptions to supply chains and shifts in demand caused by the pandemic have contributed to significant increases in food retail prices.<sup>12</sup> The CUNY Urban Food Institute conducted a food retail survey among New York residents over a 13-week period between March and June 2020 and found that 70% reported spending more money weekly on food since the beginning of the pandemic.<sup>13</sup> The pandemic may have also worsened existing inequities in food retail access as qualitative interviews conducted by the Hunter College NYC Food Policy Center with NYC residents during August 2020 found that residents reported that smaller grocery stores and bodegas charged more for their products and/or offered more processed or packaged food choices rather than fresh or perishable items.<sup>14</sup>

Many NYC residents also rely on institutional settings for access to healthy food. The City serves over 230 million meals and snacks every year to over a million NYC residents, including public school students, seniors, homeless individuals and families, and patients in public hospitals.<sup>15</sup> However, the pandemic created significant shifts in the service models for institutional food that contributed to uneven access to nutrition among NYC residents.<sup>16</sup> In 2020, many institutional meals served by schools and senior centers switched to grab-and-go models in response to closures and social distancing mandates. Despite efforts to continue to reach NYC residents who rely on institutional meals during the height of the pub-

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**In the next four years, the Mayor and City Council should take measures to increase healthy and affordable food available in retail settings and purchased by NYC agencies for institutional and emergency food programs.**

lic health crisis, the overall number of meals and snacks served across 10 City agencies decreased to 151 million in FY 2021.<sup>17</sup>

It is estimated that food insecurity currently affects 1.4 million NYC residents which represents a 36% increase from pre-pandemic rates.<sup>18</sup> The socioeconomic challenges presented by the pandemic have contributed to an unprecedented increase in the use of the City's emergency food assistance programs, which is made up of a network of more than 400 food pantries and soup kitchens across all five boroughs. 75% of food pantries and soup kitchens reported an increase in the total number of visitors in 2020 compared to year before, including increases in first time visitors, families with children, and undocumented immigrants.<sup>19</sup> The emergency food system has been unprepared for the level of demand created by the pandemic and has also raised concerns about the nutritional quality and cultural appropriateness of the food distributed.<sup>20</sup> The COVID-19 pandemic has had a profound impact on the food environment in NYC, exacerbating existing inequities and creating new challenges to healthy food access for residents.

### Existing Programs and Policies

Several existing city and statewide initiatives have been implemented to increase healthy food options in retail, institutional, and emergency food settings and provide a strong foundation for Policy makers to expand upon to continue to improve healthy and affordable food access for all NYC residents.

The City operates several nutrition incentive programs that aim to increase the purchasing power of low-income residents for fruits and vegetables in retail settings. Since 2005, the DOHMH has operated the Health Bucks program. Health Bucks are \$2 coupons that are redeemable for fresh fruits and vegetables at all NYC farmers markets. Health Bucks are distributed to Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP, formerly known as food stamps) recipients at farmers markets as an incentive for using an Electronic Benefits Transfer (EBT) card at the market. In 2021, the incentive amount was increased and for every \$2 spent using their SNAP/EBT card, shoppers received \$2 in Health Bucks, capped at \$10 per day. Community-based organizations can also request Health Bucks from DOHMH to distribute to community members as an incentive to participate in nutrition education activities; however availability is limited. In 2020, over 316,000 Health Bucks were distributed at farmers markets as a SNAP incentive and more than 114,000 Health Bucks were distributed by more than 470 programs at community-based organizations.<sup>21</sup>

In 2019, DOHMH launched the Get Good Stuff program, a nutrition incentive program available to SNAP recipients at select grocery stores. For every dollar spent using SNAP/EBT on eligible fruits, vegetables and beans, shoppers receive a matching dollar in reward points (up to \$10 per day) that can be used for the next purchase of eligible produce. In FY 2021, customers participating in the program redeemed over \$1,090,000 worth of fruits, vegetables and beans.<sup>22</sup> The program currently operates at six supermarkets in the Bronx, Brooklyn and Queens.<sup>23</sup> In March 2021,



the City announced it received a \$5.5 million grant from the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) Gus Schumacher Nutrition Incentive Program (GusNIP) to expand SNAP nutrition incentive programs and part of this funding will be used to expand the Get the Good Stuff program to additional supermarkets in NYC.<sup>24</sup> Nutrition incentive programs aim to increase access to and consumption of fruit and vegetables and should be expanded to reach low-income households that are not eligible for SNAP.

Shop Healthy NYC is a DOHMH initiative that works with food retailers to increase the stock and promotion of healthy foods in bodegas and supermarkets. This initiative aims to support sustainable changes in food retail environments at the neighborhood level and engages food retailers and community residents to influence the supply and demand for healthy food options. By 2019, over 1,500 food retailers agreed to promote healthier items as part of this initiative; however, this program was paused during FY 2021 due to the pandemic.<sup>25</sup>

At the institutional level, the NYC Food Standards provide mandatory nutrition guidelines for meals and snacks provided by all NYC agencies.<sup>26</sup> The Standards apply to more than 230 million meals and snacks served each year at schools, senior centers, homeless shelters, child care centers, after school programs, correctional facilities and public

hospitals. While the Standards only apply to food served at NYC agencies, they are recommended for use in other settings such as community and faith-based organizations, private businesses, and universities. Additionally, the Standards do not apply to foods purchased for the intention of a disaster response.<sup>27</sup>

Several new emergency initiatives were created to bolster the City's response to the increased level of food insecurity caused by the pandemic. In 2020, the Pandemic Food Reserve Emergency Distribution Program (P-FRED) was established as a temporary program to distribute fresh and shelf-stable food to more than 400 COVID-response emergency feeding programs in NYC that continue to experience high demand. The City has also allocated an additional \$900,000 for equipment grants for City pantries and \$600,000 to fund technology upgrades for the City's emergency food network.<sup>28</sup> In February 2022, the Department of Social Services (DSS) announced a new food procurement program that will require vendors to distribute fresh fruits and vegetables through the Emergency Food Assistance Program (EFAP).<sup>29</sup>

## Policy Recommendations


In order to achieve the goal of increasing healthy and affordable food available in retail settings and purchased by NYC agencies for institutional and emergency food programs,



the Mayor and City Council should consider the following recommendations.


### By the end of 2022, the Mayor and City Council should:

#### Further increase funding to emergency food programs for infrastructure updates to support fresh food procurement.

 In February 2022, DSS announced a new procurement program that will require vendors to distribute fresh fruit and vegetables through the emergency food assistance program, a first in the program's thirty-year history.<sup>30</sup> The City must now ensure that all participating food pantries and soup kitchens have the necessary infrastructure (e.g., refrigeration, adequate storage) and training to distribute fresh produce. Funding should be provided to assess the emergency food network's capacity for the distribution of fresh fruits and vegetables as well as technical assistance to support equipment and infrastructure upgrades.

### Between 2022 and 2025, the Mayor and the City Council should:

#### Ensure universal definition of healthy food used by all NYC agencies and emergency food programs.

 A central goal outlined in the 10-year food policy plan that was released by the Mayor's Office of Food Policy (MOFP) is to ensure that all NYC residents have multiple ways to access healthy food;<sup>31</sup> however the City lacks a universal definition for the term "healthy food" and its applied use in institutional and emergency food settings. While the NYC Food Standards provide nutritional standards for meals and snacks served by City agencies, they focus primarily on the nutritional composition and preparation of food and do not provide specific guidance to help agencies

prioritize or promote the consumption of whole foods that are minimally processed. The City must make strides to create a universal definition of healthy food that can be used by all NYC agencies and emergency food programs to advance city-wide food policy and public health goals. The City should establish an advisory board composed of multidisciplinary health and nutrition experts (including, but not limited to health providers, academic food centers, leaders of community-based organizations, and residents) to work in tandem with the DOHMH and the MOFP to develop a universal definition of healthy food that ensures that minimally processed, whole foods are prioritized in NYC agencies and emergency food programs.

**Expand citywide incentive programs for fruits and vegetables to more NYC residents.** Nutrition incentive programs increase the purchasing power of low-income residents for fruits and vegetables in retail settings. The City should continue to support programs such as Health Bucks and Get the Good Stuff that provide nutrition incentives to SNAP recipients. In addition, the City should create a program to provide nutrition incentives to low-income households that are ineligible for SNAP (including undocumented immigrants and residents whose income is beyond the threshold of the program but struggle to meet dietary needs) and support their acceptance at a variety of retail food businesses including supermarkets and bodegas. Smaller retailers may have limited operational capacity to stock, store, and otherwise provide maintenance of fresh produce. The City should provide technical assistance and grant funding for retailers and retail suppliers who would like to offer fresh fruit and vegetables.

#### Move away from an emergency food model that limits choice, to one that maximizes choice and enhances dignity.

The emergency food system is not always utilized by those who need it. As cited in

the Food Forward NYC report released in February 2021, “One study looking at New Yorkers facing food hardship found that only 25% of New Yorkers who face severe food hardship and only 17% of New Yorkers who face moderate food hardship typically use the emergency food system.”<sup>32</sup> The research often cites stigma as a significant barrier to utilization of food pantries and soup kitchens.<sup>33</sup> Further, most food banks and pantries primarily distribute shelf-stable food items and often do not have the capacity to accommodate the wide range of cultural and dietary needs of community members. The City must further invest in technology to build out citywide ordering systems and delivery platforms to improve efficiency, maximize choice, and create a more dignified experience for participants of emergency food programs. This should also include technical assistance to all emergency food providers to leverage existing digital platforms, such as the “Plentiful” app, so food pantry participants are better able to select foods that they want and coordinate pickup times that are convenient for them.



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