

Roundtable Discussion on Hunger Hosted By: Congresswoman Scanlon with Congressman McGovern
Cynthia Figueroa, Deputy Mayor
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Cynthia Figueroa
Hunger Roundtable Testimony

Thank you for inviting me to testify today. I am Cynthia Figueroa, Deputy Mayor for the City of Philadelphia's Office of Children and Families. I am honored to be here at the Roundtable Discussion on Hunger and to submit testimony to the House Rules Committee on innovative ways to end hunger. I would like to thank Congresswoman Scanlon and Congressman McGovern for your important leadership on hunger and food access work including Congressman McGovern's proposal to create a White House Conference on Food, Nutrition and Hunger.

Mayor James Kenney formed the Office of Children and Families (OCF) on January 6, 2020, with the intent and determination that no single support, program, or resource on its own can ensure the health, education, and well-being of Philadelphia's children and families. By working to coordinate and strengthen City operations, policies, and prevention services for the City's children and families, the creation of OCF solidified the administration's deep commitment to ensure children, families, and communities are connected to the resources they need to thrive

Food access has been one of our highest priorities throughout the pandemic. In March 2020, the City immediately mobilized to lead an emergency food response that included multiple ways for families to receive free, nutritious food in partnership with other City Departments and community partners. Within the first days of the pandemic, we set up 80 food distribution sites in neighborhoods with demonstrated high need. This was based on the immediate need that school closures would require a method to ensure school students could continue to get feed. Within a week or supporting a method to distribute youth meals the City lead the implementation of 40 general food distribution sites. In addition, there was specialized distribution to vulnerable populations-- older adults, people with disabilities, and unsheltered individuals. Ensuring that sites operated consistently and with an adequate food supply has been the foundation for these efforts. As of the end of May of 2021 we distributed over **11 million meals** and over **26 million pounds of food**.

The Office of Children and Families has acted convener and messenger serving as a megaphone to amplify food resources through digital and non-digital communication in multiple languages. The City now has an interactive free food finder map, phila.gov/food, that is a permanent resource for Philadelphia residents that was a result of infrastructure developed and utilized during the pandemic. This summer the City and our partners will have over 500 free food and meal sites listed on this map. The City of Philadelphia's 311 operators were also trained to help families find nearby food sites and pantries using phila.gov/food. The collaboration we have fostered with partners and the communications infrastructure will continue beyond the pandemic as we work to ensure all Philadelphians have access to the food they want and need.

Philadelphia is the poorest big city in the United States. In 2019, 14 % of Philadelphians faced food insecurity, meaning they did not know where their next meal was coming from or did not have the money to buy more food.¹ For 2021, Feeding America projects that over 17% of Philadelphians and a staggering **28% of children in Philadelphia will face food insecurity**.² Think about how hard it would be to focus on learning math in school if you hadn't had breakfast that morning or enough dinner the night

¹ Feeding America, State-By-State Resource: The Impact of Coronavirus on Food Insecurity, <https://feedingamericaaction.org/resources/state-by-state-resource-the-impact-of-coronavirus-on-food-insecurity/>

² Feeding America, State-By-State Resource: The Impact of Coronavirus on Food Insecurity, <https://feedingamericaaction.org/resources/state-by-state-resource-the-impact-of-coronavirus-on-food-insecurity/>

before. Children experiencing food insecurity are more likely to have to repeat a grade in elementary school, struggle socially, and experience developmental delays.³ Food is a human right and no child or adult should be experiencing hunger in the United State.

Food Insecurity in Philadelphia

In Philadelphia, as in the rest of the country, the pandemic has exacerbated historic and structural racial inequities including access to food, living-wage jobs, health care and housing security. Philadelphia Works released a Jobless Brief in June 2020 and found unemployment claims increased by 1,273% during Philadelphia's pandemic shutdown. For 10 of the 12 weeks covered in the report, the greatest proportion of unemployment claimants were Black.⁴ The report identified 11 zip codes as being most impacted by unemployment during the pandemic. Many of these zip codes also had the highest rates of unemployment claims prior to the pandemic.⁵ We know that to end food insecurity, we need to address the root causes including poverty and systemic racism.

While Philadelphia is a city with deep poverty and inequity, we are also a city where residents care for each other. There is a strong network of over 500 community and faith-based food pantries, soup kitchens and emergency food providers where neighbors support neighbors. The City was able to work with many of these existing food providers to quickly mobilize a city-wide network of food distributions during the height of the pandemic.

Philadelphia's Pandemic Emergency Food Response

On March 13, 2020, the School District of Philadelphia announced that schools were closed for in person learning and classes would move to a virtual format. In the days that followed, our daily lives transformed and we had new, urgent challenges to address. The pandemic fast-tracked opportunities to work creatively across systems to develop innovative ways to help meet the needs of Philadelphia's children, youth, families, and adults. As many programs transitioned to virtual, the Office of Children and Families helped lead the City's COVID-19 emergency food distribution response.

- **Strong partnerships:** The City brought together an amazing group of dedicated partners including the School District of Philadelphia, Charter Schools, Philadelphia Corporation for Aging (PCA), Philabundance, Share, Broad St. Ministry, Muslims Serve, Prevention Point, SEAMAAC and Liberty Resources, Inc to make sure free food was available to anyone who needed it, where they needed it. The City continues to convene all of our partners in this work to ensure consistent operations of free food sites and adapt our strategy to meet the needs of all Philadelphians.
- **Free youth meals:** We have worked with the School District of Philadelphia and Charter Schools to ensure that youth had access to free meals throughout the City as soon as schools closed for in person learning. During the 2020 school year we had over 130 schools distributing school meal boxes with 7 breakfasts, 7 lunches, fresh fruit and milk every week. Thanks to the USDA child nutrition waivers, any Philadelphia caregiver could go to any of these meal sites to pick up

³ Feeding America, Child Hunger Facts, <https://www.feedingamerica.org/hunger-in-america/child-hunger-facts>

⁴ Philadelphia Works, Jobless: A Brief on Initial Unemployment Compensation Claimants Residing in Philadelphia During the Local COVID-19 Coronavirus Outbreak and City Shutdown, <https://www.philaworks.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/Jobless-Brief.pdf>

⁵ Philadelphia Works, Jobless: A Brief on Initial Unemployment Compensation Claimants Residing in Philadelphia During the Local COVID-19 Coronavirus Outbreak and City Shutdown, <https://www.philaworks.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/Jobless-Brief.pdf>

food for their children. As of May 2021, we have distributed over 10.6 million meals to children in Philadelphia.

- **A data-driven approach:** We worked with trusted partners and used data, including the poverty index, population density, walkability, and vehicle ownership, to determine food site locations. Many of the meal and food sites were in places experiencing the greatest need. 9 of the 11 zip codes with the highest unemployment claims between March and June 2020 had 5 or more city-supported meal sites.
- **City-run food warehouse:** The City mobilized its own workforce and volunteers to stand up a food warehouse that supplied food boxes to a network of 40 sites throughout the city in partnership with Share and Philabundance. The City's Community Life Improvement Program (CLIP) managed the warehouse and volunteers to pack over 32,000 boxes of food every week and the warehouse remained active from March 2020 through August 2020. The independent food warehouse also ensured safe COVID operations and ensure that food partners would not have to compromise their food warehouse in the event of a COVID-19 exposure.
- **Step Up to the Plate PHL:** The Step Up to the Plate initiative launched in April 2020 raised funds to pay local restaurants and businesses to provide meals to people experiencing homelessness, refugees and immigrants at outdoor meal sites. Step Up to the Plate hosts four free outdoor meal sites that operate 4-6 days/week. The initiative provided much needed work opportunities to local restaurants/catering companies during the height of the pandemic. Meals were purchased at cost, which included food, direct labor, utilities and facilities, transportation. Partners provide many other services at the meal sites including COVID testing and vaccination, case management, and support applying for benefits.
- **Deliveries to people with disabilities:** From April - December 2020, Liberty Resources, Inc, the Center for Independent Living in Philadelphia, delivered bi-weekly groceries to over 800 people with disabilities. Share Food Program provided food boxes and LogistiCare, a service that drives people to medical appointments, helped with deliveries. They also partnered with **Live Nation** to use the parking lot at the Fillmore to organize deliveries.
- **Summer Programming:** This summer, the School District of Philadelphia, Charter Schools, Parks and Recreation and many of our partners will offer hundreds of places for families to get free summer meals for their children. We will also have summer camps, academic programs, and enrichment programs that will also provide meals for over 12,000 children. We will be partnering with City Council to offer more comprehensive social services at food distribution sites.

Much of this work wouldn't have been possible without the support of Federal Government programs. Share and Philabundance were able to give out Farmers to Families boxes at our food sites for the duration of the program. USDA waivers to the National School Breakfast and Lunch Program made it possible for us to offer grab and go meals to any student at any site without the need for an ID.

Philadelphians have continued to face food insecurity even as we have been able to reopen the City and lift COVID restrictions. We plan to continue the innovative work we started during the pandemic so that we can end hunger for good in Philadelphia. Partners like Philabundance saw a 60% increase in demand at their food pantries at the height of the pandemic and responded by doubling the amount of food they were providing. We want to make sure Philabundance and Share can continue to meet the need in Philadelphia through support from programs like The Emergency Food Assistance Program (TEFAP).

Food Security Beyond the Pandemic

We are very grateful for all of the work the Federal Government is doing to support food security for Philadelphia residents through Pandemic EBT, extending the 15% increase in SNAP benefits through September 2021, and improvements to WIC including the increase in WIC dollars for fresh produce this summer. We also want as many families as possible to receive the Expanded Child Tax Credit and have partnered with the Campaign for Working Families to provide free tax filing services.

Food security is rooted in financial security, which is why programs that provide direct financial assistance are so important. Hunger will never be solved only by distributing food, we need to address the structural inequities at the root of food insecurity. We need to invest in the people most impacted by poverty and racism.

In August 2020, Philadelphia piloted the Philadelphia Worker Relief Fund in partnership with National Domestic Workers Alliance and the Coalition to Respect Every Worker. The Fund raised over \$1.8 million in philanthropic dollars and provided direct cash assistance to workers and families impacted by COVID-19 who did not have access to any of the federal and state relief programs, like many of whom were essential workers and people of color. The Fund provided a one-time payment of \$800 to over 2,000 Philadelphians by working directly with local, trusted community-based organizations to identify residents who needed this assistance. Over 35% of direct purchases from this program went to paying for groceries and most direct purchases were used to pay for basic needs. Cash assistance can restore power and dignity to people so they can decide what they need for themselves and their families.

There is also a deep history of farming and self-reliance amongst African American, immigrant and refugee communities here. We are in the planning process to create Philadelphia's first Urban Agriculture Comprehensive Plan, which has shown there are over 418 active farms and gardens in Philadelphia. 70% of those farms and gardens are in high poverty areas. 67% are in high poverty areas where the population is more than 50% people of color. The City's Parks and Recreation Farm Philly program donated over 3100 pounds of organic produce to local communities from our Carousel House Farm during the pandemic. When people grow their own food and own land to grow their own food, they invest in their own food security and can contribute to the food security of their neighbors and communities.

Policy Recommendations

Hunger is a complex issue rooted in systemic inequities, but it is absolutely a problem we can solve if we all decide to. Solving hunger will require systems-level, equitable solutions that get at the underlying causes and invest in listening to people who are most impacted by food insecurity and investing in building their wealth and resources. We would love to work with you and our partners in Philadelphia to achieve these policy recommendations:

- **Extend Pandemic-EBT and Child Nutrition Flexibilities:** The School District of Philadelphia qualifies for the Community Eligibility Provision (CEP) because of the high poverty level in our city, so all children in the school district are eligible for free breakfast and lunch. Both the Pandemic Electronic Benefit Transfer (P-EBT) and the 2020 child nutrition waivers have been critical to give families the options of both money purchase meals their children were missing with school closures and the flexibility to pick up multiple meals at any student meal site in the city. With the projected increase of child insecurity rates in Philadelphia, it is crucial to continue and bolster these programs. We are advocating that USDA continue to offer P-EBT during the summer months and during extended school closures when meals are not available. We also

want to see the extension of child nutrition waivers so that programs continue to have flexibility in determining how to best get food to children.

- **Extend the 15% SNAP Increase:** Over 450,000 Philadelphians rely on SNAP to get the food they need for themselves and their families.⁶ That's nearly 30% of our City's population. And SNAP benefits aren't only vital for Philadelphians facing food security, SNAP benefits are invested in Philadelphia's local economy when people use their benefits at our grocery stores. Extending the 15% increase in SNAP benefits will continue to support our economic recovery and will continue to make sure Philadelphians have access to the food they want and need.
- **Replace the Thrifty Food Plan with the Low-Cost Food Plan:** While SNAP is essential to supporting food security, it is often not enough to get families through the whole month. This often means families are forced to buy less nutritious, less healthy foods and often must rely on the charitable food system to make ends meet. By switching to the USDA's Low-Cost Food Plan, we could invest in increased health and well-being of Philadelphia families by giving them more resources to purchase more nutritious foods that will last for the full month.
- **Expand SNAP Eligibility:** Keeping SNAP eligibility at 130% of the Federal Poverty Line means that many Philadelphians who face food insecurity cannot access federal support and must rely on the charitable food network because they are just above that limit. Expanding eligibility for SNAP will have a positive impact for Philadelphians and the Philadelphia economy.
- **Create a White House Conference on Food Nutrition and Hunger:** We are in favor of Congressman McGovern's proposal to create a White House Conference on Food, Nutrition and Hunger to create a roadmap for ending hunger by 2030 in accordance with the United Nations goal. We need to work together at the national level with both policymakers and with people who are experiencing hunger to come up with policy solutions to put an end to hunger. I agree with Congressman McGovern that hunger is a political condition and while we have the food and the resources, we now need the political will to end hunger permanently.⁷
- **Make the Expanded Child Tax Credit permanent:** As I stated earlier, giving families direct cash assistance is one of the best ways to get at the root causes of food insecurity. A permanent Expanded Child Tax Credit could decrease child poverty by 40%.⁸ In Philadelphia, the Child Tax Credit applies to about 9 out of 10 children. Making this tax credit permanent could be transformational for our city.

Conclusion

We are committed to working collaboratively to end hunger in Philadelphia. Philadelphia's Food Policy Advisory Council (FPAC) has been growing the membership and developing infrastructure so that Philadelphians who are most impacted by our food system (people experiencing hunger, relying on school/prison food, working in the food industry, etc.) and have experience organizing community solutions (feeding neighbors, running a food business, growing food, etc.) can lead food policy in our city. This year, FPAC is offering stipends to appointed members so that these resident experts are paid for their time. Within the next few months, we will be completing the City's first Urban Agriculture Comprehensive Plan, which will include recommendations for increasing food access by making it easier for people to grow their own food and start farming and local food production businesses.

⁶ Pennsylvania Department of Human Services, Office of Income Maintenance Listserv, <http://listserv.dpw.state.pa.us/ma-food-stamps-and-cash-stats.html>

⁷ Jim McGovern, End Hunger Now, <https://mcgovern.house.gov/issues/issue/?IssueID=120517>

⁸ Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, Congress Should Adopt American Families' Plan's Permanent Expansions of Child Tax Credit and EITC, Make Additional Provisions Permanent, <https://www.cbpp.org/research/federal-tax/congress-should-adopt-american-families-plans-permanent-expansions-of-child>

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Thank you for listening to my testimony today. I am available to answer any questions you have. The City of Philadelphia looks forward to opportunities to continue working with you on innovative, multi-faceted solutions to end hunger in Philadelphia.