

**Assembly Standing Committee on Social Services Hearing on the Impact of the 2009-2010 State Budget on the Programs and Services of the Office of Temporary and Disability Assistance (OTDA)**

Nutrition Consortium of NYS Testimony  
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Thank you to Assemblyman Keith L.T. Wright, Chairman of the New York State Assembly Standing Committee on Social Services, and to your Assembly colleagues on the Social Services committee, for all of your critical and successful work on behalf of New York's most vulnerable residents. Thank you for having this hearing today, and for affording me the opportunity to testify. My name is Casey Dinkin, and I am the Manager of Advocacy and Communications at the Nutrition Consortium of NYS. The Nutrition Consortium is a statewide, nonprofit organization dedicated to alleviating hunger for residents of NYS. To do this, the Nutrition Consortium focuses on maximizing participation in governmental nutrition assistance programs, such as the Food Stamp Program, the School Lunch and Breakfast programs, and summer, afterschool, and childcare meal programs for children. Outreach, education, and application assistance, to help eligible people apply for and receive nutrition assistance program benefits, is a key focus of the Nutrition Consortium's work. The Nutrition Consortium also engages in advocacy work with our elected officials to strengthen these programs by expanding eligibility, increasing benefit levels, and simplifying the application process, so that benefits are easier to access.

The Nutrition Consortium would like to commend the New York State Office of Temporary and Disability Assistance (OTDA) for their wonderful work to promote the Food Stamp Program to eligible populations, and successful initiatives to increase the number of people who access benefits. OTDA's progressive leadership towards enrolling eligible people in nutrition assistance programs, along with the continued commitment on the part of local Departments of Social Services and HRA to deliver benefits to those in need, is critical to addressing the issue of hunger in NYS.

One of OTDA's successful initiatives to increase access to nutrition assistance programs by eligible populations is the Nutrition Outreach and Education Program (NOEP). NOEP is funded by OTDA and the New York State Department of Health (NYSDOH), and federally matched dollar for dollar by the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA). The Nutrition Consortium, as the statewide administrator of NOEP, would like to extend its most sincere thanks to the Assembly for its leadership in maintaining funding for this important program in the 2009-2010 budget, along with the Senate and Governor. In particular, we would like to thank Assemblyman Wright for his commitment to maintaining NOEP funding, despite a very difficult budget situation in the State. Thanks also to Assemblyman Wright's Chief of Staff, Jeanine Johnson, and Communications Director, Ben Rosen, for their work alongside the Assemblyman to maintain NOEP and other programs for New York State's most vulnerable residents.

NOEP serves 45 service areas throughout NYS—32 upstate counties, including Long Island, and 13 areas in NYC. NOEP provides outreach, education, and application assistance to help eligible individuals learn about and enroll in the federally-funded Food Stamp Program. OTDA invests just

under a million dollars into NOEP, and DOH invests approximately the same amount, which is then federally matched by USDA food stamp outreach dollars. This money is used by community-based organizations throughout the state, to hire food stamp outreach and application assistance workers who focus their efforts on helping as many eligible people as possible to enroll in the Food Stamp Program. These NOEP coordinators, as they are called, are expertly trained in Food Stamp Program eligibility rules and regulations, policies, and application procedures.

Since food stamp benefits are 100% federally-funded, the work done by NOEP coordinators brings millions of additional federal food stamp dollars into the state. In 2008-2009, NOEP helped 27,000 households across NYS to enroll in the Food Stamp Program, which brought more than \$65 million in federal food stamp dollars into New York State's food retail outlets, from large chain stores to supermarkets, independent grocers, farmer's markets, and green carts. These food stamp benefits stimulate the local economy, keep businesses afloat during difficult times, maintain jobs in retail stores and the food industry, and support farms and agriculture.

Aside from the economic impact, food stamp benefits are absolutely critical in preventing hunger and promoting nutrition. Recently-released data from the United States Department of Agriculture shows that 11.3% of New York State Households are struggling with hunger. This statistic represents an unacceptable reality, and unfortunately a growing reality. I'd like to share a written statement from the NOEP coordinator at the Food Bank for New York City, based on her recent experiences working to help those facing hunger and food insecurity. She wrote:

*"Within the last several months, the number of people inquiring about programs such as food stamps or food pantries has increased tremendously day by day. In my experience with the contacts I have had, people from all social and economic backgrounds are now depending solely on these supplemental programs to keep food on their tables as they are faced with a very difficult decision: Rent or food? At the different outreach events, I have learned that many households are not just struggling to provide healthy and nutritious food for their children, but to provide food on a regular basis. Families and single households are under the constant struggle, simply because there is not enough money after just one or two basic expenses, such as rent and utilities, have been met.*

*In my opinion, the issue of hunger has not only affected families within low-income areas. It has reached each and every single corner of our communities. It affects the lives of employed people, individuals who have recently lost their jobs, small and big families, immigrants, students, senior citizens, single parents, professionals, homeowners, etc. One of the biggest impacts caused by hunger is the fact that an alarming number of people are losing their well established independency. During my experience handling NOEP activities, I have learned that there is a significant number of people who have been forced to move out of their homes. They are forced to move in with a family member or friend or in other cases, to a shelter due to the fact that they were not able to afford paying for rent or mortgage and buying food at the same time. Moreover, I have also learned that students are being forced to leave school as a consequence of not being able to afford food. For example, I have had several contacts with college students reaching out for help, who have stated not being able to continue their education after losing their part time job and after their families could not keep helping them. Once they lose their income and once their families are not able to provide for them, they are forced to quit school. School becomes difficult to continue once*

*they begin a job search task, which will be the only way of guaranteeing they will be able to afford eating.*

*In addition to the impacts of hunger, I have learned that an alarming number of people who were living on a fixed income, such as senior citizens, are now being forced to decide between visiting the doctor and eating. Many encounters with senior citizens have taught me that in many households, a decision between buying medicines and food is being made. Some seniors decide to cut on their medical treatments so they can have some extra money to buy a few more groceries. Others decide to stand in line outside of soup kitchens and food pantries to be able to eat. Unfortunately, the majority of those seniors, regardless of the changes they make, still report not being able to afford food.”*

Fortunately, the federally-funded Food Stamp Program, nation’s first line of defense against hunger, is a resource to New York’s residents to help them put food on the table, and make ends meet. However, despite the availability of the Food Stamp Program, and the record numbers of people now enrolled in the program, there are still a record number of people eligible but not receiving benefits. Contact with an “on the ground” outreach worker is often the key factor in getting a household connected with the Food Stamp Program.

This is highlighted in a recent New York Times story about a man whose family had been hit by the economic downturn and was foregoing meals so his children didn’t have to. It took an outreach worker showing up at his daughter’s Headstart class to convince him to finally apply for food stamp benefits. The Nutrition Consortium hears these types of stories time and again from NOEP coordinators across the State. So many people, before being helped by NOEP, either don’t know about food stamps, or don’t know they are eligible. So many people are intimidated or overwhelmed by the application process, don’t know where to start, or feel uncomfortable applying for a government program. But because of NOEP, “on the ground” food stamp outreach workers in trusted community-based organizations reach out to and assist people where they work, live, and bring their children. NOEP also provides translation services in at least eight different languages. Because of NOEP, harder-to-serve people throughout the state are receiving food stamp benefits—people who otherwise would likely not enroll in the program, and would be facing a struggle with hunger.

Maintaining funding for NOEP has proved to be absolutely effective, needed, and productive to the State during this year thus far. Data collected for the first three months shows that the need for food stamp information and application assistance is greater than ever:

- Throughout the state, in the 45 NOEP service areas, in the first three months of 2009-2010, more than 17,000 households have contacted NOEP for information and assistance applying for food stamp benefits.
- In three months, NOEPs have made more than 41,000 face to face contacts with potentially eligible people at individual meetings, presentations, and community events.
- In these three months, NOEPs have helped more than 6,000 households across the state apply for and receive food stamp benefits.
- In three months, these 6,000 newly-enrolled households have brought nearly \$3.5 million in federal food stamp dollars into the state.

Since the state only invests \$2 million in NOEP—half of which is OTDA funding—this means that NOEP has already more than paid for itself in resulting food stamp benefits into New York’s economy, in the first three months of the budget year.

By the end of 2009-2010, we project that NOEP will bring at least \$70 million in federal food stamp benefits into the state. This is 35 times what the state will have invested in it. A program that returns 35 times what the state invests in it, improves public health, promotes self-sufficiency, helps people from all backgrounds, ethnic groups, ages, and geographic areas, is a wonderful example of good, sound public policy, and we commend the New York State Assembly for recognizing it as such, and maintaining its funding.

In addition to its economic benefits to NYS, NOEP assists OTDA by being the “on the ground partner” in implementing and publicizing new initiatives such as mybenefits.gov, the Working Families Food Stamp Initiative, electronic food stamp application, and removing the dependent care deduction cap for childcare expenses. Additionally, NOEP helps local departments and HRA by preventing churning—clients going into the office, only to be sent away because they don’t have the correct documentation, and then having to return. NOEP produces completed applications for caseworkers, with all the required documentation, which are ready to be processed. This helps to take some of the burden off of a system which is currently inundated with applicants.

On that note, we urge the Assembly Social Services Committee to closely monitor the State’s benefits delivery system’s ability to handle the record numbers of people who are now coming to apply for Food Stamp benefits. We commend OTDA and local districts for their continued work to get people the benefits they need. For them to carry out this important work, the Food Stamp administration infrastructure must be adequately funded—and staffed—to meet the increased demand for benefits.

For 2010-2011, we would like to ask the Assembly, along with the Senate and Governor, to strongly consider expanding the funding for NOEP so that it could reach statewide, and fully maximize participation in the federally-funded Food Stamp Program. A state investment of \$4 million, approximately double the current funding, would be enough to do this. Currently, New York City has 13 NOEP service areas, and that number should be doubled in order to adequately meet the need, and help thousands of additional households to receive food stamp benefits. There are also a number of upstate counties that are in need of an additional food stamp outreach worker, such as Syracuse, Buffalo, Nassau, and Suffolk. Lastly, there are upstate counties, including Ulster and Dutchess, with tremendous need, that do not currently have NOEP. Fully funding NOEP would allow these counties to have coverage.

Thanks again to Assemblyman Wright and the Assembly Social Services Committee for holding this hearing, and thank you for your continued leadership towards a New York State where all residents have access to adequate food and nutrition.