

FoodMap NY

Leveraging Private-Sector Innovation
and Investment for Food Security

RESEARCH SPOTLIGHT REPORT

Food and Nutrition Assistance

November 2024



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Introduction

More than 44 million Americans experience food insecurity today, including more than 2.2 million people in New York State alone. Despite decades of government and philanthropic efforts, levels of food insecurity continue to rise, depriving millions of a decent quality of life, and costing our nation billions in preventable health care expenses.¹ In response to this crisis, federal and state leaders have called for private sector collaboration to improve food access and affordability; integrate nutrition and health; empower consumers to make, and have access to, healthy choices; support physical activity for all; and enhance nutrition and food security research.²

The NYU Stern Center for Sustainable Business, in partnership with Cornell University, and with the support of Mother Cabrini Health Foundation, sought to better understand where private sector interventions and investment could enhance food and nutrition security in New York State (NYS).

Research was conducted between April 2022 and May 2023 to assess current knowledge, efforts, and opportunities for private sector engagement in six focal areas:

1. Controlled Environment Agriculture
2. Supply Chain & Infrastructure
3. Healthy Food in Retail Environments
4. Food and Nutrition Assistance Programs
5. Food as Medicine
6. Food Finance

This report focuses on research and opportunities in the area of **Food and Nutrition**.

Government and philanthropic initiatives that directly target food insecurity include the food assistance network (e.g., food banks and food pantries) and nutrition assistance programs—such as the federal Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC), and a range of nutrition incentive programs designed to subsidize the cost of fresh produce. Opportunities for private-sector engagement exist across the areas of program uptake, ease of access, scaling, and technology needs.

Separate reports for each of the other areas are available here:

[view resources](#)

Defining the Opportunity

Private sector organizations are uniquely positioned to fill the gaps in existing food assistance systems. For example, private sector organizations may work to increase enrollment in SNAP, including through the collection of data to target gaps in participation, as well as the administration of specific interventions to bolster participation. Interventions targeted towards increasing participation in federal nutrition assistance programs may focus on outreach and/or educational programming, as well as technological support (e.g., point of sale (POS) systems) to lower barriers to retailer participation, including in online retail settings. Private sector organizations may also develop specific programs to provide food assistance to NYS residents experiencing food insecurity, including last-mile delivery services, alternative benefit schemes, and/or private-sector food donation networks. Lastly, private sector organizations may directly support philanthropic and/or public sector food services, including through the provision of funding for nutrition assistance and incentive programs.



Background

Nutrition Assistance Programs

While food and nutrition policy in NYS spans food system sectors, one of the most efficient and effective food policies operating across the state is SNAP.³ The largest federal nutrition assistance program, SNAP is regarded as a private-public partnership that works.⁴ Under SNAP, eligible individuals and families are provided monthly benefits through an Electronic Benefits Transfer (EBT) card that they can use to purchase eligible food in authorized retail stores,⁵ convenience stores, farm stands, and via online retailers. Private supermarkets serve as the primary point of distribution for SNAP benefits for millions of individuals across the country, including NYS residents.⁶ More than 254,000 retailers across the country are authorized to sell under the federal program,⁷ although more than 90% of all benefits nationwide were redeemed at supercenters, supermarkets, or grocery stores.⁸

As of 2021, one in seven NYS residents (14%) received SNAP benefits during the previous year (2020-21).⁹ Despite the program's benefits, however, state residents may experience a "SNAP gap," in which: 1) SNAP benefits do not cover the full price of household food shopping within a given month; or 2) state residents are not enrolled in, or are otherwise ineligible, for nutrition benefits. Although 89% of state residents who were eligible for SNAP in 2021 received benefits,¹⁰ this rate varied widely across the state. In Tompkins County, for example, just over half (53%) of eligible residents received benefits.¹¹ Further, according to a 2023 report by the New York Health Foundation, over one-quarter (28%) of food insecure individuals in the state did not participate in any food or nutrition program over the past 12 months.¹²

SNAP participation also varies by geographic classification across the state, pointing to spatial differences in perception and/or enrollment. From 2021-2022, for example, data collected from a sample of food insecure residents in NYS indicated that the percentage who do not participate in any state food or nutrition program was lowest amongst suburban residents (38% of survey participants), followed by rural (27%) and urban (23%) residents.¹³ Suburban residents were also least likely to find SNAP easy to use and, alongside rural residents, reported that SNAP benefits were not enough to cover the monthly cost of food. Altogether, however, research conducted by the NY Health Foundation indicates shared challenges that food-insecure individuals in the state may face in enrolling in SNAP benefits. For example, almost two-thirds (63%) of sampled food-insecure individuals reported that traveling to benefits offices is problematic, and half are worried that they earn too much to qualify for SNAP. More than half of the individuals sampled also worry about the required paperwork, and the majority reported that stigma (i.e., worries that people will find out they participate in food assistance programs coupled with their reluctance to rely on government programs) is another barrier to utilizing SNAP benefits.

To address some of these challenges, NYS operates a Nutrition Outreach and Education Program (NOEP), funded by the state government and administered through Hunger Solutions New York (HSNY), a nonprofit organization based in the Capital Region that is under contract with the NYS Office of Temporary and Disability Assistance (ODTA).¹⁴ NOEP is funded by NYS and federal reimbursement funds to conduct statewide outreach and education for SNAP and other nutrition programs (e.g., WIC, School Breakfast Program).¹⁵ From 2021-2022, NOEP funding supported 26 subcontractors across 47 counties in Upstate New York, as well as 16 subcontractors in the five boroughs of NYC. Subcontractors must be community-based nonprofit organizations; the organizations apply for funding for NOEP coordinators through an annual Request for Proposals (RFP) process.¹⁶ After receiving funding, organizations work closely with HSNY to promote the benefits of SNAP to their respective communities; provide outreach to eligible non-participants of SNAP; assist households with the application process; and mitigate barriers to household SNAP participation.¹⁷ NOEP coordinators are responsible for the administration of the aforementioned tasks, though HSNY provides additional support through a contract manager and SNAP technical assistance specialist.

Nutrition incentive programs may also help low-income households increase their purchasing power, particularly when combined with federal nutrition assistance. The NYS Department of Agriculture and Markets (NYSDAM), the primary regulatory authority on state-level food policy within NYS, oversees multiple farmers market nutrition incentive programs, including FreshConnect Checks and the Farmers' Market Nutrition Program (FMNP), both of which seek to expand the number of individuals with financial access to nutritious food while supporting the economic viability of NYS farmers.¹⁸ The

FreshConnect Checks Program provides coupons to individuals who use SNAP benefits for use at participating markets, including farms, farm stands, farmers markets, and mobile markets. Specifically, for every \$5 a customer exchanges for SNAP tokens at participating markets, a \$2 FreshConnect Check is provided for use on SNAP-eligible items, providing benefits to both consumers and agricultural producers.¹⁹ FMNP operates similarly by providing checks to WIC participants for use at farmers markets, as well as offering nutrition education.²⁰ Field & Fork Network, a NYS nonprofit, operates the Double Up Food Bucks program, which matches SNAP benefits spent on fruits and vegetables dollar for dollar up to \$20 per day, allowing users to double their SNAP-funded produce purchases. According to a recent nationwide study, fruit and vegetable incentive programs at farmers markets have significant positive effects on the consumption of these foods, and the effects increase in tandem with higher levels of incentives.²¹

Emergency Food Assistance Programs

Another common way in which households “bridge” the SNAP gap is by utilizing emergency food relief organizations (EFROs), an institutionalized network that provides food to individuals through organizations such as food banks, food pantries, soup kitchens, and emergency shelters. Food banks serve as the initial aggregation and distribution organizations, receiving food directly from individual and organizational donations, farmers, and the federal and state governments. Food banks are able to aggregate this food in warehouse space and subsequently distribute it to other organizations within the emergency food relief network, including food pantries, meal programs, shelters, after-school programs, and senior programs. In NYS, food banks may also receive funding from Feeding New York State (Feeding NYS), a member of Feeding America, as well as through the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA), Feeding America, and contracts with the NYS Department of Health



and the NYS Department of Environmental Conservation. There are currently 10 regional food banks operating in NYS: FeedMore WNY, Foodlink, Catholic Charities' Food Bank of the Southern Tier, Food Bank of Central New York, Regional Food Bank of Northeastern New York, Feeding Westchester, Long Island Cares, Island Harvest, Food Bank for New York City, and City Harvest.

While food banks receive food from multiple sources, with each food bank receiving a different proportion of the following resources to comprise its budget and food needs, the federal Emergency Food Assistance Program (TEFAP) has been cited as one of the most reliable sources of food for food banks, providing 1.2 billion meals across the U.S. in 2020.²² Increasingly, food banks receive food through food retail locations. The Food Bank of Central New York, for example, receives food donations from almost 100 stores, including Wegmans, Hannaford, Walmart, and Price Chopper, among others, totaling 3.8 million pounds of donated food in the past year. NYS's 2022 Food Donation and Food Scraps Recycling Law also supports food retail donations by requiring businesses and institutions that generate an average of two tons of wasted food per week to donate excess food and recycle their remaining food scraps.²³ In an effort to facilitate the movement of edible food waste to food banks, the state has partnered with Feeding NYS, a consortium of all NYS food banks, to coordinate the delivery of large amounts of farm food.²⁴

The NYS Hunger Prevention and Nutrition Assistance Program (HPNAP), funded by the NYS Department of Health,²⁵ seeks to improve the quality of food provided by emergency feeding organizations (e.g., food banks).²⁶ To do so, eligible organizations (e.g., food pantries, soup kitchens, emergency shelters) apply annually for the HPNAP Food Grant, which provides a line of credit to purchase nutritious foods (e.g., cereals, dairy, fruits and vegetables) from partner organizations, such as regional food banks. HPNAP funding also includes cash grants for up to \$3,000 for operational support; funds may cover staff, rent, transportation, and capital equipment, among other expenditures. Importantly, HPNAP works in tandem with TEFAP,²⁷ which is funded by the USDA and overseen in NYS by the state's Office of General Services.²⁸ More recently, NYSDAM's Nourish New York program, which was included in the November 2021 NYS Agriculture and Markets Law,²⁹ also supports emergency food providers. Initially created in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, Nourish New York seeks to connect food banks and emergency food providers with agricultural producers across the state.³⁰ The law therefore seeks to concurrently assist individuals who are food insecure and provide markets for farmers to sell their products.³¹ Since Nourish New York was established in 2019, their program has provided approximately 24 million meals to households across the state, and 4,169 farms have benefitted from the program.³²

Although food banks do not typically provide food directly to residents, some food banks have direct-service programs, including through mobile markets and school food programs. Food pantries, however, serve as the most direct way for individuals to access food within the emergency food relief network. Food pantries, along with other aspects of this organizational network, including soup kitchens and shelters, provide food directly to individuals. Food pantries may be sponsored by a community-based organization or religious institution, or operate independently. Similarly, food pantries differ regarding their location (i.e., self-standing vs. housed within another organization), hours of operation, and quantity of food provided. Food pantries may also be mobile, providing organizations with the flexibility to serve communities with the highest need.

Food pantries receive the bulk of their food items directly from food banks, representing a critical partnership within the food assistance network. For example, in parts of NYS, food pantries may receive up to 90% of their food from a regional food bank, though this can range between 40–90%, depending on the organization and region. Food pantries generally receive this food at one-third of the retail cost due to food banks' ability to aggregate large quantities at bulk prices.³³ Food pantries may also receive food in the form of donations through retail and personal sources, as well as donations from partnering food distributors and farms. Despite this robust network of food suppliers, however, a 2023 survey conducted by the NY Health Foundation indicates that food insecure individuals face challenges in food bank settings, including the food bank running out of food, having inconvenient hours or long wait times, or imposing limits on the amount of visits. Still, the networks detailed above collectively form a "critical safety net" for food insecure individuals: from 2021–2022, 35% of all food insecure individuals in NYS visited a food pantry or food bank.³⁴ Altogether, food assistance organizations provide more than 220 million meals annually to NYS residents.³⁵

Examples of Successful Food Assistance Programs

Washington State Department of Health and Amazon

Established under a grant from the USDA Food Insecurity Nutrition Incentive (FINI) program the Washington State Department of Health's Fruit and Vegetable Incentives Program supports SNAP matching incentives (redeemable for fruits and vegetables) at a range of retail and farm-direct locations as well as produce prescriptions that are redeemable at Safeway (Albertsons) stores in the state. Thanks to partnerships with a range of large retailers, Washington State's program has been able to expand. Under the FINI grant, the program brought together a range of government, private, and nonprofit entities to participate in a roundtable on food systems work, laying the foundation for its partnership with Safeway. In November 2022, the Department of Health partnered with Amazon to integrate SNAP matching with Amazon Fresh, allowing SNAP incentive users to redeem their benefits through Amazon Fresh online purchases. This partnership builds on Amazon's previous distribution work with the Department of Health during the COVID-19 pandemic, and was supported by funding from the USDA's Gus Schumacher Nutrition Incentive Program (GusNIP). Department of Health Program Manager Alyssa Auvinen noted that Amazon's engineering resources allowed for significant customization of the user interface, including flagging all incentive-eligible items. While Amazon purchases are convenient and reduce barriers to accessing incentive programs, the Department of Health is unable to reimburse delivery fees, which customers must cover on their own.

Field & Fork Network

Field & Fork Network operates NYS' Double Up Food Bucks program, a nationwide nutrition incentive program that matches SNAP purchases dollar for dollar (up to \$20 per day) for the purchase of fruit and vegetables. The Double Up Food Bucks program is available at over 200 retail locations (including farmers markets, farm stands, and brick and mortar retailers) across NYS, with a footprint in 30 counties. It impacts several different segments of the food system: helping low-income populations afford healthy food, keeping money in local economies, and directing federal funding toward farmers markets and other local retailers. Double Up Food Bucks is funded by federal grants (GusNIP) that require a 100% non-federal match. In Field & Fork Network's case, 36 private sector partners have stepped up over the past three years to provide that match. Field & Fork Network is in the process of launching a pilot program to make the use of the Double Up incentive more seamless, through technology that links incentive eligibility to consumer purchasing behavior, described in greater detail below.

Feeding Westchester

A regional food bank serving Westchester County, Feeding Westchester is a member of the national organization Feeding America. In collaboration with the Boston Consulting Group, Feeding Westchester recently conducted a countywide hunger study to map the entire hunger relief landscape and food distribution points, including the current sources of food (e.g., food recovery, food rescue) and areas where additional food is needed, with the ultimate goal of bringing more food into higher-need neighborhoods. The study—which was initially proposed as part of the organization's strategic plan, which utilizes an equity framework to address hunger and create pathways out of hunger—also included research on the capacity

of organizations that are currently working in hunger relief (e.g., equipment, staffing, space), to help identify ways for Feeding Westchester's partners to meet hunger and food security needs at scale. The organization conducted quantitative and geospatial analysis utilizing data at the state, county, and census-tract levels, to generate an accurate assessment of hunger in Westchester County, including among people who are above the federal poverty line but still struggle with hunger and food insecurity, with the overall goal of comparing neighborhoods across the county to identify the greatest need. The study identified 15 high-need census tracts, allowing the organization to prioritize four high-level initiatives that it plans to implement alongside its partners (such as food distributors and retailers): (1) agency enablement; (2) client listening sessions; (3) partner capacity upgrades; and (4) client experience upgrades.

AdkAction Fair Food Program

AdkAction recently launched the Fair Food Program, which targets qualified households in Clinton, Essex, Franklin, and Hamilton counties that are above the poverty line (and therefore do not qualify for SNAP or other federal benefits), but fall under the United Way's definition for ALICE: "Asset Limited, Income Constrained, Employed." Qualifying households receive prepaid PEX credit cards that can be used to purchase local products (including fruit, vegetables, eggs, meat, and dairy, as well as minimally processed foods such as cheese and maple syrup) from AdkAction partner Hub on the Hill and an expanding list of additional farm vendors. Cards are valued from \$80 to \$215, depending on household size and access to transportation, and card amounts are topped off each month (but do not roll over). AdkAction noted that these types of private nutrition incentive programs are less stigmatized than federal programs, and the organization is actively looking for new partnerships to expand program reach, as well as an endowment to sustain the program on a multi-year basis.



Key Learnings From Stakeholder Interviews

Reducing Barriers to Food Assistance Enrollment and Use

Food assistance programs are prevalent across NYS, offering assistance to residents via SNAP and other nutrition incentives programs. Stakeholders also described the presence of other coalitions and working groups throughout the state, including the NYS Council on Hunger and Food Policy and a statewide SNAP policy workgroup. Despite the presence of such resources, however, there are still barriers to food assistance usage and outreach, a challenge made particularly acute by recent cuts to NYS' Emergency Allotment of food.

“When food assistance isn’t done right, it can limit people’s willingness to receive food.”

ANDRÉ THOMPSON, FEEDING WESTCHESTER

Echoing existing literature, stakeholders across NYS affirmed that stigma is a barrier to SNAP enrollment. SNAP outreach in NYS is most often provided through NOEP coordinators who follow strategies implemented by other organizations in the U.S., to facilitate outreach to individuals through community resource centers or other existing organizations. Stakeholders affiliated with food pantries, however, also stated that they provide on-site assistance for SNAP enrollment. Yet, multiple stakeholders spoke to some individuals’ unwillingness to receive government aid. Individuals that do apply may face challenges arising from staff and staffing capacity, particularly in less-densely populated areas of NYS, limiting organizations’ ability to coordinate on enrollment and move cases forward when they’re stuck. Further, one stakeholder shared that they do not have a point of connection with individuals once the latter begin receiving benefits, unlike other nutrition programs such as WIC. Individuals may therefore be unaware that they have additional benefits they could spend, resulting in an overall underutilization of SNAP benefits, while others may run out of resources prior to the end of the month, before the next renewal period.

Stakeholders also reported that individuals were less likely to enroll in and/or utilize SNAP benefits due to restrictions on which food they could purchase, including limitations on the purchase of lightly processed items such as cheese and maple syrup. Stakeholders across the food assistance network, including at food banks and food pantries, also spoke of the necessity of providing appropriate and empathetic experiences to participating individuals. While food pantry models vary across the state, some individuals may not have the ability to select the food items they do, or would like to, receive. From a volume standpoint (i.e., limited stock of certain items), however, it is difficult for pantries to change which items they offer. Some food pantries, however, have taken a person-centered approach, treating individuals as guests who are being served, to increase empathy and dignity within a food pantry setting. For example, food pantries may emphasize high degrees of interpersonal interaction, responsiveness to individual needs, and easier access to other social services and/or non-food items (e.g., clothing, hygiene products).

Partnerships with Retailers and Other Organizations

Organizations across NYS’s food assistance network rely on partnerships with retailers and other organizations to provide services. SNAP and nutrition incentives, for example, require the participation of an organization, such as a brick-and-mortar retailer, farmers market, or farm stand, before individuals can redeem and/or receive benefits and subsequently purchase food items. While there is a strong network of eligible SNAP retailers in NYS, retailers may face challenges in offering new forms of food assistance, such as nutrition incentives. According to Dawn Thilmany, a professor of agricultural economics at Colorado State University who has conducted economic evaluations of nutrition incentive programs in NYS and across the country, nutrition incentive programs may benefit both retailers and consumers by providing a guaranteed way for retailers to increase revenue and provide more food items. Small independent retailers, however, may not be able to participate because they lack the technological or staffing capacity to make necessary service upgrades or provide training.

Moreover, stakeholders in NYS and across the country have had varying experiences with convincing store leadership to integrate nutrition incentive programs. The Iowa Healthiest State Initiative found it advantageous to work directly with larger retailers, specifically at the administrative level. By doing so, the organization has been able to place the responsibility on grocery stores to update its cash register system if necessary, provide training, and implement the program across all of its locations, making the program both efficient and scalable. While the organization only works with Iowa-owned and -operated markets to circulate spending within the state economy, opportunities continue to exist to make it possible for more consumers to utilize nutrition benefits in smaller stores, including stores that serve increasingly diverse populations across the state.

Existing food assistance networks may also benefit from increased coordination. Food banks, for example, receive advantageous amounts of technical and monetary support due to Feeding NYS—a consortium of all NYS food banks and a member of the national Feeding America organization. Specifically, Feeding NYS supplies “foods and funds” to 10 regional food banks through the provision of food items; USDA and NYSDAM funds; and grant-writing assistance for investments in infrastructure (e.g., cold storage, transportation technology). Food pantries, in contrast, are primarily volunteer-run, often by an aging population of individuals across the state. Moving forward, opportunities exist not only to increase coordination between food banks and food pantries, including through improvements in financial and technical capacity, but also to develop new models for providing food assistance, including through the education and healthcare sectors.

Lastly, one stakeholder spoke about the disconnect between where food is being transported and/or distributed and where the need is greatest, pointing to other potential areas within the food assistance network that may benefit from increased coordination. Feeding Westchester recently partnered with Boston Consulting Group to map out its service area’s hunger relief landscape and food distribution points, analyzing where food is currently coming from (e.g., food recovery, food rescue) and where additional food is needed, to see how to bring more food into higher-need neighborhoods. Feeding Westchester also looked at partners’ capacity (e.g., equipment, staff, space) to meet these needs at scale. Given that food insecurity is driven, in part, by limited geographic access to food, the resulting study may serve to identify areas with the greatest need for increased services and infrastructure to support food assistance.

Technology Needs (Consumers and Retailers)

The growth of nutrition incentive programs across NYS has led stakeholders to call for an integrated digital POS payment method to improve user experience and reduce barriers to uptake. While SNAP benefits are loaded onto an EBT card, which resembles a debit card, incentives such as Double Up Food Bucks and FreshConnect are utilized through a variety of separate payment vouchers, including grocery store loyalty cards, coupons, FreshConnect Checks, and Double Up tokens. Users who wish to apply nutrition incentives are often required to ask the staff of grocery stores or farmers markets for vouchers to get started, and they must keep track of different vouchers and payment methods.

Beyond improving user experience and reducing the need to train retail staff, integrating nutrition incentives onto EBT cards could significantly reduce program administration costs. The Washington State Department of Health is currently partnering with the state’s SNAP agency to launch a pilot program that loads nutrition incentives onto EBT cards by updating the state’s EBT system and working with its EBT retailer and processor. The department estimates that this change could save millions in administrative costs each year.

In NYS, the Field & Fork Network is currently working with collaborators at Cornell to design a pilot program that would improve ease of using Double Up Food Bucks by automatically triggering eligibility for this incentive based on a user’s behavior (specifically, by factoring in other SNAP-eligible items a user buys), rather than requiring users to sign up in store. The organization believes that this innovation will improve access and significantly reduce stigma around enrolling in the program.

On the other side of the equation, retailers’ lack of sophisticated POS technology presents a challenge to making nutrition incentives widely available at scale. Independent retailers’ POS technology often lacks features such as the capacity to recognize and discount incentive-eligible products or include a printed coupon on a receipt. While simple app-based solutions exist, they are often expensive and perform unreliably in areas with limited broadband coverage, which is where

farmers markets and farm stands are typically located. In addition to increasing the number and type of retailers that can participate in food and nutrition incentive programs, upgraded POS technology could reduce the incidence of fraud and provide clear data on the number of people served by these programs and where they are spending their benefits.

Stakeholders highlighted several barriers to updating and integrating POS systems. First, private funders—who typically contribute some or all of the required matching funds for federal grants that support nutrition incentive programs—are reluctant to subsidize efforts to improve POS technology as opposed to directly backing incentive programs. They may be unwilling to support what they view as for-profit companies that have no direct stake in food and nutrition assistance work.

Second, federal funding opportunities in this space are limited. Under federal guidelines, exempt retailers, such as farmers markets and farm stands, are eligible to receive no-cost EBT-only POS technology—which accepts SNAP benefits through EBT cards but does not accept credit or debit card transactions, and cannot be integrated with incentive programs. Non-exempt retailers must partner with third-party providers for their POS needs. GusNIP federal funding can only be used to upgrade retailers' existing POS systems rather than purchase new ones. While stakeholders have reported using GusNIP funding to effectively pilot POS solutions, this funding seeks to reward innovation, rather than scaling. Third, upgrading POS systems involves integrating many different players. Even when a POS provider rolls out a solution that can sync with incentive programs, independent retailers' ability to update their systems relies on third-party technology companies who may not prioritize these types of updates. Organizations may need to work closely with individual retailers to install customized software that integrates with a POS provider's technology. While larger retailers will navigate these relationships with technology companies themselves, smaller retailers often require support. Finally, retail workers need training to adapt to new and often complex POS technology.

Nevertheless, efforts are underway to develop innovative POS solutions. In 2021, the Iowa Healthiest State Initiative utilized GusNIP funding to partner with Epic Technology Solutions to create the Fresh Incentives App. As a smaller company, Epic was able to accommodate the organization's existing retailers as well as work to find solutions for retailers with specific needs, such as the Hy-Vee grocery chain, which has a proprietary system. Iowa Healthiest State Initiative noted that its retail partners are in the process of transitioning to the new system and are excited about the change, although the app-based system still presents a challenge to farmers markets and farm stands, given the reliance on broadband connectivity. In NYS, Field & Fork Network has worked with the National Grocers Association Foundation to promote dialogue between the grocery industry and POS providers.

Delivery Services

Many stakeholders pointed to delivery services (including online purchasing and delivery) as a key part of expanding access to food and nutrition assistance while reducing stigma. SNAP benefits cannot typically be used for online purchases. Under the 2014 Farm Bill, a SNAP Online Purchasing Pilot was introduced in eight states, including New York in 2019. Currently, 30 NYS retailers accept SNAP payments online. This group includes both large retailers (Walmart, Wegmans, Aldi, Amazon, Whole Foods Market) and smaller markets (GreenStar Food Coop, Hub on the Hill). However, customers who use these services must still pay for delivery costs, adding an additional cost burden. For NYC residents, the Groceries to Go program, launched in February 2023, provides eligible residents with monthly credits for online grocery purchases, covering SNAP-eligible food and beverages as well as all fees associated with delivery.

There has been significant private sector involvement to support food banks in the online delivery space. On a national level, DoorDash's Project DASH is a partnership with the national food bank network Feeding America, which allows government and nonprofit organizations to request deliveries through DoorDash's online platform and provide deliveries of food and other items to food bank/food pantry users and others who are experiencing food insecurity. Since February 2023, DoorDash customers can use SNAP benefits through the DoorDash app—although this functionality is currently limited to California. In NYS, the NY Health Foundation has provided grant support for a free meal-kit program run by the Joint Council for Economic Opportunity of Clinton and Franklin Counties. In 2019, RealEats, a Geneva-based company and Grow-NY winner³⁶, partnered with GNC to launch a subscription meal kit service in 2019, which sourced ingredients from local farms. With

meal-delivery demand waning in the wake of the pandemic, however, the company recently closed. There has been less movement in terms of integrating delivery services with nutrition incentives. Field & Fork Network cited the food benefits app Tangelo as a potential partner, noting that the platform allows users to redeem their benefits for online delivery.

There are also traditional delivery services that connect users of food and nutrition assistance with brick-and-mortar retail sites. For example, Fruit & Veg Boulder runs a farmers market delivery program that uses both volunteer drivers and existing paratransit services to make weekly, year-round deliveries of bags of food to local customers.

Infrastructure and Other Services

NYS's food assistance network relies on a vast array of infrastructure to aggregate and distribute food and services to participating organizations and individuals. Food banks, for example, aggregate food items from a variety of sources (e.g., individual and organizational donations, farmers, the public sector), which requires warehouse space, cold storage, and transportation equipment. Similarly, food pantries require a physical space—whether it's embedded in an existing organization or a stand-alone structure—and the ability to store food in shelving and refrigeration units. Stakeholders at both food banks and food pantries spoke of the need for increased support to cover infrastructure costs, including capital equipment and improvements. Particularly for organizations that operate in areas of low food access, additional infrastructural capacity can “tip the balance of how many individuals each [organization] serves,” said one stakeholder. For example, food pantries with cold storage facilities can provide different items (e.g., milk) and serve a greater number of people. Other stakeholders, including food banks, spoke of the inability to expand their programming or staffing further due to limitations in cold storage space. Expanded infrastructure is particularly important for food banks and food pantries, both of which reported serving an increasing number of individuals, particularly since the advent of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Multiple stakeholders shared the importance of providing additional services within their organizations, including cooking and nutrition classes, job training, and food production. The Schenectady Inner City Ministry (SICM), for example, offers classes on nutrition education, food preparation and cooking techniques, and food preservation. Such classes can reduce additional barriers that individuals may face beyond accessing food. As one stakeholder shared, individuals—particularly those working multiple jobs and/or households with children—would benefit from skills that could be utilized to produce quick nutritious meals, and stretch the food they receive (i.e., preservation). Other stakeholders offer similar education classes, though these target other factors that may reduce the risk of food insecurity. FeedMore WNY, for example, specifically trains individuals with high barriers to employment, stating that economic factors are one of the root causes of hunger. Specifically, the organization has developed a training program in warehouse and logistics, providing individuals with credentials that they can take anywhere. Though the program is currently unable to expand due to a lack of space and resources, these types of initiatives could be offered by other organizations within the food assistance sector.

Multiple stakeholders cited their programming that is related to food production. For example, both SICM and FeedMore WNY operate urban farms to supplement their food offerings. Farmers within SICM oversee three urban farms, as well as a community orchard, encompassing a total of 1.3 acres of land that's used to grow fruits, vegetables, and herbs, as well as to raise small livestock. FeedMore WNY utilizes innovative container farming techniques, growing products such as leafy greens, herbs, and beans for 10-12 months out of the year. While each container is only 40 square feet, it can produce the equivalent of two to four acres of farmland. The organization is also able to modify its growing practices based on community input, providing adaptability in meeting consumer preferences and community needs.

Suggestions for Action

While food assistance networks rely heavily on public sector support for programmatic funding, infrastructure, and sustainability, opportunities exist for the private sector to play critical roles in strengthening food security for residents who utilize services at food banks, food pantries, and through nutrition programs. First, despite the presence of actors within food assistance networks that are working to close the “SNAP gap,” there is clearly a need to increase food assistance enrollment and overall utilization. There are opportunities to expand digital applications and/or consolidate food assistance programs, including nutrition incentive programs, into one application and on one card. For example, private sector organizations could work with NYSDAM to consolidate the FreshConnect, FMNP, and Double Up Food Bucks programs onto one card, or integrate these benefits into EBT cards, for increased ease of access and use. This could also increase privacy and decrease stigma, one of the leading factors that contributes to low enrollment and utilization.

Second, there is a clear need for the development of cost-effective and scalable POS solutions that can be fully integrated with incentive programs, through collaboration among retailers, POS system providers, and trade associations such as the National Grocers Association Foundation. Success may depend on balancing the need for a unified POS platform that has the potential to be rolled out across different retailer types, with an acknowledgment of the specific needs of particular retailers and the role that proprietary systems can play.

Finally, there is the potential for partnerships in the delivery space to reduce or eliminate the cost of online purchases and deliveries of SNAP-eligible foods, support the distribution of food by food banks and food pantries, and simplify access to incentive programs. This could involve working with the state EBT administrator to allow DoorDash users to redeem SNAP benefits through the DoorDash app; integrating incentive programs with nutrition services apps such as Tangelo; and/or building out existing meal-kit/meal-delivery partnerships in the North Country and Western New York. The Groceries to Go program in NYC represents a model that could be expanded to the rest of the state with sufficient public and private support.

These specific suggestions for action should be viewed in the context of a broader set of recommendations to connect populations with food and nutrition assistance, encompassing steps by government, nonprofit organizations, and the private sector. These include increasing SNAP enrollment and uptake by increasing the capacity of NOEP staff in rural areas of the state and replacing existing call center-only resources; upgrading food banks' existing warehouse and cold-storage capabilities to allow for greater volume of food distributions; promoting more efficient distribution and programming partnerships between food banks and food pantries; and scaling nutrition incentive programs by tapping new funding sources.

Moreover, effective change will require strengthening existing partnerships across the food system and building new ones, rather than working in isolation. For instance, food pantries can go beyond serving as places where food-insecure populations receive food; they can also provide resources for education and outreach, work to increase enrollment in and utilization of nutrition incentive programs, partner with Nourish New York and other food-waste reduction programs, and serve as hubs for delivery programs that reduce barriers to access. Stacking resources in this manner can magnify program impact and introduce valuable synergies across the food system.

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