



June 16, 2021

Assembly Member Gabriela M. Mosquera, Chair
Assembly Member Lisa Swain, Vice-Chair
Assembly Committee on Women and Children
Via email: OLSAideAWC@njleg.org

Re: Assembly Bills A5880, A5881, A5882, A5883, and A5884

Dear Chairperson Mosquera, Vice-Chair Swain, and members of the Assembly Committee on Women and Children,

As the leaders of New Jersey's five food banks, Community FoodBank of New Jersey, Fulfill (formerly the FoodBank of Monmouth and Ocean Counties), the Food Bank of South Jersey, Mercer Street Friends and Norwescap FoodBank, we write in support of A5880, A5881, A5882, A5883 and A5884. These bills would streamline and improve access to the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP, formerly known as the Food Stamp Program), provide supplementary state funding for child nutrition programs, and create a position in state government to give permanent focus to food security issues.

We are grateful for the Assembly's consistent focus on our neighbors' food security needs, both prior to and throughout this pandemic. The pandemic-triggered recession has brought about an increase in food insecurity throughout our state and nation such as we have not seen since the Great Recession more than a decade ago. The vital food resources that this legislature has enabled are helping prevent even more widespread hunger in our state, and countless New Jerseyans are better off for it.

As more and more residents are vaccinated and our economy gradually reopens, we know from past experience that a return to normal for many of our neighbors may be a much more distant horizon. After the last recession, food security rates took nearly a decade to return to prior levels, and in the meantime, hundreds of thousands of our neighbors continued to struggle to put food on the table for themselves and their families. We know that an improving economy may not mean a return to food security for those who have accrued back rent or other debt that will be coming due, whose jobs were eliminated, or who can no longer find work with the equivalent hours and wages as they had prior to the pandemic.

All five of New Jersey's foodbanks continue to bear the brunt of meeting the needs of families whose lives have been upended by COVID. Whether measured in people served, meals distributed, or operational expenses, the numbers say it all:

- Fulfill has provided 3.5 million more meals to the residents of Monmouth and Ocean Counties, spending in excess of \$420,000 per month on food, and serving 58 percent more individuals (including 40 percent more children);
- To meet the need, Mercer Street Friends spent \$1.85 million on food in 2020, *more than four times* as much as in 2019, and is likely to spend in excess of \$2.5 million in 2021;

- The Community FoodBank of New Jersey distributed more than 66.7 million meals in 2020, a 33 percent increase from 2019, and is on pace to distribute more than 83 million meals this year;
- Norwescap's food distribution increased by 500,000 pounds (a 25% increase) in 2020 as compared with 2019; and
- Food Bank of South Jersey distributed food for 18.7 million meals in 2020, increasing its food budget more than 350 percent over pre-pandemic spending, and now serving over 95,000 food-insecure South Jersey residents each month.

Heartbreakingly, Black and Latinx households were already more than twice as likely as white households to experience food insecurity; we see in our state's data that COVID is afflicting those same households. And our children suffer the most. Before the pandemic, New Jersey was only reaching 26% of the children during the summer who received free or reduced lunch during the school year. The national standard is 40%.¹

SNAP Improvements Are Vital to Recovery

SNAP is our nation's first line of defense against hunger. Evidence shows it reduces food insecurity and can reduce the need for emergency food from a food pantry or a soup kitchen. SNAP benefits have been especially important in this pandemic, with federal legislation having increased benefit amounts for all participating households. Two bills being considered by this committee would make important improvements to how SNAP is administered in our state.

A5880 would direct the Department of Human Services to develop a mobile application for SNAP recipients that would enable them to manage their SNAP cases, maintain up-to-date documentation, receive notifications, and other important information. The pandemic has clearly shown the value of being able to conduct needed household transactions online, and many states and localities across the country already offer mobile access to SNAP recipients.

A5881 would direct the Department of Human Services to stagger the issuance of SNAP benefits throughout the month, rather than the current practice of issuing benefits only in the first five days of each month. By doing so, the State would reduce the incidence of monthly grocery runs that might limit product availability at local stores, and would allow SNAP offices to better manage workload and congestion associated with benefit issuances.

We support the improvements to SNAP in these bills.

Bolstering Child Nutrition Programs Addresses a Particularly Acute Need

Households with children disproportionately experience food insecurity, and in this pandemic, children's access to school meals has been limited, disrupted, or in too many cases, lost completely. Two bills being considered by this committee would supplement with state funds the federal reimbursements offered to operators of two important child nutrition programs: the Summer Food Service Program (SFSP), and the school breakfast program. Many parts of our state face higher than average costs of food and labor, meaning the federal payments may not adequately cover the costs of providing healthful, high-quality meals for children.

A5882 would establish a state supplement to the federal reimbursement for SFSP operators, at the rate of ten cents per meal. A5883 would provide a state supplement of ten cents per meal to

¹ Hunger Free New Jersey, *Food for Thought: The State of Summer Meals in New Jersey*, 2019, June 2020.

schools that offer breakfast after the bell so as not to require students arrive before the school day for breakfast – something that, for many students and families, is logistically impracticable.

The investments our state makes in keeping children nourished will yield long-lasting returns. We support these bills.

Maintaining Dedicated Focus on Food Insecurity Requires Dedicated Resources

Multiple state agencies administer anti-hunger programs, and they work with hundreds of local governments and non-profits. In order to ensure coordination, maximize opportunities, and optimize the efficient use of state resources, A5884 would establish an Office of the Food Insecurity Advocate to maintain a dedicated focus on improving food security in New Jersey. The bill specifically tasks the Office with assisting food banks to distribute more protein and produce, food groups that are always in high demand at local food pantries and soup kitchens.

We support a dedicated office in state government to give sustained focus to improving food security for all New Jersey residents.

By targeting state resources and action to high-impact programs that effectively address food insecurity, these bills will improve our state’s footing to recover from the pandemic-triggered hunger crisis stronger than ever. We support these bills and the strong leadership shown by their sponsors to take decisive action on behalf of our struggling neighbors. On their behalf, we thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely,



Carlos M. Rodriguez
President & CEO
Community FoodBank of New Jersey



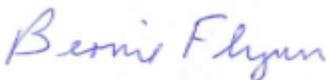
Fred C. Wasiak
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James Kroeze
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Bernie Flynn
President & CEO
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Mark Valli
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cc: Speaker Craig J. Coughlin
Assembly Member Eliana Pintor Marin
Assembly Member Shanique Speight