



OFFICE OF THE COMPTROLLER
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JUMAANE D. WILLIAMS

May 20, 2020

Kathryn Garcia
COVID-19 Food Czar / Commissioner
New York City Department of Sanitation
125 Worth Street
New York, NY 10013

Dear Commissioner Garcia:

New Yorkers are grappling with widespread food insecurity, as unemployment skyrockets, salaries are being slashed, and thousands of residents shelter in place. As a result of COVID-19, countless New Yorkers can no longer afford to buy enough food, or simply can't leave their homes to get it.

As the City's newly-appointed Food Czar, you have put systems in place that are increasing capacity in our City's food distribution networks. However, we continue to face growing challenges in getting sufficient food to those in need, a serious problem in a city where one in five New Yorkers were experiencing food insecurity, even before the current crisis. We believe there are additional issues that warrant your immediate attention, and urge you to take the following suggestions under consideration as you ramp up and streamline the City's emergency food programs.

Food Pantry Access

It has been widely reported that more than 30 percent of New York City food pantries have ceased operations since the outbreak of COVID-19. These pantry closures are creating increased demand on the pantries that are still operating, and also creating "food pantry deserts" in neighborhoods where there are no or very few food pantries in operation.

Our offices have received complaints about inadequate food pantry access in neighborhoods including Kingsbridge, Belmont, Throggs Neck, Westchester Square, Pelham Bay and Coop City in the Bronx, as well as the southern portions of Ozone Park and South Ozone Park, Rosedale, Brookville, Corona, East Elmhurst and the northern portion of Jackson Heights in Queens. In Brooklyn, many neighborhoods that do have a robust network of food pantries have been overwhelmed by demand and can't keep up. The North Shore of Staten Island has lost several food pantries and the remaining ones are struggling to meet the rising needs.

- 1) As part of the City's increased investment in food pantries, the City should conduct an assessment of neighborhoods and communities that have few pantry resources but high food insecurity. The City should invest in creating new emergency programs or reopening shuttered ones in these areas.

Disconnected seniors

Seniors are particularly vulnerable to the impacts of COVID-19, and many are rightly heeding public health guidance and staying home. This has created a huge increase in demand for home delivered meals and groceries for seniors, which we understand DFTA's direct meal delivery program and Get Food NYC are working to address. While seniors who attended senior centers before COVID-19 struck have transitioned to home delivered meals, and an effort has been announced to bring food delivery to all NYCHA senior buildings, we're particularly concerned about unaffiliated or disconnected seniors who do not live in senior residences or participate in City-sponsored programs. These seniors may not know that they may be eligible for food delivery assistance.

The City must do everything within its power to inform all seniors about available food options, and ensure that no one goes hungry due to lack of information about these resources.

- 2) In that vein, the City should undertake a public information campaign via robocalls, text messaging, door hangers, radio and television announcements, or any other appropriate communication channels to ensure that seniors who do not have the resources to obtain their own food delivery know that the City is here to fill that gap.
- 3) Additionally, the City should be assessing how the multiple private and City-funded food programs, including DOE Grab and Go sites, food pantries, Get Food NYC, home delivered meal programs, and other initiatives are working alongside each other, and identify service gaps that still need to be filled.

Increasing Choice and Quality

As New Yorkers remain at home for an increasing length of time, the need for choice and diversity in food programs will grow. The increase in kosher and halal food programs, as well the diversification of vendors supplying food for home delivery, is an important and welcome improvement. However, our offices have both received numerous complaints about the quality and appropriateness of the food being provided which needs to be swiftly addressed. We also understand that a Request for Information (RFI) has been sent to senior service providers to assess their capacity and interest in participating in the Get Food NYC network. Engaging these providers in food delivery will surely improve quality and choice, as they have deep experience serving the food needs of New York City's seniors.

We must also think of diversity in terms of what type of food is offered. Some seniors may need cooked meals because they have limited ability to cook for themselves. Others may prefer pantry staples or groceries including fresh produce. Ensuring a wider range of nutrition options will become increasingly important as seniors stay at home for longer periods.

- 4) The City should create multiple meal pathways to meet the diverse needs of New Yorkers – including cooked meals, pantry staples and fresh produce – to the fullest extent possible.
- 5) Further, the City should make additional efforts to engage with representatives of communities with specific dietary needs, including but not limited to communities that require halal, kosher, and vegetarian foods, to obtain feedback about the current food offerings and take recommendations to ensure that high quality, culturally appropriate food is being provided.

We are still in the midst of an unprecedented crisis, and the City’s commitment to ensuring that New Yorkers do not go hungry is vitally important. We want to thank you for your efforts to make sure that New York’s existing and newly created food systems meet rising needs, and we appreciate your taking our recommendations under consideration as you continue to ramp up our food supply.

We stand ready to assist you in any way that we can, and would appreciate a written response by June 1, 2020.

Sincerely,



Scott M. Stringer
New York City Comptroller



Jumaane D. Williams
New York City Public Advocate