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Gale A. Brewer, Borough President

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**Gale A. Brewer, Manhattan Borough President
Testimony before the New York City Council Committees on Education,
General Welfare and Economic Development Hearing
On New York City Food Policy**

My name is Gale A. Brewer and I am the Manhattan Borough President. Thank you to Chairs Treyger, Levin and Vallone and the members of the Committees on Education, General Welfare and Economic Development for the opportunity to testify today. Congratulations as well to Speaker Corey Johnson, the sponsors of these bills and the many advocates here today for their work to elevate solutions that make our city's food system more just and accessible.

With such a robust agenda, I will narrowly focus my comments on the following issues: summer meals, agency food procurement, and school sustainability coordinators.

Every year since I was elected to this office, my staff has created detailed, neighborhood-specific, multilingual fliers for the Summer Meals program. A team of dedicated volunteers, advocates, and staff annually distribute thousands of these fliers at schools, libraries, tenant associations, NYCHA developments, homeless shelters, park sites, food pantries and soup kitchens, religious institutions, senior centers, and community based organizations serving youth and families, beginning before the end of the school year and continuing well into the summer.

In late 2017, then-Council Member James Vacca and I passed a new law requiring the Department of Education to distribute summer meal information by June 1 of each year. This deadline is critical to effective outreach because scheduling and other details vary from site to site. The Department of Education promotional materials direct families to use the Feed Your Mind app, 311, or the Department of Education's Office of Food and Nutrition Services (OFNS) website. As you all know, I am a strong advocate of using technology to enhance city services. But year in and year out, we hear from school staff and parents that these printed fliers are essential to connecting families to the program.

Intro 1675 of 2019:

Intro 1675 would require the Department of Education to mail information about summer meals to the home address of every student eligible for the federal free and reduced price lunch program by June 1. I agree and recommend that the bill be amended to reflect the program eligibility and therefore be distributed to all families with students who are 18 years and younger.

Simply put, children cannot participate in the program if they don't know where (and when) to eat. In 2019, OFNS provided each school with envelopes advertising the summer meals program for backpacking end of year information – this is a practical start, but those envelopes should provide families where and when information.

While summer meal site information has been made available on or even before June 1 for the past couple of years, many potential meal sites including NYCHA developments remain unconfirmed well past the June 1 deadline. These sites are left off of promotional materials limiting their effectiveness. It's my understanding that the delay in confirming sites also contributes to operational issues with the summer meals texting service that is heavily promoted across the city. This past June my staff texting from an upper West Side zip code were referred to New Jersey sites, and a Cobble Hill query recommended several sites in Long Island. Once we shared these issues with DOE, they were quickly resolved. But NYCHA, OFNS, Parks and other participating agencies need to confirm their site information by the June 1 deadline.

This spring I convened a Summer Meals Task Force including representatives from OFNS, Parks, NYCHA, Department of Social Services, Youth, Community Boards, NYCHA resident association leaders, CSA, Community Education Councils, emergency food providers, food security advocates, and others.

Next week I will share the full summary of the improvements that were implemented this season with recommendations for next year. Task force members brought a breadth of experience and knowledge and I thank all who participated. Christopher Tricario and Armando Taddei at OFNS should be recognized for their responsiveness including opening PS 188 mid-summer to provide Lower East Side families with a summer meal site option that didn't require children to perilously cross Delancey Street. Responding to our concerns that children at city pools were being told that they had to wear bathing suits or even swim in order to receive a meal, the Parks Department worked with pool managers and staff to make sure that they understand program eligibility rules and that there is a meal service area that does not conflict with Department of Health pool deck clothing rules.

Many task force members raised the issue of food insecure and hungry caregivers accompanying children to the program sites who both openly and discreetly were partaking of summer meals. Several sites were shut down for this practice because federal reimbursement is limited to children 18 years and younger. However, our response to the crisis of food insecurity cannot be to reduce youth summer meal availability. I support launching a pilot next summer to provide adult caregivers with food at summer meal program sites. In 2013, Connecticut launched a partnership with End Hunger CT! to fund adult meals, significantly increasing their sites' overall participation.

Intro 1660 of 2019:

All New Yorkers need as much access as possible to fresh, healthy, locally-sourced food. Agency procurement is a pathway to realizing this goal. Intro 1660 seeks to create a good food purchasing program that encourages food procurement motivated by environmental sustainability, local economies, health, valued workforce and animal welfare. In 2011 the

Council passed a package of bills aimed at expanding agency purchasing of New York State grown or produced foods, including Local Laws 50 and 52. I feel very strongly about the potential impact of these laws in expanding New Yorkers' access to healthy, fresh, and locally sourced foods that also deliver environmental and economic benefits downstate and upstate. Some agencies have more energetically embraced this considerable toolkit than others and some vendors like the Lenox Hill Neighborhood House exemplify its goals. Yet it is clear that there is a lack of information about the degree to which the City is utilizing its buying power to support local farms.

Local Law 50 of 2011:

The bill I introduced, Local Law 50 of 2011, encourages City agencies and vendors to purchase food grown or produced in New York State by establishing tools of procurement. These include a price preference within 10% of the lowest responsible bidder; mandating that particular products come from New York State; and 'best value' provisions that ensure freshness by limiting the length of time between harvest and delivery. The law also requires the City's Chief Procurement Officer to provide an annual report of the efforts during the preceding fiscal year to implement the City guidelines for the purchase of New York State food.

According to the Fiscal Year 2017 Local Law 50 report, only 59 vendors from across the five boroughs were sent surveys, of which only 11 responded. As per the Fiscal Year 2018 report, 66 vendors were sent surveys and only 3 responded. The limited pool of vendors surveyed along with the abysmal response rate creates an immense information gap that contributes to an incomplete understanding of the challenges we face in increasing procurement of locally grown and produced products.

Local Law 52 of 2011:

Additionally, Local Law 52 of 2011 requires that the annual City food system metrics report accounts for the money spent on local or regionally sourced food. For example, the amount of money spent on dairy by the Department of Education is present but not the amount spent on meat or baked goods, items that are consumed in large quantities and even featured as part of the OFNS's New York Thursday menu. The reports do not capture enough data on how City funds are spent on food procurement and the methodology for data collection needs to be amended accordingly.

Access to fresh and local food for vulnerable and low-income populations is the most pressing food and nutrition issue facing New Yorkers today and a cornerstone of my office's age-friendly initiatives. Our Fresh Food for Seniors program (a version of which I first opened in my City Council district in 2012), established in partnership with senior centers from Washington Heights down to Battery Park City (and Roosevelt Island!) and colleagues including Speaker Corey Johnson and Council Members Helen Rosenthal and Margaret Chin. The process is simple: seniors pay for a bag of fresh, regionally grown fruit and vegetables aggregated by GrowNYC's Greenmarket Co. wholesale program for \$8 a week in advance at a participating senior center, and pick up their produce the following week.

The impending redesign of the Department for the Aging's (DFTA) Home Delivered Meal and Senior Center Nutrition Programs is another excellent opportunity to increase older adult access to fresh, locally sourced, and sustainable foods. This May, my office convened a meeting of Manhattan senior center food services staff with DFTA, GrowNYC and Lenox Hill Neighborhood House to discuss the various possibilities and challenges to integrating local produce into their congregate meal programs. Despite my office working with DFTA and GrowNYC over six years ago to ensure that senior centers could swap local seasonally available produce into their pre-submitted menus, senior center food service staff said that they still encountered difficulty implementing healthier menu changes or obtaining produce swapping approval from DFTA nutritional staff. Additional barriers, like sufficient funding for kitchen equipment and food service workers should also be addressed in the upcoming RFP in consultation with staff from Lenox Hill whose *Teaching Kitchen* has significantly transformed food programs at over 100 participating nonprofits to include more fresh, healthy and local food through their daylong training and invaluable technical assistance.

Intro 1681 of 2019:

Lastly, the New York City Administrative Code 16-307.1 on School Recycling designates that each school's sustainability coordinator set goals and policies, implement, and report on the school's waste prevention, reuse and recycling plan. Intro 1681 would add the food waste prevention plan to the sustainability coordinator's responsibilities. On a policy level, this is a sensible addition and would ensure the tracking and reduction of schools' food waste. On a practical level, however, a school's sustainability coordinator is often a science teacher or the assistant principal who do not receive additional resources to support their work in guiding their school toward zero waste.

In 2015, PS 130M (Hernando De Soto School) received distinctions as both the citywide elementary division winner of the Department of Sanitation's Golden Apple Super Recycler Award and the first-prize winner of GrowNYC's Recycling Champions "Big Lift" Award. My staff reached out to PS 130M's sustainability coordinator, Ms. Wen Min Yu Nicklas, to learn from her how to best encourage recycling and organics separation in schools and included her best practices into a resource package for all Manhattan DOE schools.

Yet even the best of the best was operating with insufficient resources—Ms. Nicklas used her lunch hour to work on recycling messaging for the school and to organize Student Green Team members. Since 2015, my office has remained up-to-date with the professional development and curriculum support that DOE's Office of Sustainability provides to its sustainability coordinators. Yet to date there is no budgetary support for the added work that these amazing teachers and assistant principals have been doing.

Intro 1681 further expands the scope of a sustainability coordinator's work. It is time that we recognize the importance of reporting on recycling and waste prevention—including food waste prevention—by allocating resources in the budget to support our schools' sustainability coordinators.

Thank you again for your time and consideration. I would be remiss in ending my remarks without asking all of you here today to join me in submitting comments by Monday, September 23 in opposition to the Trump Administration's proposal to eliminate the SNAP program's broad-based categorical eligibility provision. These changes would withdraw food assistance from over three million people and free school meals for more than a quarter-million children — not to mention the harsh impact on local grocery stores and farms that depend on this economic activity.