



OFFICE OF THE PRESIDENT
BOROUGH OF MANHATTAN
THE CITY OF NEW YORK

1 Centre Street, 19th floor, New York, NY 10007
(212) 669-8300 p (212) 669-4306 f
431 West 125th Street, New York, NY 10027
(212) 531-1609 p (212) 531-4615 f
www.manhattanbp.nyc.gov

Gale A. Brewer, Borough President

September 29, 2020

Hon. Bill de Blasio
Mayor, City of New York
City Hall
New York, NY 10007

Dear Mayor de Blasio:

Thank you for the ongoing efforts to address the food insecurity experienced by so many New Yorkers. I appreciate the dedication and responsiveness of former Department of Sanitation Commissioner Kathryn Garcia, Kate MacKenzie and staff in addressing a variety of delivery and system issues that have arisen during the pandemic. The logistical challenges have been tremendous. However, I remain concerned about the many seniors and homebound individuals whose food needs are still unmet, and whose service issues persist.

I learned from Commissioner Cortés-Vázquez testimony at the September 21 meeting of the City Council Aging Committee hearing that the Department for the Aging (DFTA) is preparing for a November 1 transition of the GetFoodNYC program. This came as a surprise to my office and to advocates, and raises a host of questions:

- Will DFTA be responsible for both the food vendor contracts and home distribution infrastructure of food to the 73,000 older adults currently in the program? This includes 20,000 with a pre-pandemic relationship to a senior center and the other 53,000 individuals who later registered through 311 and the Authorized Enroller system.
- Does DFTA have sufficient central capacity to manage this program or will the senior centers have a role?
- Will the City honor its commitment to reimburse senior centers for FY20 indirect costs before asking these agencies to assume expanded services and facility support?
- Is there capacity and funding for new registrants?
- Which agency will be overseeing home food deliveries for non-senior homebound adults?
- Will the funding for these programs be consistent with prior levels?

The recent change requiring GetFoodNYC recipients to renew their enrollment every two weeks instead of for 30 days at a time has caused disruption and missed meals when the senior or homebound adult was not aware of the policy change. It has also resulted in a deepened workload for staff members at Authorized Enroller senior centers and nonprofit organizations.

Since the revision, my office has received a marked increase in complaints from constituents with confirmation numbers for expected deliveries that only arrive 50% of the time. Constituents also report receiving confusing or conflicting information from 311 when they call. Although the infection rate has gone down, and some participants have elected to discontinue their enrollment in

GetFood, others need assistance. With the approach of flu season and the ongoing health vulnerability concerns, I strongly encourage restoration of the 30 day enrollment period for all participants.

It has been my understanding that *seniors* who registered for home delivered food would receive prepared meals, and non-senior adults would receive boxes of shelf-stable foods to be assembled into meals. In discussions with constituents, advocates, and senior center staff, and in follow-up with the GetFood staff, I have learned that only older adults who signed up early in the transition from Grab and Go with a prior relationship to a senior center, are guaranteed to receive prepared meals.

Many seniors express a strong preference for prepared meals. Some cannot safely prepare food at home; handling cans and opening packaging is difficult for them. In particular, older adults requiring kosher meals have reported to my staff that even though they strongly prefer prepared meals, at least half of their deliveries are not prepared meals. I received the following explanation from GetFood staff:

“In response to Clients requesting Kosher or Halal meals, [they] are primarily serviced by vendors providing pantry items. The vendors that provide prepared meals have limited Kosher and Halal meals available. Clients are more likely to receive a prepared meal if they select Standard Meals, however those meals will not be customized to the clients religious requirements.”

Why is the City procuring kosher and halal meals differently than the standard menu meals? It’s my understanding that DSNY is currently reviewing, evaluating and vetting the bids of the lowest responsive and responsible bidders to the Older Adult Food Access Program Vendor Solicitation. Businesses and non-profits need to know the status of these contracts so that they can plan and prepare. How will the City procure more kosher and halal prepared meals for distribution to older adults — regardless of when they were able to sign up for the home delivery program?

Those who prefer non-perishables report still receiving boxes of food items that are high in sodium, sugar and carbs (complaints that are concerning as many seniors have hypertension and/or diabetes). Often items are oddly random and don't work together in meal preparation. Food provided by the City should be fresh, healthy, and religiously - and culturally - appropriate. It's my understanding that the vendors with Senior Food contracts work with city nutritionists to meet health guidelines. What nutritional guidelines and oversight are provided to the non-Senior Food Vendors, who are serving homebound adults and the many seniors who didn't have a prior affiliation with a senior center?

Finally, there are many professional and courteous delivery people, including TLC licensed drivers, who bring the meals to the recipient's unit door. Their service is essential and I applaud how they have risen to meet these needs; I know that the seniors are deeply grateful.

However, we continue to receive too many reports of homebound adults or seniors being called by drivers to come down to the lobby or curb to receive their delivery. Seniors also may receive a notification that their delivery is on the way, then they don't receive the delivery at their front door. Some drivers have shared that they were told that if the program participant doesn't pick up their phone or respond right away when they are contacted, they are not to leave the food there. Without a protocol for attempting another delivery, the end result is that participants may go hungry. There are a variety of practical reasons why a person may be home yet either unable to answer their phone or are hesitant to pick up a call from an unfamiliar number. The City must clarify with vendors and

drivers that food should be delivered to the recipient's front door; and how delivery status should be confirmed.

It is encouraging to see improvement in the City food programs that have transitioned several times in the midst of a difficult situation. We must continue to improve quality control and access, and avoid a return to the chaotic stress of the spring.

My staff and I look forward to working together with you and your team and providing support to meet this continued challenge.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "gale A. Brewer". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large, looped initial "g" and a distinct "A".

Gale A. Brewer