



**Testimony Submitted By:
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For the:

**ASSEMBLY STANDING COMMITTEE ON SOCIAL SERVICES
ASSEMBLY STANDING COMMITTEE ON AGRICULTURE
ASSEMBLY TASK FORCE ON FOOD, FARM & NUTRITION POLICY**

**THE IMPACT OF COVID-19 ON FOOD INSECURITY IN NEW YORK STATE
WHAT WE KNOW FROM 2-1-1**

Thank you for the opportunity to submit written testimony regarding the very important topic of the impact of COVID-19 on food insecurity in New York State. As we continue to face the effects of this global pandemic on New York State, I want to provide information on the experience of an important referral resource that continues to help many individuals and families affected by this crisis: 2-1-1.

Since answering that first call to 2-1-1 in early 2005, 2-1-1 has responded to millions of calls from New Yorkers seeking help with a wide array of human care needs from food to housing and shelter; from mental health needs to addictions; and from transportation to information on volunteer income tax assistance. 2-1-1 is available to all New York residents; the only criteria for accessing our services is a burning question. 2-1-1 call specialists are available 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, 365 days a year. Services are free and confidential with language translation services available for those who need it. For those who prefer, the 2-1-1 data bases of services are publicly available on the regional 2-1-1 websites. The resource data bases

contain information on 16,000 agencies and organizations, 44,700 programs and 71,000 services.

On March 1, 2020, the first case of COVID-19 was confirmed in NYS, in Westchester County. The first requests to 2-1-1 soon followed – both individuals seeking information and assistance and local governments and government agencies relying on 2-1-1 as their local “go-to” for COVID related information and information on local resources for individuals needing assistance. We responded by maximizing our contact center capacity and very quickly developing remote work capabilities to keep 2-1-1 staff healthy and safe. There was no interruption in services.

From March 1 – June 30 (17 ½ weeks, 122 days, 2,928 hours) 2-1-1s across NYS (exclusive of NYC) responded to 189,630 requests for assistance. Averaged out that’s 10,836 calls/week, 1,554 daily calls and 65 calls every hour from New Yorkers needing information, assistance and assurance. This reflects a 150% increase compared to contact volume from the same time period in 2019.

Initial COVID-related calls were for information about COVID: symptoms, testing sites, quarantine. Very quickly, needs for food (help buying food, food pantries, soup kitchens, home delivered meals). According to 211 Counts (<https://ny.211counts.org/>), from January 1 – August 31, 2020, 2-1-1 responded to 62,340 requests for food assistance (20.5% of all requests). As a point of comparison, from January 1 – August 31, 2019, 2-1-1 responded to 15,328 requests for food assistance. This represents a 307% increase in food-insecurity related calls.

As the chart below illustrates, food requests were remarkably consistent from month to month in 2019. The effect of COVID was immediate and reflected in significant increases for the March – June 2020 time frame before declining in July, only to begin trending upward again in August.

MONTH	2019	2020	% change
January	1,817	2,226	↑23%
February	2,553	1,548	↓39%
March	1,613	10,081	↑525%
April	1,675	16,074	↑ 860 %
May	1,745	10,483	↑501%
June	1,771	10,841	↑512%
July	2,339	4,640	↑85%
August	1,815	6,411	↑253%

As the calls for food assistance escalated, several other realities must also be noted:

- Food insecurity may have been but one of the reasons for a call to 2-1-1. Many callers express more than one need for assistance.
- Callers' moods reflected their increasing frustration with helping systems they could not access (i.e. stimulus checks not arriving, unresponsive NY Unemployment System, limited internet access, VITA sites closed and anticipated refunds not arriving when anticipated), followed by anxiety fueled by the ongoing social isolation and seeming endlessness of the pandemic, layered with fear as Black Live Matter protests dominated the news, compromising many callers' sense of safety and security.
- Many callers were first time callers to 2-1-1, in fact, had never before needed to ask for help. These were community residents who were used to helping those less fortunate than themselves. They were embarrassed at needing to line up for dairy giveaways or to seek assistance from a local food pantry.
- The changing local services landscape required daily resource data base updates as new food/feeding programs popped up to fill a need and other services shut down due to a lack of government funding.
- 2-1-1's outreach and intervention were key to getting services to those for whom services did not exist – an example would be home delivered meals for health compromised individuals younger than 60.

Words and numbers are good at providing information. Client stories are much more reflective of the impact of the pandemic on individual lives – the choices they make and the challenges we face in addressing their needs.

Consider:

Mrs. O, a recent kidney transplant recipient, called today needing food. She confided that she was eating her service dog's food to take her medication. During the 20-minute conversation the caller shared her struggles and challenges in life. Staff took her information and told her that someone would call her back. The information/needs were shared with the local United Way who arranged for meal delivery for this caller and dropped off a bag of groceries as well.

Or:

A call to 2-1-1 came from a man requesting food delivery services because he is an end stage dialysis patient and due to his poor immune system was told that he can't go to a food pick up site in order to try to remain healthy during this time. He first contacted the local department of health but was told that due to him not being "a senior" he would not qualify for delivery services. He contacted 211, who reached out to the county DSS. After explaining the situation and the high risk to the person should he go into the community, DSS decided that it would be appropriate for him to receive food delivery.

The engagement of 2-1-1 extends well beyond providing basic information and referral to food sources for callers seeking that type of assistance. Local government and community leaders also rely on 2-1-1 as a resource for:

- Mapping food pantries;
- Serving as the point of contact for a Fine Foods program – connecting families/individuals in need to restaurant donated meal (2-1-1 as Uber Eats!);
- Providing central intake for individuals and families seeking food pantries;
- Rapid response food security screenings;

- Texting to push out food distribution notices;
- Serving as the point of contact for Food Link;

The above list reflects regional/community efforts and 2-1-1 engagement. Any could be scaled to be more widely available.

The work of 2-1-1 in response to the COVID pandemic has been nothing short of heroic. However, I would be remiss if I did not address the stress under which the system is currently operating, due to EO 202.48 and subsequent extenders.

Thanks to the NYS Legislature, the 2019/2020 state budget included \$1.25 million for 2-1-1 New York. This funding accounts for about 35% of the resources needed to operate the system. 2-1-1 New York has a contract with OCFS for these funds and we received an advance payment which covered our work from September 1 – December 31, 2019. NYS is withholding payment on our contract for this work, causing cash flow hardships for us, our 10 lead organizations and 8 contact centers. Delayed payment is causing severe stress on a system that is already running at full, and extended capacity. If payments do not resume, 2-1-1 will be forced to make difficult choices such as reducing hours or capacity, at a critical time when New Yorkers will continue to face this pandemic head on and need this service.

We have not been paid by NYS for any of our work in 2020.

The 2020/2021 state budget also includes a \$1.25 million appropriation for 2-1-1. This is for the contract year that begins on September 1, 2020. We have received no notification about the status of that grant, while we continue our good faith efforts to meet the needs of New Yorkers who depend on us.

Thank you.