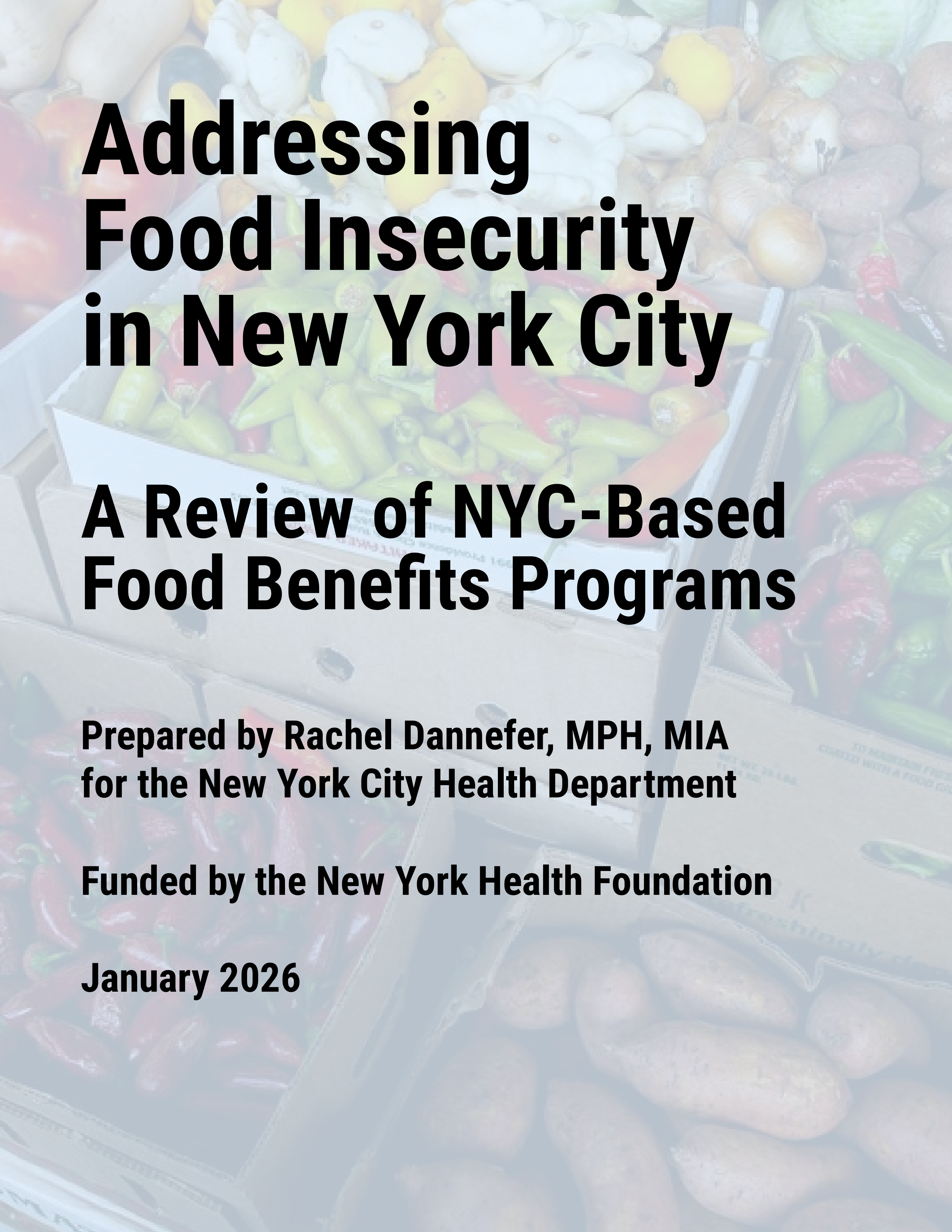

Addressing Food Insecurity in New York City

A Review of NYC-Based Food Benefits Programs

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Introduction

Close to 15% of New York City residents experience food insecurity, which translates into more than 1.2 million New Yorkers with inadequate or uncertain access to sufficient household food. Food insecurity is associated with numerous health conditions, including chronic diseases and mental health conditions, as well as increased health care spending. Many New Yorkers who experience food insecurity are unable to access the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), the country's largest anti-hunger program, or other safety net programs.

This report aims to share models for providing food benefits programs to populations experiencing food insecurity who may be excluded from traditional safety net programs by highlighting three NYC-based initiatives: the East Harlem Food Voucher Program, Groceries to Go, and the Immediate Response Card Program. Each program uses a distinct model to provide food benefits to people with limited resources in a manner that allows participants to purchase their own food. In this report, programs are described along with strengths, limitations, and considerations for scaling and implementation. Key findings across programs are also discussed. The information in this report comes from a review of program materials and interviews with eight individuals across the three programs.

East Harlem Food Voucher Program

The East Harlem Food Voucher Program is a pilot program that has provided paper vouchers to close to 200 residents of East Harlem since 2023. To be eligible, people must be a resident of East Harlem, foreign-born, experiencing food insecurity, and not receiving Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP). Vouchers are provided through a partnership with Meals for Good, a small nonprofit organization, and can be spent on SNAP-eligible items at two East Harlem-based grocery stores.

Background

The New York City Health Department's Bureau of Harlem Neighborhood Health (Harlem Bureau) began focusing on neighborhood food insecurity after finding high levels of food insecurity among participants of Bureau programs. Subsequent Bureau-led research found that Spanish-speaking residents who were ineligible for SNAP were experiencing more severe forms of food insecurity relative to other groups. Given these findings, the Harlem Bureau began exploring ways to address food insecurity among this population.

In 2023, the Harlem Bureau partnered with Meals for Good, a small NYC-based nonprofit organization, to implement a pilot study examining how distributing vouchers over several weeks would impact food insecurity and other outcomes. During the COVID-19 pandemic, Meals for Good had been raising money to help food pantries purchase foods that clients wanted but that were not typically available at pantries, such as coffee, cooking oil, eggs, tortillas, and tofu. In an effort to streamline this process, Meals for Good worked with community-based organizations to test out paper vouchers that allowed clients to directly purchase what they needed from local independent supermarkets. Ninety-two percent of the 2,000 vouchers distributed were redeemed.

Since 2023, the East Harlem Voucher Program has distributed vouchers to five cohorts totaling more than 200 East Harlem residents. The benefit has been provided for two different time periods: 8 weeks (4 of 5 cohorts) and 6 months. The benefit level is $100 every two weeks for a 2–3-person household, and $150 per week for households with 4 or more people. The amounts were informed by SNAP benefit levels and the typical contents of a standard food pantry basket. The program has served East Harlem residents who are foreign-born and experience food insecurity but don't participate in SNAP, likely due to ineligibility on the basis of documentation status. Most participants have been long-time residents of NYC, and 65% have lived in East Harlem for more than 10 years. Funding sources have included partner donations, grant funding, and in-kind staff time. See Snapshot below for more program details. (For a side-by-side comparison of all programs included in this report, see Appendix A).

Snapshot: East Harlem Food Voucher Program

Eligibility Criteria	East Harlem resident for at least one year At least 18 years old Foreign-born Food insecure The primary household shopper Household has at least 2 people with no adults receiving SNAP Speak English or Spanish (due to staff capacity)
Benefit Purpose	Benefit amount is intended to offer supplemental resources for food.
Benefit Amount	$100 every two weeks for a 2- to 3-person household $150 every two weeks for a household of 4 or more people Vouchers are printed in $10 increments.
Duration	Duration has been for 8 weeks or 6 months.
Distribution Method	Participants retrieve vouchers in person every 2 weeks from the Bureau of Harlem Neighborhood Health.
Allowable Items	SNAP-eligible items Aligning allowable items with SNAP facilitates cashier training and implementation, since stores have established systems for SNAP-eligible items.
Key Partners	Meals for Good, a small nonprofit that prints the vouchers and manages retailer recruitment, training, and reimbursement. Two Fine Fare grocery stores in East Harlem accept vouchers.

A Closer Look: The East Harlem Food Voucher Program in Context

Key strengths of the East Harlem Food Voucher Program come from its position within the neighborhood-focused Harlem Bureau, which is charged with improving community health in East and Central Harlem. The program has helped the Bureau engage a new population and build relationships with community members who were previously unconnected to the Bureau.

The Harlem Bureau has a dedicated staff member who manages participant engagement and is essential to building connections with participants. The staff member is bilingual in English and Spanish and is responsible for program screening, enrollment and data collection, and voucher distribution. Through these interactions, the staff member forms relationships with the participants and their family members. As one interviewee explained, “That relationship building results in...a lot of comfort with sharing any challenges [participants are] having, any concerns they have with the program, and...what their needs are.”

Most participants had not previously engaged with the Harlem Bureau, but since participating in the voucher program, they now stop in with questions and have engaged with other Bureau programs and partners. Being in contact with these community members has helped the Harlem Bureau develop awareness of other community needs and issues.

These relationships and the broader word of mouth about the program have also helped address fear and hesitancy some people have around engaging with government programs. As one interviewee explained, “There was...a hesitancy to...show up to this building. So, the word of mouth of...someone who's like, ‘I've actually been to this program. I know these people... You're going to be okay by interacting with this program...’ I think that really has helped.” This word of mouth has also led to a waitlist for the program. Since its first cohort, the program has not had to actively recruit participants.

The Bureau has engaged former participants of the East Harlem Food Voucher Program in photovoice, a participatory research method through which community members share their lived experiences through photographs. In partnership with the Harlem Bureau, former voucher recipients selected the theme, “My Community is My Heart,” and took photos of community resources and symbols of positive community characteristics. Their photos and stories will be exhibited at the public-facing Harlem Bureau Action Center.

> **There’s...community building and... engaging with [this population] in a way that our Bureau hasn't previously [done].**
>
> **-East Harlem Food Voucher Program**

Strengths, Limitations, Scaling Opportunities, and Implementation Tips

Model strengths

- Program administration and technological requirements are minimal. Administration consists mainly of staff time to enroll participants and distribute vouchers.
- Participants find vouchers easy to use, with redemption rates at 97% for the East Harlem Food Voucher pilot program. Participants like that vouchers can easily be shared among family members.
- In-person voucher pick-up facilitates relationship building between staff and community members. Staff connect participants to other Bureau programs and partners and gain deeper insights into community needs. Staff also provide referrals, including to NYC Care, the City's low/no-cost healthcare access program, and Groceries to Go.
- Stores indicate that participating in program makes them feel more connected to the community and that the vouchers have a meaningful financial impact.

Model limitations

- Vouchers can only be used at participating stores.
- The vouchers must be physically given to participants.

Scaling considerations

- Scaling the current program to reach more people and establish a long-term program would be possible with additional funding for vouchers and staff time.
- Expanding to new neighborhoods would require additional sites to distribute benefits to local residents in those neighborhoods.
- Scaling might also require additional supermarkets to participate, though several supermarkets in other neighborhoods have agreements in place with Meals for Good to accept vouchers.

Implementation tips

- Ensure that the person distributing vouchers is someone who can build rapport with participants and put people at ease.
- Select grocery stores that will be acceptable to community members (e.g., stores that are well-lit, carry culturally important foods, and have acceptable prices).
- Create vouchers in small increments ($5 or $10), since change cannot be given.
- Vouchers can be branded and they are printed on security paper to prevent unauthorized duplication.
- Align allowable purchases with SNAP-eligible items to facilitate cashier training and implementation

Groceries to Go

Groceries to Go provides participants with monthly credits that can be used through an online platform that links to hundreds of NYC grocery stores. Credits can be spent on groceries and prepared foods, service fees, tips, and delivery. Individuals can participate for up to 18 months. To be eligible, people must be a resident of NYC, a member of NYC Care (a health care program of NYC Health + Hospitals that guarantees low-cost and no-cost services to New Yorkers who do not qualify for or cannot afford health insurance), be food insecure, and report a diagnosis of hypertension or diabetes.

Background

Groceries to Go was launched in 2021 by the Mayor’s Office of Food Policy and the Mayor’s Office of Housing Recovery Operations to expand food access during the COVID-19 pandemic. The program was transferred to the Bureau of Chronic Disease Prevention at the NYC Health Department in July 2022. The NYC Health Department relaunched the program in early 2023 with new eligibility criteria (see above). New criteria were selected to ensure that the limited resources available through Groceries to Go reach a high-need population. They were informed by NYC Health Department survey data indicating that food insecurity risk is higher among NYC adults without health insurance compared to those with health insurance. Similarly, food insecurity risk is higher among NYC adults with hypertension than those without and among NYC adults with diabetes than those without.

Groceries to Go provides $110 per month for a 1- to 2-person household and $270 a month for households of 3 people or more. Participants also receive a 50% discount on purchases of fresh fruits and vegetables for up to $60 worth of purchases (meaning participants can save up to $30). Most participants come from households with three or more people. As of May 2024, the program had enrolled more than 4,000 participants across all boroughs.

Snapshot: Groceries to Go

Eligibility Criteria	Resident of NYC Member of NYC Care Food insecure Self-reported diagnosis of hypertension or diabetes Only one individual per household may be enrolled in Groceries to Go at any time
Benefit Purpose	Benefit amount is intended to offer supplemental resources for food.
Benefit Amount	$110 per month for a 1- to 2-person household $270 per month for a household of 3 or more people Participants receive a 50% discount on purchases of fresh fruits and vegetables using their credits for up to $60 worth of produce.
Duration	Participants can be in the program for 18 months and can re-enroll after being out of the program for 18 months.
Distribution Method	Credits are loaded in participants' Mercato accounts on the first business day of each month.
Allowable Items	SNAP-eligible items Prepared foods Service & delivery fees Tips
Key Partners	NYC Health and Hospitals, who run NYC Care, a health care access program that guarantees low-cost and no-cost services to New Yorkers who do not qualify for or cannot afford health insurance. Mercato, a web-based grocery platform where monthly credits are loaded for participants to shop for groceries.

A Closer Look: Building a Responsive and Efficient Call Center

The call center is an essential component of Groceries to Go, ensuring that the program is responsive and accessible to participants.

Some staff who support the call center are physically located at the Health Department's central office in Queens, and in its Bureaus of Neighborhood Health in the Bronx, East Harlem, and Brooklyn. The call center operates Monday through Friday from 8:30 AM to 5:30 PM. Call center staff conduct eligibility screenings and re-screenings, enroll eligible New Yorkers into the program, answer program questions and provide general program support, and offer information about other food resources. Most staff are bilingual in English and Spanish and staff use a translation service when necessary. (Groceries to Go participants speak more than 12 languages.) Staff are trained to interact with participants in a manner that reflects patience, empathy and understanding. Most importantly, call center staff are committed to providing high quality customer service that acknowledges the challenges many Groceries to Go participants face.

A strong feedback loop between call center staff and the staff responsible for overall program management has helped inform program improvements. For example, the call center began offering in-person technical assistance to address challenges they experienced when trying to troubleshoot participants' technical issues over the phone. In-person support has been an important way to reduce technological barriers to participation. The location of call center staff in four different boroughs has facilitated in-person access to support.

Finally, the call center uses Salesforce, a customer relationship management (CRM) platform, to store and manage participant data. Groceries to Go's configuration of Salesforce is fully customized and includes tailored scripts and automatic workflows to guide call center staff with eligibility screening, enrollment and other participant interactions. It automatically sends participant communications including emails confirming program enrollment, notifications about the need to complete eligibility re-screening, and reminders of participants' program end dates, all tasks that would have otherwise fallen to call center staff. The Salesforce platform also validates data, stores extensive notes, and generates easily read reports. The highly customized system ensures consistency in program implementation, enables accurate and detailed data collection and reporting, and has largely eliminated manual tracking which can be prone to errors. It has been a crucial tool for supporting administration of the program and increasing call center efficiency, accuracy, and consistency in messaging.

All of this supports an improved participant experience. As one interviewee shared, "At the end of the day we want to provide not only this program… but also…a great experience."

Strengths, Limitations, Scaling Opportunities, and Implementation Tips

Model Strengths:

- By working with Mercato as its tech partner, Groceries to Go leverages an established online grocery shopping platform that provides access to more than 300 retailers across NYC.
- Expanding allowances to include delivery fees and tips facilitates home delivery for people with mobility issues or with limited supermarket access. It also expands geographic access to food for people who aren't close to high-quality grocery stores. SNAP and other food assistance programs do not cover such fees.
- Allowing prepared foods makes this model work for people who do not have access to kitchens or cannot cook.
- Offering a 50% discount for fruit and vegetable purchases (up to a $60 value) and sending participants a monthly email with nutrition tips supports healthy eating.

Model Limitations:

- Participants must have internet access and access to a computer, laptop or a smart phone.
- While participants can inspect their groceries when they retrieve them, they are not able to select their groceries in person.

Scaling considerations:

- The infrastructure, including the contract with a tech partner, the CRM platform, and the call center are in place and would be easy to scale to reach more people meeting current eligibility requirements if more funding was available for benefits.
- If eligibility for the program expanded beyond NYC Care, new referral pathways would have to be established.

> ”
>
> **We have a lot of people who are...homebound who appreciate the delivery option.**
>
> **-Groceries to Go**
>
> ”

Implementation tips:

- Using a CRM, like Salesforce, for data management supports efficiency, accuracy, and ultimately participant experience. The system integrates tailored scripts and screening prompts and sends automatic emails to participants, reducing the burden on program staff.
- Working with a mission-compatible tech partner has facilitated program implementation. Mercato programmed its platform to automatically disburse monthly credits, apply the fruit and vegetable discount on eligible purchases, and email participants with their account balances. In response to NYC Health Department requests, Mercato has also examined its store coverage across NYC neighborhoods, translated portions of its shopping app into multiple languages, and created a video explaining how to shop at Mercato with grocery credits.
- Offering support through the call center and, when needed, through in-person appointments has ensured people with limited technology skills are able to participate in the program.

> **Have a strong call center…staffed by folks who speak the language of the people you're enrolling. I…think that's one of the best parts of our program. I think a good grocery platform …partner is super important, someone who's responsive and willing to work with you to program the system the way you want it to work… and [is] responsive to changes and requests.**
>
> **-Groceries to Go**

Immediate Response Card

The Immediate Response Cards program was introduced as part of NYC's efforts to serve large numbers of migrants and asylum seekers arriving to NYC. This program distributed prepaid cards to migrant families for use during their 28-day stay under the Hotel Voucher Program. Cards could be used at supermarkets, bodegas, grocery stores and convenience stores to purchase food and baby supplies. The program was active from March through December 2024.

Background

Between Spring 2022 and January 2025, more than 229,000 immigrants arrived to NYC from the U.S.-Mexico border, many intending to apply for asylum. In comparison to previous waves of immigration, this population is less likely to have established family or community networks in NYC. NYC government and local partners launched a humanitarian emergency response operation. They worked to meet immediate needs of these new arrivals, including providing healthcare, housing, employment, legal assistance, and food access. In almost all cases, this population was not eligible for SNAP or other federal benefits programs, and many had extremely limited resources when they arrived in NYC.

Thousands of these new arrivals were housed in emergency housing provided by the City. Some emergency shelters had catering services and were able to serve hot meals on site, however, as larger shelters ran out of capacity, families with children were housed in hotels with room blocks rented by the City for this purpose. The Immediate Response Card program aimed to provide families in these smaller hotels, particularly those housed through the Hotel Voucher Program, with means to access food in a manner that gave families control over food choices (including accessing culturally appropriate foods), while supporting local businesses. This approach was anticipated to be more cost effective and produce less food waste than using meal delivery services that provided pre-packaged, shelf-stable meals.

A total of 5,446 individuals representing more than 2,990 migrant families were served while the program was active (March – December 2024). Amounts distributed were intended to cover all food costs for families, as well as basic baby supplies, and ranged from $345 for a household size of 1, and $1,436 for a household size of 5, for the 28-day hotel stay. The redemption rate was 99.9%.

Snapshot: Immediate Response Card

Eligibility Criteria	Migrant families staying in select city-funded hotels under the Hotel Voucher Program (HPD/HANYC). All families staying in these hotels had children under age 18 or were pregnant.
Benefit Purpose	Benefit amount was intended to cover all food costs as well as essential baby supplies (e.g., diapers).
Benefit Amount	Per month: $345 for a 1-person household $644 for a 2-person household $932 for a 3-person household $1,195 for a 4-person household $1,436 for a household of 5 or more people Plus: $100 for a child under 5, and $36 for people who are ages 5-17 or pregnant
Duration	Participants received the benefit for duration of their 28-day Hotel Voucher Program stay.
Distribution Method	One Immediate Response Card was issued to each adult in the household as part of the Hotel Voucher Program registration process. The benefit was paid in 4 equal weekly installments.
Allowable Items	Food (including prepared foods) Baby supplies
Key Partners	Mobility Capital Finance was the tech partner and issued debit cards, programmed the amount for each card, and staffed a call center to address participant issues. Housing Preservation and Development.

Strengths, Limitations, Scaling Opportunities, and Implementation Tips

Model Strengths:

- The card was very easy to use and well received by recipients, as demonstrated by the 99.9% redemption rate for all issued funding. Recipients appreciated the freedom to select their own food.
- Prepaid cards worked well for participants, most of whom didn't have smart phones. With a different population, a phone-based system could be used. This would save money, as printing the cards themselves was expensive.
- Multiple approaches were in place to ensure that the card was used properly:
    - The card could only be used at retailers with specific store codes and could not be used at ATMs.
    - Recipients were given a pamphlet with program guidelines and signed an attestation that stated the card was just for purchasing food and baby supplies and its use for other items could result in program discharge.
    - HRO staff monitored purchases. When the card was used at an unauthorized location, participants were given a warning. If this happened multiple times, the card was cancelled. Misuse overall was very rare.
- This was an effective alternative to shelf-stable meals, which are expensive, requiring a warehouse, a delivery driver, and other logistical coordination, and often aren't eaten by recipients. Allowing prepared foods was important as this population did not have access to kitchens.

Model Limitations:

- The cards could only be configured to restrict purchases by merchant type, not by individual items, which meant that adherence to the allowable items was dependent on card recipients following the agreement. While this helped ensure card were used as intended, it also meant participants couldn't shop at discount stores or large retail stores that might potentially be less expensive. A card that could restrict purchases by item type, like the EBT cards used for SNAP, would have been more ideal.
- A substantial amount of time was spent monitoring purchases and orienting people to allowable items because of the limitations to restrictions put on the cards.

Implementation tips

- Some participants were concerned they would have to pay the money back; this concern should be anticipated and addressed during outreach and enrollment.
- Future iterations of this approach could explore ways to align credits with SNAP-eligible items and to use phone-based approaches for accessing the credits.

Cross-Model Findings

Key issues emerging from programs' experiences implementing these models are described below.

Participant Experiences

Participants have shared ways that receiving food benefits have helped them, as well as factors contributing to insufficient household resources for food.

Staff interviewed for the East Harlem Food Voucher Program shared that participants have talked about how the vouchers enabled them to eat healthier, led to health improvements, and reduced strain on their household finances. Participants spoke about being able to catch up on bills, especially knowing that the food benefit would be coming. One interviewee shared the experience of a long-time East Harlem resident who had problems with her feet due to complications from diabetes. She had shared that the vouchers allowed her to buy more produce. Several months after her participation in the program had ended, she stopped by the office. As the interviewee explained, "She just wanted to thank us, because, you know, without that she might have had to get her foot amputated." Groceries to Go participants have shared similar experiences. As one participant expressed to the program, "This program helps me a lot to get these foods fast. I was able to buy my fruits and vegetables to eat healthier. Thank you very much."

Both the East Harlem Food Voucher Program and Groceries to Go interviewees noted some of the challenging circumstances that participants experienced, including being unable to make ends meet even though they are working. In some cases, participants worked in precarious employment with unreliable work hours. Others mentioned being between jobs or having family members join the home, straining household resources. Some shared that they were still catching up on rent or other costs from the pandemic. These varied experiences created challenges in meeting household food needs.

> **Even if they have a job….there have been [participants] who said they're still catching up from…the pandemic... And so that leaves difficulty being able to feed their household.**
>
> **-Groceries to Go**

Allowing Participants to Purchase Their Own Food

Interviewees emphasized the value of models that allow participants to directly purchase their own foods.

Each of these models allows participants to purchase their own food in a manner that fosters choice and dignity. This approach can help participants meet dietary needs, buy basic cooking items (e.g., cooking oil, rice, and meat) that are unavailable at pantries, and reduce food waste associated with other food access approaches. For example, one interviewee shared that some older adults were uninterested in receiving home delivery of prepared meals because of negative experiences with the quality of such meals and because "it would defeat, according to them, the purpose of being in the program if they're getting food from pantries or delivered meals that may [have] too much salt or too much sugar."

”

How we allow participants to use the credits freely, I think that's one best practice… I think…people who are in need are aware of what they need, so I feel like...that aspect of this program could be adopted in others.

-Groceries to Go

**[Participants] see that the process is… not demeaning…
You get use of vouchers just as if there's cash.**

-East Harlem Food Voucher Program

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Selecting a Benefit Amount

Benefit amounts vary based on program goals. While current amounts have yielded meaningful improvements, for larger families the impact may be diminished.

The benefit amounts and duration vary across the three programs, reflecting different program goals. (For a side-by-side comparison of allowable items and benefit amounts for each program as well as SNAP, see Appendix B.) The East Harlem Voucher Program and Groceries to Go aim to provide supplemental resources for food, whereas the Immediate Response Card Program aimed to cover costs for all food as well as essential baby supplies (e.g., diapers) for new arrivals staying in NYC emergency housing. For the East Harlem Food Voucher Program and Groceries to Go, participant feedback as well as significant improvements in food security, self-reported health, and self-reported diet indicate that the benefit amounts are meaningful. Interviewees for both programs noted that the maximum benefit amounts do not increase for households larger than three people for Groceries to Go or four people for the East Harlem Food Voucher Program. As an interviewee for the East Harlem Food Voucher Program explained, for a household of six or seven people, "$300 for the month will help, but it may not help as much."

Groceries to Go credits can be used to pay for fees associated with online grocery ordering and delivery which can reduce credits available to pay for food. An interviewee for Groceries to Go noted that some participants felt that much of the benefit went towards the fees associated with online ordering (e.g., service charges and delivery fees). While these fees help the tech partner cover costs associated with operating the online grocery platform and stores cover costs associated with gathering, packing and delivering groceries, the fees can add up.

Building Trust in a Climate of Fear

Minimizing data collected, being prepared to address concerns about broader impact of participation, and word of mouth have helped people feel comfortable enrolling in these programs.

Allaying fears among participants emerged as an important issue, particularly for immigrants concerned about immigration applications or about their information being shared with other agencies. Both the East Harlem Food Voucher Program and Groceries to Go try to address such concerns by clearly explaining what information is collected and who will have access to it. The East Harlem Food Voucher Program creates a unique ID number for each participant and uses this number rather than names when interacting with participants (e.g., for scheduling appointments). Names are not retained following cohort completion. For the East Harlem Food Voucher Program, word of mouth among community members and developing relationships with program staff has also helped to build trust and allay fears.

Groceries to Go does not ascertain whether people are immigrants. Call center staff have standard language describing how participants' information will be used and explaining that participating in Groceries to Go will not affect SNAP benefits but could impact how annual income is calculated for assisted housing programs. One interviewee had the sense that people felt comfortable enrolling in a NYC Health Department program because of knowing that NYC is a sanctuary city. Similarly to the East Harlem Food Voucher Program, word of mouth among community members, including being referred to the program by a friend or family member, was cited as mitigating concerns about enrolling in the program.

I try to make them feel at ease…ask them questions, not on the survey. Just personal questions, or just about their family... Also…we reiterated that no one else would have this information... because that was a big thing at the beginning… [Some participants] were afraid that this would impact their citizenship papers, or, you know, anything like a green card process.

-East Harlem Food Voucher Program

A lot of people are actually very uncomfortable because of their status when they initially get into the program because they don't know if their information is going to be released, and we do have to go through letting them know that it will not be released… letting them know that it is directly from the City through the Department of Health, it is not a [federal] governmental program, and that puts them at ease.

-Groceries to Go

When Benefits End

The end of the benefit can be challenging for participants. Programs have mitigated this through advance planning and providing referrals to food pantries and other services.

Because programs operated with limited budgets, they have to balance providing a benefit for a meaningful length of time with ensuring that new people can participate by limiting program duration so that resources can become available for someone else. The time-limited nature of the benefit can be challenging for participants of both the East Harlem Food Voucher Program and Groceries to Go as well as for staff, especially when participants' resources for food have not meaningfully improved outside of receiving the food benefit.

The East Harlem Food Voucher Program now addresses this issue during program enrollment. As part of initial enrollment, staff discuss planning for the end of the program, including connecting participants with other resources and ensuring they are receiving benefits for which they might be eligible. They also provide participants with a list of pantries in the area and help them sign up for a nearby pantry where they can choose the food they want.

Similarly, Groceries to Go provides information about food pantries and other referrals when the program ends. In some cases, participants are removed from the program because they obtain regular health insurance and are no longer part of NYC Care. One interviewee shared, "I have had participants that said they'll contact New York City Care and ask them if they can drop their [other] coverage" in order to stay in Groceries to Go.

> **We do let [families with children] know they may be able to apply for SNAP and then we give them that information...**
>
> **-Groceries to Go**

Emotional Impact on Staff

Interviewees noted the emotional impact of this work, especially when talking to people facing acute circumstances.

One interviewee from the East Harlem Food Voucher Program shared an experience of telling someone that the program was full. “I remember one woman who came and said, “You know I have two kids. My husband died… I have no other help,” and you know you're hearing this, and you still have to tell them…we're not accepting anyone else… It would get a little difficult turning them away.” This interviewee was still receiving inquiries from people in previous cohorts who were wondering about the possibility of their friends or family members enrolling in the program.

Another challenge is communicating with people for whom the benefit would be ending. As an interviewee from Groceries to Go explained, “For the people who… don't have work …they'll end the call, saying, ‘Oh, hopefully, I have a job by the time this happens.’ ” That kind of pinches.” This interviewee shared the desire to find more and better services to refer people to when the program ends, a sentiment shared by other program staff, who often raise the issue of how to find other options for people who can no longer participate in Groceries to Go.

The Essential Role of Food Pantries

Food pantries are an important resource for people who have participated in the East Harlem Food Voucher Program and Groceries to Go.

Many participants in the East Harlem Food Voucher Program and Groceries to Go have used food pantries and both programs provide information about pantries to participants. Additionally, information about pantries is offered to people who were ineligible or wait-listed for the programs and when enrollment in the programs is ending.

The East Harlem Food Voucher Program helps participants enroll in a neighborhood pantry that allows people to select their own foods. Participants prefer this approach as opposed to receiving a set bag of food which might contain items they would not eat. “[People] said there are certain things that they may not eat, and they don't like to throw out food…And with [this] pantry, they could actually just take what they’re gonna eat.”

Some participants shared that with the vouchers, they stopped visiting pantries so that more food would be available for others. On the other hand, some continued visiting pantries during the weeks that they didn't receive the food vouchers, especially participants with larger families. Some said they visited pantries during the program in anticipation of experiencing insufficient food again when the program ended. As one interviewee explained, even though they were hearing fewer reports of participants cutting meals or going hungry, because the program would end, the threat of food insecurity was still present.

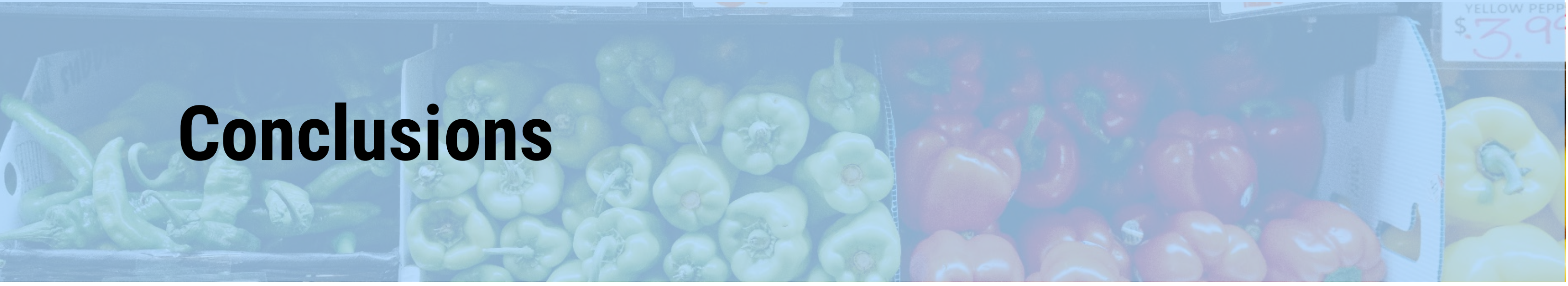
> **[One participant] had stopped going because… she wasn't as needy right now because of the food vouchers. She said there may be other people that need, so, she would rather have someone else get it…that might be in situation that she was before.**
>
> **-East Harlem Food Voucher Program**

Gaps in Information

Some participants were fearful of participating in other programs because of concerns about impacts to immigration applications and having to show identification.

Interviewees noted gaps in participants' knowledge of available food pantries and misconceptions about participation in other food support programs, especially SNAP. One interviewee noted the power of word of mouth in discouraging people from participating in SNAP or Medicaid because of concerns that doing so could interfere with immigration applications. Some participants worried about visiting pantries because of fear that they would have to show identification. As an interviewee explained, "They don't want to show ID, they don't want to give their name, [they] don't want to sign anything." Addressing these concerns can be important to supporting food security.

> **So many [participants] just wouldn't go near applying for SNAP or any other government [program]…Medicaid, anything like that.**
>
> **-East Harlem Food Voucher Program**



Conclusions

Food insecurity affects more than one in 10 New York City residents. Many New Yorkers are unable to access traditional safety net programs, most notably SNAP, because of ineligibility due to immigration status or other factors. The programs reviewed in this report offer models for filling such gaps that provide people with resources to purchase food for their households in a manner that supports choice and dignity. All programs have been well-received by participants, with redemption rates ranging from 85% to 99.9%. The East Harlem Food Voucher Program and Groceries to Go have been shown to reduce food insecurity and improve self-reported health and diet.

The models used by the East Harlem Food Voucher Program, Groceries to Go, and the Immediate Response Card differ with respect to key characteristics including benefit amounts, distribution methods, allowable items, and how participants shop for food. These differences make each model well-suited to different populations and circumstances, for example:

- The Immediate Response Card is useful in emergencies situations and circumstances where people do not have access to a kitchen and are unable to use internet- or app-based programs to order or pay for food.
- Groceries to Go's online ordering system, which allows participants to use credits for delivery fees and tips, works well for people who do not live near grocery stores that meet their needs or who have challenges getting to grocery stores due to mobility, health issues, time deficits, or other reasons.
- The food voucher model is well-suited to a neighborhood context where people are able to shop at local grocery stores and can benefit from connections to other neighborhood programming.

Findings highlight the importance of providing adequate funding for the infrastructure to administer such programs, as well as staffing such programs with people who are empathetic and can build trust with participants. Key to this trust building is equipping staff with information to address participant concerns, for example, explaining how participant information is stored and will be used. Interviewees for this project noted that some people avoid accessing SNAP, food pantries, and other programs due to concerns about providing personal information or jeopardizing immigration applications. A concern that surfaced from the Immediate Response Card program was that benefits would have to be repaid. Programs should proactively address such concerns to ensure that people make use of programs and services available to them.

The programs reviewed here have bridged gaps in current safety net programs and meaningfully supported food security for participating New Yorkers. However, at current funding levels, these programs are insufficient to address food insecurity for people who are unable to access SNAP on a widespread and permanent level. With high levels of food insecurity anticipated to persist, ways to further address this issue include:

- **Expand current programs:** Additional funding for the East Harlem Food Voucher Program and Groceries to Go would allow these programs to expand their reach and provide food benefits for a longer period of time. In particular, continuous funding for the East Harlem Voucher Program would allow it to be offered on an ongoing basis as a part of the Harlem Bureau's suite of programs.
- **Replicate current programs:** The models described here can be adapted and replicated by other organizations seeking to reduce food insecurity. (To aid in considering replication, budget line item categories for Groceries to Go and the East Harlem Food Voucher Program are provided in Appendix C.)
- **Policy change:** Broader policy initiatives are underway to address current gaps in food security supports, most notably SNAP4All, a statewide campaign to extend SNAP benefits to income-eligible New Yorkers regardless of immigration status.

In addition to such efforts, continued funding for federal food programs that support nutrition such as SNAP, WIC, and school meals, as well as state and local funding that supports emergency food providers is essential. Recent federal cuts to SNAP are anticipated to strain household food resources for many and place additional pressure on food pantries in New York City, which have themselves lost funding due to federal budget cuts. As noted by interviewees in this project, food pantries are a vital resource and are a key referral given to people ineligible for or rolling off these programs and for many other New Yorkers. Local government, foundations, and other funders can play a critical role in supporting both emergency food and innovative food resource programs in New York City.

The programs profiled in this report offer practical approaches to address food insecurity among New Yorkers who fall outside of established safety nets programs. As we work towards finding ways to meaningfully reduce food insecurity in New York City, such programs offer important models for providing people with the resources to purchase the food they need.

For more information

For more information about the East Harlem Food Voucher program, contact the Bureau of Harlem Neighborhood Health at harlemoutreach@health.nyc.gov or (855) 789-8760.

For more information about Groceries to Go, visit www.nyc.gov/site/doh/health/health-topics/groceries-to-go.page or contact the program at groceriestogo@health.nyc.gov or (347) 665-0175.

More information about Meals for Good can be found at https://www.mealsforgood.org/.

About this report

This report was funded by a New York Health Foundation grant to the Bureau of Harlem Neighborhood Health of the New York City Health Department.

The information in this report comes from a review of program materials, documents, and interviews with eight individuals across the programs conducted from June through August 2025. Interviews were conducted with 3 individuals from the East Harlem Food Voucher Program, 3 individuals from Groceries to Go, and 2 individuals from the NYC Mayor's Office of Housing Recovery Operations Immediate Response Card Program.

References

Gundersen C, Ziliak JP. Food insecurity research in the United States: Where we have been and where we need to go. *Appl Econ Perspect Policy*. 2018;40(1):119-135.

Mayor's Office of Food Policy. *Food by the Numbers: January 2025*. Mayor's Office of Food Policy; 2025. https://www.nyc.gov/assets/foodpolicy/downloads/pdf/NYC-Food-by-the-Numbers-2024.pdf

Appendices

A. Combined Program Snapshots

	East Harlem Food Voucher Program	Groceries to Go	Immediate Response Card
Eligibility Criteria	East Harlem resident for at least one year At least 18 years old Foreign-born Food insecure The primary household shopper Household has at least 2 people with no adults receiving SNAP Speak English or Spanish (due to staff capacity)	Resident of NYC Member of NYC Care Food insecure Self-reported diagnosis of hypertension or diabetes Only one individual per household may be enrolled in Groceries to Go at any time	Migrant families staying in select city-funded hotels under the Hotel Voucher Program (HPD/HANYC). All families staying in these hotels had children under age 18 or were pregnant.
Benefit Purpose	Benefit amount is intended to offer supplemental resources for food.	Benefit amount is intended to offer supplemental resources for food.	Benefit amount was intended to cover all food costs as well as essential baby supplies (e.g., diapers).
Benefit Amount	$100 every two weeks for a 2- to 3-person household. $150 every two weeks for a household of 4 or more people. Vouchers are printed in $10 increments.	$110 per month for a 1- to 2-person household. $270 per month for a household of 3 or more people. Participants receive a 50% discount on purchases of fresh fruits and vegetables using their credits for up to $60 worth of produce.	Per month: $345 for a 1-person household. $644 for a 2-person household. $932 for a 3-person household. $1,195 for a 4-person household. $1,436 for a household of 5 or more people. Plus: $100 for a child under 5, and $36 for people who are ages 5-17 or pregnant.

Duration	Duration has been for 8 weeks or 6 months.	Participants can be in the program for 18 months and can re-enroll after being out of the program for 18 months.	Participants received the benefit for duration of their 28-day Hotel Voucher Program stay.
Distribution Method	Participants retrieve vouchers in person every 2 weeks from the Bureau of Harlem Neighborhood Health.	Credits are loaded in participants' Mercato accounts on the first business day of each month.	One Immediate Response Card was issued to each adult in the household as part of the Hotel Voucher Program registration process. The benefit was paid in 4 equal weekly installments.
Allowable Items	SNAP-eligible items Aligning allowable items with SNAP facilitates cashier training and implementation, since stores have established systems for SNAP-eligible items.	SNAP-eligible items Prepared foods Service & delivery fees Tips	Food (including prepared foods) Baby supplies
Key Partners	Meals for Good, a small nonprofit that prints the vouchers and manages retailer recruitment, training, and reimbursement. Two Fine Fare grocery stores in East Harlem accept vouchers.	NYC Health and Hospitals, who run NYC Care, a health care access program that guarantees low-cost and no-cost services to New Yorkers who do not qualify for or cannot afford health insurance. Mercato, a web-based grocery platform where monthly credits are loaded for participants to shop for groceries.	Mobility Capital Finance was the tech partner and issued debit cards, programmed the amount for each card, and staffed a call center to address participant issues. Housing Preservation and Development.

B. Programs’ Allowable Items and Benefit Amounts Compared to the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP)

Allowable Items	SNAP	East Harlem Food Voucher Program	Groceries to Go	Immediate Response Card
SNAP-eligible items (household groceries)	✓	✓	✓	✓
Hot prepared foods	✗	✗	✓	✓
Service fees, delivery fees, and tips	✗	✗	✓	✗
Baby supplies (e.g., diapers)	✗	✗	✗	✓

<table>
<tr><th>Household size</th><th>SNAP</th><th>East Harlem Food Voucher Program</th><th>Groceries to Go</th><th>Immediate Response Card*</th></tr>
<tr><td></td><td>Maximum benefit amount per month</td><td>Benefit amount per 4 weeks</td><td>Benefit amount per month</td><td>Benefit amount per month</td></tr>
<tr><td>1</td><td>$298</td><td>N/A</td><td>$110</td><td>$345</td></tr>
<tr><td>2</td><td>$546</td><td>$200</td><td>$110</td><td>$644</td></tr>
<tr><td>3</td><td>$785</td><td>$200</td><td rowspan="7">$270 for 3+ people</td><td>$932</td></tr>
<tr><td>4</td><td>$994</td><td rowspan="6">$300 for 4+ people</td><td>$1,195</td></tr>
<tr><td>5</td><td>$1,183</td><td rowspan="5">$1,436 for 5+ people</td></tr>
<tr><td>6</td><td>$1,421</td></tr>
<tr><td>7</td><td>$1,571</td></tr>
<tr><td>8</td><td>$1,789</td></tr>
<tr><td>Each additional person</td><td>$218</td></tr>
</table>

*Additional amounts for a child under 5 ($100) or ages 5-17 ($36), and a pregnant person ($36)

C. Budget Line Items

Budget Line Items for the East Harlem Food Voucher Program Groceries to Go	East Harlem Food Voucher Program	Groceries to Go
Personnel		
Management and coordination *Strategic planning, stakeholder relationships, supervision, fiscal oversight, communication, & promotion*	✓	✓
Direct customer service *Outreach, screening, enrollment, data collection, customer service*	✓	✓
Food voucher distribution	✓	✗
Evaluation	✓	✓
Other than Personnel Services		
Food benefits	✓	✓
Technology licenses *Customer relationship manager platform, call center software*	✗	✓
Referral platform	✓	✓
Vendor overhead *Program administration and other costs*	✓	✓