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**Testimony of the American Heart Association
Before the New York City Council Committee on Health**

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Good afternoon. Thank you, Chair Levine and members of the Council Committee on Health for the opportunity to discuss several key budget priorities the American Heart Association | American Stroke Association believes would benefit the City of New York. The AHA is the largest, voluntary-led and science-based organization focused on the mission to save lives from heart disease and stroke. We encourage the City to dedicate vital funding for city agencies to help promote access to healthy food for all New Yorkers, prevent tobacco addiction and improve management of high blood pressure.

Every family should have access to the foods that help support a balanced diet and a healthier life. In the Fiscal Year 2019 budget, the American Heart Association asks the City to invest in three key programs that will increase access to healthy food and boost the economy, especially for neighborhoods that need it most.

First, the city should commit an additional \$15 million to help New Yorkers afford fresh fruits and vegetables by expanding SNAP incentives such as Health Bucks. 1 in 5 New Yorkers receive Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program benefits¹, which reduce food insecurity and help households rise out of poverty. It also benefits the economy; every \$5 in new SNAP benefits generate \$9 for the local economy². Since more food is being purchased through SNAP, it increases the economic activity for both the producers and the systems that deliver the food, including retailers, wholesalers, and transportation. Farmers' markets that offered Health Bucks saw higher daily Electronic

¹ <https://www1.nyc.gov/assets/hra/downloads/pdf/facts/snap/2002.2015NYCSNAPParticipation.pdf>

² <https://www.ers.usda.gov/topics/food-nutrition-assistance/supplemental-nutrition-assistance-program-snap/economic-linkages/>

Benefits Transfer sales than farmers' markets that did not offer the incentive³. Demand and use of Health Bucks has increased over time, and we applaud the city for continuing to innovate in this area. The city should increase funding for SNAP incentives by \$15 million and continue to explore avenues for expanding access not only at farmer's markets but also bodegas and supermarkets, online markets, or other retail venues that allow families to access these resources where they live and shop.

Second, the city should launch a \$10 million Healthy Food Financing Initiative, which will help local grocers to open, expand, and improve grocery stores in neighborhoods that need healthy food and jobs the most. 1.2 million residents of New York City live in lower income communities with limited access to healthy food retail⁴. These same neighborhoods often struggle with high rates of unemployment and diet-related chronic diseases like diabetes and heart disease. While FRESH provides zoning and tax incentives for grocery stores to open or expand in underserved communities, an HFFI leverages both public and private funding to provide low-interest loans and grants specifically tailored for food establishments that may otherwise struggle to secure needed traditional capital. These low-interest loans and grants support the establishment, renovation, and expansion of permanent facilities for the sale of healthy foods in underserved communities, including supermarkets, farmer's markets, mobile markets, and bodegas. Given the success of HFFI in New York State⁵ and in other regions across the country, New York City should invest \$10 million to launch a local program to support healthy food access and strengthen local economies.

Third, the city should increase funding for healthy corner store initiatives to \$3 million as a means to increase the amount of healthy food that is offered in our neighborhoods. Groceries and corners stores are anchors for development in communities; they attract foot traffic and can engage in community development through local programs. Shop Healthy NYC, operated by the Department of Health and Mental Hygiene, is doing important work across the city⁶. And \$3 million would allow the program to expand or be supplemented by community-led initiatives in order to provide grants and free equipment to corner stores as well as support community-led initiatives that will meet the need in neighborhoods across the city.

All three of these programs should use the best available science to set public health-driven goals and involve an evaluation partner identified from the academic research community who is responsible for the collection and annual public reporting of data for evaluation. Healthy food financing and healthy corner store initiatives should be dedicated for projects that will economically benefit low or moderate-income communities that are also identified as most in need of healthy food access.

Another key aspect to the AHA's goal to prevent heart disease and stroke is centered on a well-funded and highly effective tobacco control program. While the City has

³ https://www.cdc.gov/pcd/issues/2013/13_0113.htm

⁴ <http://www1.nyc.gov/assets/foodpolicy/downloads/pdf/2017-Food-Metrics-Report-Corrected.pdf>

⁵ http://thefoodtrust.org/uploads/media_items/hfhc-final-impacts.original.pdf

⁶ <http://www1.nyc.gov/site/foodpolicy/help/shop-healthy.page>

achieved much-heralded success in addressing tobacco addiction, continued inequity in the smoking rates persist among the most vulnerable New Yorkers. Public housing residents have some of the highest smoking rates in the City (20 percent) compared to the citywide average of 13.1 percent⁷. By the end of July 2018, a new U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) rule will require that all the nation's public housing properties be entirely smoke-free⁸. With over 400,000 New Yorkers living in over 2,500 HUD regulated residential buildings in New York City, the new HUD rule will have a significant impact on the lives of New Yorkers. The City should allocate at least \$2 million in FY 2019-20 to the New York City Department of Health and Mental Hygiene and the New York City Housing Authority to fund an aggressive tobacco cessation program focused on New York City's public housing population. The investment will provide for necessary staff and cessation resources that must go above and beyond the current funding level for the Bureau of Tobacco Control.

Lastly, while our focus remains steadfast on the prevention of heart disease and stroke, unfortunately far too many New Yorkers are already struggling with these illnesses. A key concern shared by the American Heart Association and our Department of Health and Mental Hygiene is the silent burden of hypertension on New Yorkers. 1 in 4 city residents has been diagnosed with high blood pressure⁹. This doesn't include the likely majority who have not yet been made aware of their uncontrolled hypertension. As the city undertakes a significant effort to promote awareness, clinical guidelines and treatment adherence, it would be appropriate for the City to devote funding to support this necessary initiative. An investment of \$1 million would help bolster the City's plans with this outreach and provide appropriate incentives for community partners to participate.

The American Heart Association appreciates the City's continued efforts to prioritize health and wellness for all New Yorkers. We believe the proposals outlined above will greatly enhance the work of city agencies supporting this mission. As heart disease and stroke remain the leading cause of preventable death and disability in New York City, we hope the city will prioritize these investments in the Fiscal Year 2019 budget. We look forward to your support.

⁷ <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/28656541>

⁸ https://www.hud.gov/program_offices/healthy_homes/smokefree

⁹ <https://www1.nyc.gov/site/doh/health/health-topics/heart-disease-blood-pressure.page>