

Thin Gruel For Soup Kitchens

Publicly funded help for the needy, from food assistance to job training, dries up further under the proposed budget.

By [Neil deMause](#) | Published: Mar 8, 2010

From now through March 24, City Council committees will be [holding hearings](#) on the [preliminary budget](#) presented by Mayor Bloomberg on Jan. 28. The annual budget gains momentum amidst a civic fog of dismay and uncertainty – dismay over the ongoing [chaos](#) in Albany, and uncertainty about how that, and the state's generally poor economy, will affect the city's \$63 billion budget.

Council will gather its findings into a report to be delivered by April 8, which should inform the mayor's Executive Budget [to be released](#) by April 26.

As New York City's unemployment rate continues to climb [above 10 percent](#), proposed spending cuts by both Gov. Paterson and Mayor Bloomberg are threatening to make life tougher for anyone who depends on government programs for food, cash grants or job training.

Potentially hardest hit: the city's soup kitchens and food pantries. Emergency food providers had already seen the state's [Hunger Prevention and Nutrition Assistance Program](#) – which provides about \$30 million a year to New York's food banks – sliced by \$2.3 million in mid-year budget cuts last year; Paterson is now proposing \$1.2 million in additional cuts for 2010. Bloomberg then followed by threatening that if the governor's cuts to [aid to the city](#) go through, he'd completely eliminate the city's [Emergency Food Assistance Program](#) (EFAP), which last year supplied about \$10 million worth of non-perishable goods to New York's emergency food providers.

Between the state and city cuts and the phasing-out of food aid provided by the federal stimulus program, says West Side Campaign Against Hunger director Doreen Wohl, her organization's [food pantry](#) is looking at a loss of nearly \$100,000, which represents about 200,000 meals. "In calendar year 2009, we provided 825,000 meals, so a loss of 200,000 meals is a quarter of the meals that we provide," says Wohl – at a time when demand for food aid is still rising.

"We go through this dance every year, where the governor and the mayor propose cuts, and the legislature and the City Council reinstate them," says Ed Fowler, director of Brownsville's Neighbors Together, which runs one of the city's largest soup kitchens.

"But this year, they've upped the stakes." EFAP alone, says Fowler, represents 30 percent of his food budget. "We serve lunch and dinner, and we'd probably have to eliminate one, at a time when numbers are going up."

Bloomberg has actually proposed two separate flavors of budget cuts: There's the mayor's previously announced [Program to Eliminate the Gap](#) (PEG), which is designed to balance the city's own books in coming years; on top of that, the mayor had his Office of Management and Budget draw up a [contingency plan](#) containing additional cuts that could be made if the governor succeeds in slashing aid to New York City. The mayor's office stresses that the elimination of city food aid was included in Bloomberg's contingency cuts as a worst-case scenario, but that hasn't assuaged the worries of food providers.

One silver lining: Paterson's budget includes a one-time \$10 million infusion of federal stimulus dollars for New York state's food banks, which should help offset the other cuts. Fowler warns, though, that it could only end up delaying the inevitable: "We've seen that once cuts are made, it's hard to get them reinstated in future budgets. So maybe this year isn't so bad, but I am worried about having to fight for 'increased funding' every year in the future."

Few jobs for youth ahead

Another area looking at steep cuts is workforce development. Paterson would completely eliminate funding under the federal Temporary Assistance to Needy Families for numerous state programs, including [wage subsidies](#) for private employers who make new hires, as well as its new [Career Pathways](#) program. Meanwhile, the Summer Youth Employment Program, which both Bloomberg and Paterson [lauded as a win-win](#) for youth and the local economy last year, now faces \$47 million in city and state cuts.

According to Rebecca Brown Cesarani, acting director of the New York City Employment and Training Coalition, the combined cuts would result in only one-third as many youth job slots available this summer as last. This, she says, after a summer when there were already twice as many applicants as slots available: "You're talking 100,000 youth looking for jobs with only 17,000 available, and that's pretty rough."

Since TANF is funded by a federal block grant, advocates have been struggling to figure out where the money is going. Some is being held back to fund an anticipated rise in New Yorkers receiving welfare – after [falling for years](#), the city's welfare caseload has rebounded by about [7 percent](#) since Sept. 2008, and is continuing to rise. Under [a plan](#) agreed to by Paterson last year, the state welfare grant (currently averaging \$291 a month, and unchanged since 1990 despite inflation) was also supposed to rise 10 percent this year, though that's now being cut in half under Paterson's new budget.

In all, the state anticipates spending an extra \$450 million in welfare benefits this year, mostly due to rising caseloads, says spokeswoman Jessica Bassett of the state budget division. She notes that some workforce programs are seeing increased spending – the

[Transitional Jobs Program](#), for example, has its budget doubled to \$10 million – but acknowledges that there will still be tough cuts: "This is, as the governor always says, a budget of necessity, not of choice."

Yet as Hunger Action Network of New York State upstate director Andreas Kriefall points out, the state is actually getting an extra \$1.2 billion in "extraordinary relief" funding via the stimulus bill, but is using much of it to supplant the state's own social spending – for example, \$261 million is being used to pay down the state's share of welfare benefits. Effectively, says Kriefall, "a quarter billion dollars becomes available to fill a hole in the budget."

On the city level, the mayor has proposed cuts to the Human Resources Administration's own [much-criticized](#) job programs, with the longstanding [BEGIN job-skills program](#) facing complete elimination in Bloomberg's doomsday contingency budget. Also hit hard: the [Parks Opportunity Program](#), which provides six-month transitional jobs in the Parks Department to welfare recipients, and which under the mayor's PEG cuts would lose 319 of its 2,322 positions this year, and 737 more in 2011. HRA spokeswoman Barbara Brancaccio says the city plans to use federal stimulus grants to shift current POP workers into [Back to Work](#) or other subsidized job programs. "The clients won't be affected, but the funding streams will change," Brancaccio says.

The big question now: How much of all this is serious, and how much is a bluff designed to scare the state into coughing up more money (on Bloomberg's part) and scare unions into pension givebacks (for both Paterson and the mayor)?

"Normally I'd say it's gamesmanship, but all my prognostications of common sense in governing have gone out the window," says New York City Coalition Against Hunger director Joel Berg. He notes that this is the first year as mayor that Bloomberg hasn't proposed emergency food cuts in his regular budget. "They all need increases, so any cut would be devastating. I'm assuming the mayor knows that, and purposely picked options so dire that he would call attention to what this would mean."

But with the state budget facing [multi-billion dollar deficits](#), it could end up a game of chicken with no winners. Says Federation of Protestant Welfare Agencies policy analyst Liz Accles: "Bloomberg may be bluffing, but I don't know that the governor is."