

SCHENECTADY FOOD & POVERTY SPEAK OUT

May 2024



Schenectady Food and Poverty Speak-Out

Movements Begin With The Telling Of Untold Stories

- **Are you or your family members struggling to make ends meet?**
 - **Are you concerned about your neighbors who don't always have enough food?**
 - **Do you believe we can do better when it comes to ensuring everyone has what they need to survive and thrive?**
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Wednesday, May 1st - 5pm dinner, 6pm event
Rotterdam Community Center
705 Curry Road, Schenectady, NY 12306

For more information and to register:
<https://bit.ly/May1Speakout>



Co-sponsored by Rotterdam Community Center, The Alliance for a Hunger Free New York, Labor-Religion Coalition of NYS, and the Schuyler Center



Event flyer, distributed electronically and at food pantries and community spaces.

The Telling of Untold Stories: Navigating Life on the Edge of Poverty



Introduction

"We're here to make a difference, we're here to use our voices, and we will NOT be silent!" – Glenda, Speak Out participant

In December 2021, Governor Kathy Hochul signed the Child Poverty Reduction Act into law, committing New York to cutting child poverty in half – with attention to racial equity – in the next decade. The law established an ambitious poverty reduction goal and holds the State accountable to reach that goal through the creation of the Child Poverty Reduction Advisory Council. The Council is charged with monitoring the State's progress toward its child poverty reduction goal.

Now, more than two years into that timeline, it is critical that efforts to combat poverty be informed by the wisdom, experience, and expertise of communities and individuals who have experienced poverty and interacted with the systems and services that are intended to alleviate its impacts.

On May 1st, 2024, the Schuyler Center partnered with the Alliance for a Hunger Free New York, the Rotterdam Community Center, and the Labor-Religion Coalition to hold the second in a series of community conversations about child poverty. The Schenectady Food & Poverty Speak Out provided an opportunity for community members to share a meal together, hear each other's stories, and shape a vision for a New York free from poverty and hunger.

Event Design & Delivery: Centering Lived Experience

"Movements begin with the telling of untold stories."

The Food & Poverty Speak Out was intentionally designed as a community-centered, community-driven event. Because of that, it was particularly important to identify partner organizations with deep and meaningful local connections.

The Alliance for a Hunger-Free New York (housed at the Food Pantries of the Capital Region), the Rotterdam Community Center, and the Labor-Religion Coalition were ideal collaborators, with deep ties, knowledge, and trust with neighbors in the Schenectady area.

Planning the event included identification of additional partner organizations to engage individuals who would be passionate about the goals of the Speak Out. The Rotterdam Community Center was chosen as a venue, providing a welcoming space for participants. The Center houses a food pantry, hosts events, and is located centrally in Rotterdam, not far from downtown Schenectady.

Leading up to the event, organizers advertised it online and distributed flyers at food pantries and community sites (see flyer on page 2).

The Speak Out was held at the end of the work day and a shared meal was provided, allowing participants to gather and converse over dinner. This created a friendly environment which carried over into the program portion of the Speak Out.



The Food and Poverty Speak Out was the second in a series of conversation sessions held across New York State, serving as an opportunity to elevate community voices and experiences navigating poverty. These stories will be integrated with the broader state-level policy conversation regarding child poverty reduction.

Meaningful, effective policy change will only be possible with insight and direction from those who have experienced poverty firsthand.



Community members were offered multiple ways to share their story, which contributed to the success of the event and the diversity of stories collected. While seven participants stood up and shared their stories in front of an audience, 45 others completed a written survey/story collection form, which allowed them to share their perspectives in a less public way. The survey was often given as a verbal interview by food pantry staff and other community-based organization staff. We also made available the opportunity to record a video story at the Speak Out.

During the event, an artist/illustrator captured participants' stories in real-time. This live illustration provided an opportunity for attendees to continue engaging with the conversation after the event, talking with the artist and viewing her illustration (right) as she continued to work after the program's conclusion.

Because the Speak Out was planned by organizations deeply entrenched in the community, it was part of a larger plan to encourage grassroots advocacy. Information about the Speak Out was woven into other programs and was tied into the launch of a new Community Advocates program run by the Schenectady Food Council. These connections mean that the work begun at the Speak Out is ongoing, providing more pathways for community members to become advocates, sharing stories and input about how to combat poverty and better support all New York families.



Listen to the Stories: Speak Out Themes

Throughout the Speak Out, community members shared their stories and experiences navigating hardships, poverty, and the public systems that, while intended to help those experiencing poverty, too often impose additional burdens on those who utilize them.

The shared oral testimony together with the written survey responses provided more than 50 perspectives, many of which had common themes and elements.

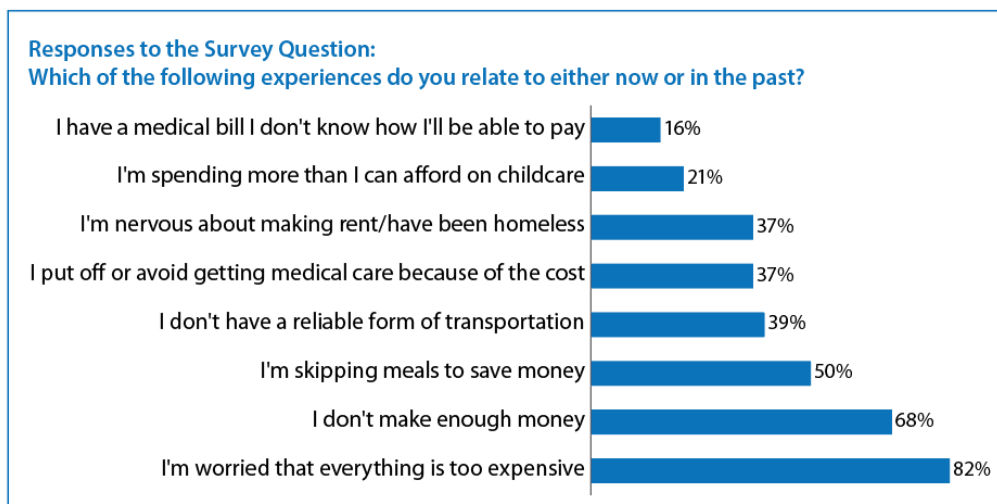
On the Precipice: Balancing Rising Costs While Navigating the Unexpected

“People with multiple jobs work themselves to the bone year after year just to barely scrape [by] above the poverty line.” – anonymous survey respondent

Several of the stories shared illustrated just how close many families are to financial hardship—how one or two life events were enough to tip the family into poverty. This is reflected in the data as well; too many individuals and families, in Schenectady and across the state, are living paycheck to paycheck, one life event away from facing significant financial distress. In fact, according to the United Way’s ALICE (Asset Limited, Income Constrained, Employed) data, 28% of Schenectady County residents live above the federal poverty line but below the income level needed to afford basic necessities – things like housing, food, transportation, and child care. Several participants spoke about how a family member’s poor health, job loss, or the break-up of a relationship provided just enough stress and additional financial burden to push the household into poverty.

One participant, Robyn, shared that she was able to rise out of childhood poverty as she became an adult. However, when she became a single parent at the age of 22, she was “plunged back into poverty.” For Robyn, becoming a single-income, single-parent household was the catalyst for economic hardship. She shared that she was forced to make difficult decisions about how to make ends meet: “I fed my children first and myself last.”

Participants’ experiences illustrated the immense amount of labor and decision-making that goes into surviving on incomes insufficient to meet basic household needs. When asked what they would want the public to understand about their experience, one survey respondent replied: “living paycheck to paycheck is difficult and draining.”



Feeding Families: Identifying and Eliminating Hurdles to Food Access

"Ten years ago, I got downsized and lost my job, after having kids. So here I am a mom, with two-year-old twin boys, who are incidentally allergic to wheat and dairy, so that makes food pantries harder. The coupons for free milk don't cover almond milk...I went through all the hoops, got on food stamps... finding a job that worked with the day care that was available was impossible." - Melessa, Speak Out participant

Speakers and survey respondents shared their experiences with food access and public nutrition programs, including WIC and SNAP. While many indicated that the programs helped their families put food on the table in times of economic stress, they also highlighted significant issues with the programs' strict guidelines. Said one survey respondent, who asked to remain anonymous: "more than once I had to leave groceries behind with the cashier because we did not have enough to pay, [or left] half-full carts in a store because the grocer did not have the specified product required by WIC."

During the Speak Out, Melessa shared her experience of generational poverty and hunger. She shared that when she was a child, her family received food stamps. Her mother was shamed at the grocery store for using those food stamps, so never used them again. When Melessa herself lost her job and fell back into poverty with children of her own, she applied for and was able to use SNAP benefits. While SNAP helped her, it was not enough - so Melessa turned to food pantries. Melessa's children have severe food allergies and she found that many of the specialty foods they needed were not available in pantries or were not covered by nutrition support programs.

Melessa's story illustrates the many complexities of relying upon public benefits programs. First is the component of public perception and humiliation, discussed in more detail in the next section, that is nearly inextricably linked to participation in public benefits programs - particularly programs designed to serve those living in poverty.

Second, when benefits are available to help parents provide for their families, often the level of the benefit doesn't fully alleviate the financial burden for the family or it adds additional challenges. For example, Melessa also shared her experience as a single parent juggling the logistics of her commute to work in another city (complicated further for those relying on public transportation), limited child care hours, and making it to the food pantry while it is open. Lastly, the restrictions around what is covered by programs like WIC or SNAP can make it difficult for families to access the specific resources needed. Several stories highlighted the exhausting work of navigating these systems, and having to do so over and over.

Like Robyn's story in the previous section, other participants shared that too often – faced with limited resources and impossible decisions – they chose to feed their children first and/or skip meals for themselves entirely to ensure that their children could eat. Fifty percent of survey respondents indicated that they were currently skipping meals to save money.

Again and again, participants and survey respondents identified a need for better food access programs and services. In particular, they identified the need for a more flexible approach to the delivery of and benefits provided by nutrition support programs. For example, participants spoke about a food delivery service, similar to services like Instacart, that could deliver SNAP- and WIC-covered groceries to their home. This delivery model would facilitate convenience equity for families in or near poverty and would have particular impact in areas where families face transportation barriers.

Walking the Line: Benefits Cliffs and Barriers to Assistance

"The 'cliff' is one of the biggest factors that perpetuates food insecurity and other poverty-related issues. [A raise of] 25¢ an hour ends up costing more than the raise you got [due to lost benefits], and then you cannot make it anymore on partial assistance and then end up back on full assistance." – Melessa, Speak Out participant

Many survey respondents and Speak Out participants shared stories about the difficulty of accessing and maintaining the public benefits they needed. Respondents talked about how difficult it was to simply apply for programs like SNAP and HEAP; the documentation and paperwork required is often time-consuming and challenging for families – particularly those experiencing crises. "Filing is quite a task to gather all the information," said one respondent, "People feel lost and hopeless. And the amount is not enough to cover needs."

Other respondents spoke about the precarious nature of their benefits. While some respondents spoke of missing out on benefits they truly needed because their income was “just over the limit,” others shared experiences with the challenges of life on the edge of benefits cliffs.

As one respondent clearly put it, there was no “incentive to get better because even if you find work, you would lose more than you receive. It is a system that is not made to encourage you to get ahead, [and] there is not enough of a safety net for getting off benefits.” As she points out, too often public benefits recipients find themselves trapped in a position where they cannot afford to earn more at their jobs and they cannot afford to exit the public benefits program.

Melessa, whose story about food access was shared above, also spoke about her struggle to exit poverty while relying on public benefits. After getting laid off, Melessa struggled to find work and relied on public programs to help support her family. When she finally found a job – earning just over minimum wage – her family’s SNAP benefit decreased dramatically. At the same time, she now had to pay for after-school care for her children and transportation to her new job. Later, when she received a \$0.25/hour raise, the family lost both their SNAP benefits and free school lunch eligibility. The cost to the family was significantly more than the wage increase, creating a trap for families that is hard to escape. Melessa ended by saying: “For those who insist that people ‘take advantage of the system,’ it is more likely that the [benefits cliff] put them there instead.”

Stigma and Shame in Public Benefits Utilization

“You have to convince the world that you’re worthy of what you need.”

– Sohaib, Speak Out participant

In addition to the systemic and bureaucratic barriers, common across nearly every story shared at the Speak Out was the experience of stigma too often felt by people who use public benefits programs. Participants spoke of the experience of living in poverty as both “humiliating” and “traumatic.”

Many stories touched on the perception of people living in poverty as having made bad life choices that landed them there. Again and again, participants spoke of having “done the right thing, but still finding themselves in poverty;” disproving the myth that poverty can be avoided simply by making “the right choices.”

It is this shame that lingers when individuals experience deep humiliation applying for and utilizing public benefits programs. Several stories detailed negative childhood experiences with public benefits that made them reluctant to access them as adults.

One speaker at the Schenectady Speak Out, Sohaib, talked about struggling as a young adult while living with roommates and scrimping on food to make ends meet. As he faced parenthood in poverty, he acutely felt the shame around being unable to provide for his children. “When I had two kids and had to go to the food pantry, it was the most humiliated I felt,” Sohaib said. A moment that should be recognized as admirable – a parent doing what is necessary to adequately provide for their child – is too often experienced as “humiliating” and difficult. This begs the question: how can we create public systems, and user interfaces of those systems, that are supportive, welcoming, and validating for families?

“There’s no one policy change that can fix child poverty and fix hunger – it’s a whole system that has to change, and a whole orientation. How are we going to fix it? Coming together, lifting up these stories, encouraging others to tell their story. We have to destigmatize the experiences we are going through...and make sure our elected officials are hearing these stories all the time.”

– Rev. West McNeill

Finding a Way: Transportation Access

As in many upstate New York communities, reliable transportation can be a challenge for residents of Schenectady and Rotterdam. Public transportation is available and helpful, but still leaves gaps in families’ needs. For families that own cars, paying for the upkeep and fuel necessary to drive to and from work often presents a significant financial burden.

Many participants discussed choosing to pay for gas or a bus fare to get to work over buying groceries, indicating the stressful balancing act of knowing they needed to get to work to earn their income so that they could buy food. In fact, 40% of survey respondents indicated that access to transportation was a concern for them.

Unreliable access to transportation not only makes it difficult for families to get to work, but also creates a barrier to receiving public benefits or services. Visiting the local Department of Social Services office to apply for needed services and benefits is a critical first step, but in geographic areas with limited public transportation, just getting to the office can be a challenge and a barrier for families.



Accessible, reliable, and convenient public transportation is key to supporting families who are experiencing poverty, for travel to work and to access public benefits and services.

A Life Event Away from Poverty: The Systems that Create a Cycle

As participants shared their stories at the Speak Out and in survey responses, one overarching theme emerged again and again: there are many ways to enter poverty (life events, emergencies, health issues, being born into it), none of which children and families choose. And there are very few ways to exit poverty, none of which are a guarantee (education, working multiple jobs). Someone could “do everything right” and still be one emergency away from entering, or reentering, poverty. Once a family falls into poverty they face multiple forces keeping them there - lack of transportation, lack of food, benefits cliffs, rising costs, and the exhausting labor required just to stay afloat.

Another common theme woven through the testimonies was the generational nature of poverty. Many speakers shared stories of growing up in households that were experiencing poverty, and several spoke about being raised by grandparents who “had not [financially] planned to be raising grandchildren.” They also spoke of the trauma of seeing their parents struggle and try to access public assistance - feelings of shame, being made to feel “lesser than,” having to prove worthiness to receive basic goods like food and housing. This trauma is compounded when participants were able to “escape” their childhood poverty as young adults and then, after becoming parents or experiencing a challenging life event, found themselves “plunged back into poverty.”

This vicious cycle of poverty and food insecurity raises questions about the safety net that can - and should - be built into those key life moments to keep people from falling back into poverty. How can our systems provide a foundation for getting ahead, rather than a trap for remaining stuck?

As Reverend Amaury Tañón-Santos prompted, we must consider “what are the systems that have been put in place that cause our young people to stumble into poverty at the prime of their creative, idealist, energetic selves again and again?”

A Better Future: Considerations for a More Just World

“The stories of food insecurity and poverty are stories of violence; of the journey through disempowerment. These stories are also filled with the hope that it can and should be different - hopefully for them, but definitely for the generations to follow.” - Rev. Dr. Amaury Tañón-Santos

Survey participants were asked what they think a world without poverty would look like. The responses were both practical and visionary, capturing the essential elements families need for stability and security, as well as pieces of community connectivity and support:

- “I would love to see a community where food and shelter is shared - so no one goes hungry or sleeps in the cold. We work together to solve problems and share what we have with each other.”
- “Access to community gardens and green space for growing food.”
- “[A world] where everyone has access to affordable, nourishing foods, reliable public transportation and good healthcare and housing.”
- “There would be less people without what they need, [they could] focus on education and make a better life and the community would get the benefits. Help would be there for addiction, and people could afford housing and be able to work. People could have homes, the economy would be better.”

Families and communities know what is needed to combat child poverty and build a more just, equitable society. Families need better access to food, transportation, housing; they need more money in their pockets, and they need public systems that are easily accessible, flexible, and humane to support them in moments of need.

As New York works toward achieving the goal of the Child Poverty Reduction Act, the experiences of families impacted by poverty must be heard and addressed. Policy solutions should:

- Ease the steep benefit cliffs that keep people in trapped in the cycle of poverty;
- Increase flexibility in how benefits can be used;
- Find ways to get money to families that can easily be used to meet a variety of needs- from allergy-friendly foods to gas to rent;
- Identify ways to make systems and benefits less stigmatizing and easier to access.

This fall, the Child Poverty Reduction Advisory Council is expected to release its recommendations for policies that will meaningfully reduce child poverty. The recommendations should center the solutions that communities have elevated as most impactful in both easing the hardships of poverty, and the ability to overcome it.

A different world is possible, and it is time for New York's policymakers and leaders to listen and to create policies that will make that world a reality.

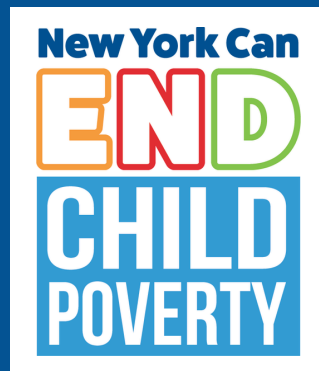
“The telling of our stories is the beginning of organizing and impacting systems of marginalization and disenfranchisement, especially stories around the experience of poverty. Ignoring the experience of poverty is a social and political choice.” – Rev. Dr. Amaury Tañón-Santos

[Learn more at newyorkcan.org](https://www.newyorkcan.org)

Acknowledgements

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NewYorkCan.org



540 Broadway

Albany, New York 12207

Tele. 518-463-1896 Fax 518-463-3364

www.scaany.org