

USDA CUTS TO HIT LI FOOD BANKS

Federal changes will also impact schools in NY

ONLY IN NEWSDAY

BY ROBERT BRODSKY AND DANDAN ZOU
robert.brodsky@newsday.com
dandan.zou@newsday.com

President Donald Trump's administration will not renew a program that Long Island's two largest food banks said provided their organizations with a total of \$2.6 million they used to buy about 2.4 million pounds of locally sourced produce, meat and dairy products for underserved communities.

The U.S. Department of Agriculture announced this week it was eliminating the Local Food Purchase Assistance Cooperative Agreement, which had provided \$420 million nationwide to food banks.

In addition, the agency said it was canceling funding for the Local Food for Schools Cooperative Agreement Program. That \$660 million program provided for the purchases of healthy food from local farmers and suppliers that was served to children through the National School Lunch and School Breakfast programs.

Four school districts on Long Island previously received a total of about \$105,000 of that federal funding, a state education official said Thursday.

The funding cuts come as White House adviser Elon Musk continues to slash spending and federal jobs through the Department of Government Efficiency, or DOGE.

A USDA spokesperson said in an emailed statement the program cancellations weren't "an abrupt shift" and that just last week the agency released "over half a billion in previously obligated funds."

The statement added: "USDA is prioritizing stable, proven solutions that deliver lasting impact. The COVID era is over. USDA's approach to nutrition programs will reflect that reality moving forward."

Last year, the USDA announced it would spend a total of more than \$1 billion to fund



Volunteer George Lutz pulls a cart of grocery boxes at Long Island Cares in Hauppauge on Thursday.

both of the food assistance programs. Under the Biden administration, the USDA had launched the Local Food Purchase Assistance Cooperative Agreement in 2021 to help food banks, along with local growers and producers, respond to the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic.

New York State's Department of Agriculture and Markets received \$25.8 million in program funding in 2022 and \$23.7 million in 2023 for a combined \$49.6 million, Hanna Birkhead, an agency spokeswoman, said in an emailed statement. During those two years, funds were distributed to 114 food service organizations across the state, she said.

The department initially was awarded another \$24 million in funding last year to continue the program, but the USDA canceled that funding, Birkhead said.

"The funding received from the first two rounds of the LFPA . . . is already helping our local food organizations expand their impact on the farmers they support and the families they help feed," she added.

Local food bank cuts

Last year, Island Harvest in Melville was authorized for \$2 million in the USDA funding, while Long Island Cares-The Harry Chapin Regional Food

Bank in Hauppauge was slated for \$650,000, food bank officials said.

"We're very concerned about losing access to the LFPA funding and the pounds of food that it would bring to Long Island," said Gregory May, director of government and community relations for Island Harvest. "We're working with our federal representatives to see if we can continue the program in some shape, form or fashion."

The Trump administration said food banks had until the end of August to spend their existing funds.

May said to date, Island Harvest has spent about \$735,000 of the \$2 million to buy about 882,000 pounds of food. By the end of August, May said, Island Harvest estimates it will purchase roughly 2 million pounds of food with the funds, largely from Suffolk County farmers.

Eliminating that funding source, according to May, will cut off about 10% of the 20 million pounds of food Island Harvest buys annually for Long Island families in need.

Local estimates show more than 221,000 Long Islanders struggle with food insecurity, meaning they don't have reliable access to nutritious food on a daily basis, Newsday previously reported. That problem,

May said, will only grow if the nation enters an economic downturn or a recession.

Long Island Cares CEO Paule Pachter said the organization received \$650,000 through the USDA program in recent weeks. He said Thursday the loss of that funding possibility in the future was "no reason for alarm" but "reason for concern."

Pachter said the nonprofit planned to use the \$650,000 to buy 430,000 pounds of food through August — representing 2.6% of the 16 million pounds of food it buys annually.

Long Island school funding

The USDA announced in October 2022 that New York schools would get nearly \$12 million in funding under the now-canceled Local Food for Schools program. The funds ultimately went to 159 school districts statewide, according to the New York State Education Department.

The department also said Thursday that on Long Island, four Suffolk districts have received a combined \$104,825 under the program. They included more than \$49,000 to Copiague Union Free School District, just under \$42,000 to Three Village Central School District, nearly \$11,000 to Southampton Union Free School District and almost

WHAT NEWSDAY FOUND

■ **The Trump administration will not renew a program** that Long Island's two largest food banks said provided their organizations with a total of \$2.6 million for produce, meat and dairy products.

■ **The U.S. Department of Agriculture is eliminating the Local Food Purchase Assistance Cooperative Agreement**, which had provided \$420 million nationwide to food banks.

■ **The USDA also said it was canceling funding** for the \$660 million Local Food for Schools Cooperative Agreement Program.

\$3,000 to Tuckahoe Common School District.

Southampton schools Superintendent Fatima Morrell said in a statement Thursday evening the district was "disappointed to hear that the program is ending." The other districts didn't immediately respond to requests for comment on program cuts.

Before the program's elimination, the state was slated to receive another \$27.7 million in funding, department spokesman JP O'Hare said in an emailed statement.

"This funding was intended to be allocated over the next three years, supplementing the regular meal reimbursements that schools typically receive," O'Hare said.

The Virginia-based nonprofit School Nutrition Association said the cuts nationwide to the program will severely limit student access to healthy meals.

"The Local Food for Schools program has enabled chronically underfunded school meal programs to purchase fresh, local options for student meals," Shannon Gleave, the nonprofit's president, said in a statement. She also called the cuts a loss for students and "a huge blow to community farmers and ranchers."

CDC DIRECTOR
NOMINATION
WITHDRAWN

A20