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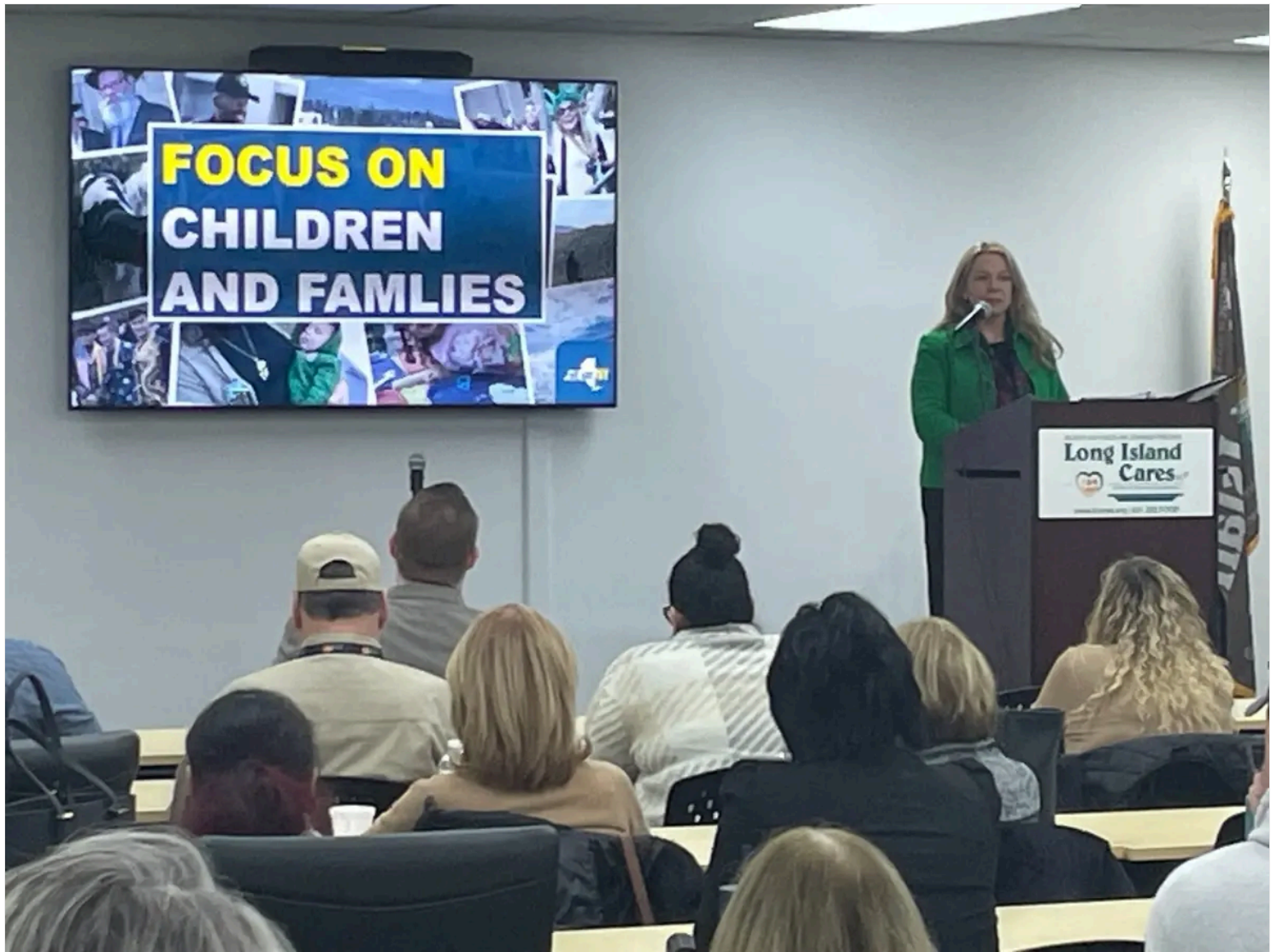
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LI Cares Lauds Free Breakfast, Lunch For School Children In Proposed NYS Budget

"Families having a tough time making ends meet will now get the money back they would be spending on school meals," an LI Cares VP said.



Michael DeSantis, Patch Staff



of Temporary and Disability Assistance)

HAUPPAUGE, NY — Free breakfast and lunch for 2.7 million school children across New York state — regardless of household income — is included in the proposed New York State budget for fiscal year 2026, which runs April 1 through March 1, 2026, according to state officials.

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The Universal School Meals plan would save New York families an estimated \$165 on groceries per child each month, Barbara Guinn, commissioner of New York State Office of Temporary and Disability Assistance, told Long Island Cares officials at a meeting held Tuesday.

Long Island Cares, a regional food bank striving to end hunger and food insecurity on Long Island, lauded the planned state initiative. Food bank officials say the proposal will open access to free meals for more students, remove associated stigmas, and save families money.

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Guinn said Gov. Kathy Hochul has made combating food insecurity a "priority "

"Governor Hochul's initiative is estimated to cover the cost of school meals for an additional 300,000 students and save families \$165 on groceries per child each month," Guinn said. "This proposal builds on the Governor's affordability agenda and will help save parents money, address food insecurity among New York kids, and create more opportunities for students to succeed."

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The New York State Legislature has until April 1 to vote on the proposed budget.

Schoolchildren currently receive free lunch, a reduced price lunch or pay full price for lunch depending on their family's income relative to poverty level.

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Michael Haynes, vice president of Government Relations, Advocacy, & Social Policy at Long Island Cares, Inc. — The Harry Chapin Food Bank, said many children decline to participate in the school lunch program because they believe

"By making school meals free and accessible to all the stigma is removed, which means the students who need this help the most are more likely to participate," Haynes told Patch.

Haynes said he does not view the initiative as "new," but rather a correction and expansion upon a system already in place which "currently leaves too many people out."

Many schools in New York offer free school meals to all through a federal option called the Community Eligibility Provision (CEP) which is available to districts serving a large number of low-income students, Haynes said.

"The problem here is that nearly 600 schools in suburban and rural areas of the state are not eligible for CEP," Haynes said. "This has led to 280,000 students, primarily on Long Island and in the Hudson Valley, remaining without access to free school meals."

Haynes said "these are expensive times," and because of "flawed federal poverty guidelines," a lot of people who need help do not qualify for assistance.

"Families having a tough time making ends meet will now get the money back they would be spending on school meals," Haynes said, pointing to the \$165 per child per month estimation.

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Haynes said [studies conclude](#) that free school meals have been shown to "support learning, [boost test scores](#), and improve attendance and classroom behavior."

"Also, healthy school meals can help to reduce family debt by mitigating the financial burden on families struggling to afford nutritious food for their kids,"

schools who can now get back to focusing on learning and worry less about debt collection."

Hochul's budget proposal creates a new baseline for the Hunger Prevention and Nutrition Assistance Program (HPNAP), Haynes said. Long Island Cares administers the program on behalf of the state for both Suffolk and Nassau counties.

The proposed 2025 fiscal year state budget funded HPNAP at \$34.5M. However, the final version of the adopted budget funded the program at \$57,797,000, according to Haynes. This year, the fiscal year 2026 proposed executive budget is set to fund HPNAP at \$57,797,000.

"By increasing the baseline by \$23M, the governor is acknowledging the great work of food banks across the state and the severity of the hunger crisis we currently find ourselves in," Haynes said.

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Haynes said if the HPNAP baseline increase is enacted, it would be "monumental" for food banks across the state, as they would no longer have to fight to preserve the funding level from the previous year.

"Food banks are striving to meet the need despite rising demand for our services and rising food costs," Haynes said. "Raising the baseline acknowledges this reality, and we commend Gov. Hochul for proposing a budget which recognizes what food banks across the state have been facing for five years."

The proposed budget would also earmark \$55 million for Nourish New York, a program that provides money to regional food banks. The food banks in turn must use the money to purchase from New York state farmers.

The \$55 million in Nourish NY funding is "essentially the same" as the enacted budget from last year, Haynes said.

"We were able to distribute greater than two million pounds of locally sourced produce, meats, and dairy products with this level of funding in 2024 and can anticipate distributing similar quantities this year," Haynes said. "This was an emergency program created to provide economic stimulus for farmers and equip food banks with additional nutritional foods during COVID, and we are grateful this has since become a permanent program equipping us with the resources needed to keep pace with sustained increases in demand and facilitating stronger relationships with local producers."

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Nourish NY has allowed Long Island Cares and other food banks to secure fresh produce from local and upstate farms; items like apples, potatoes, onions, carrots, poultry, beef, fish, yogurt, milk, eggs, and more.

"We look to support the Long Island economy and our local farmers whenever possible," said Robert LaBarbara, vice president for Operations and Procurement at Long Island Cares. "The funding is a critical part of our food plan for healthy, nutritious food."

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Patch has partnered with Feeding America since 2020 to help raise awareness in our local communities of hunger, a persistent national problem exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic. Feeding America, which supports 200 food banks and 60,000 local meals programs across the country, estimates that nearly 34 million people, including 9 million children — about 1 in 6 Americans — are living with food insecurity. This is a Patch social good project; Feeding America receives 100 percent of donations. [Find out how you can donate in your](#)