

**KATHY HOCHUL**  
Governor

**ANN MARIE T. SULLIVAN, M.D.**  
Commissioner

**MOIRA TASHJIAN, MPA**  
Executive Deputy Commissioner

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Dear New York State Mental Health Professionals and Provider Agencies:

March is National Nutrition Month, a time to celebrate health and wellness, and to focus on making informed food choices, developing sound eating habits, and promoting consistent food security. The U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) notes that food security “means that all Americans have consistent and equitable access to healthy, safe, affordable foods essential to optimal health and well-being.” Unfortunately, too many people live with food insecurity, when the availability of nutritionally adequate foods is limited or uncertain, most often because of financial constraints.

### **Why Food Insecurity Matters to Health and Mental Health Professionals**

According to a recent report by State Comptroller Thomas DiNapoli, food insecurity affects 1 in 10 (about 800,000) households in New York State. Food insecurity is more common in households headed by black non-Hispanics or Hispanics, with income levels near or below the poverty level, located in rural areas or certain metropolitan areas, or with a working-age adult with a disability, including a mental health disability.

Food insecurity is a “social determinant of health” that is linked to a higher probability of obesity, diabetes, hypertension, cardiovascular disease, stroke, cancer, hepatitis, asthma, arthritis, chronic obstructive pulmonary disease, kidney disease, and mental illnesses.

Chronic stress experienced by food insecure individuals may render them more likely to develop behavioral disorders. A survey of low-income families at the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic demonstrated food insecurity is significantly more likely to contribute to mental illness than job loss. Moreover, researchers have demonstrated an association between food insecurity and increased depression, anxiety, and utilization of psychiatric emergency services among individuals with serious mental illness (SMI). Those with SMI have remarkably high rates of food insecurity.

### **New York’s Efforts to Support Food Security and Healthy Eating for Individuals with SMI**

The OMH Office of Prevention and Health Initiatives is entering the second year of a two-year pilot aimed to combat food insecurity among people with serious mental illnesses, through increasing skills, access, and affordability. The project team partnered with two agencies that house New Yorkers with SMI to deliver a healthy foods curriculum adapted for their clients. To increase physical access to healthy foods, Mobile Farmers Market vendors were dispatched to these residential programs. This initiative helped to provide nutrition incentives and engage residents and residential staff in learning about purchasing, preparing, and consuming healthy foods. To address affordability, the NYS Department of Agriculture and Markets helped ensure clients had the purchasing power to enjoy healthy foods through its [FreshConnect](#) Check nutrition incentive program which increases the purchasing power of food stamps when used at

participating farmers' markets. More projects like this are needed to address food and nutrition insecurity among individuals with SMI.

### **We All Have a Role in Addressing Food Insecurity**

As mental health professionals, we have a role to play in advising our patients and their families about a healthy diet given that food-related risk factors can provoke and exacerbate mental illnesses and medical comorbidities. Referrals to food and nutrition assistance programs, local food pantries, and nutrition professionals can be part of our service planning in support of food security.

I wish you all a happy and healthy eating *National Nutrition Month!*

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Ann Marie T. Sullivan, M.D.", written in a cursive style.

Ann Marie T. Sullivan, M.D.  
Commissioner