



**MET
COUNCIL**

Virtual Listening Session
on Food Insecurity in
Kosher- and Halal-Observant
Communities



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Abstract

Met Council is America's largest Jewish non-profit organization dedicated to fighting poverty. Founded 50 years ago in New York City, we provide comprehensive social services to people in need.

Today, we operate the largest kosher food distribution program in the world. Our network serves an average of 95 pantries a month, 20 of which are halal emergency food pantries. These pantries serve approximately 200,000 people monthly. While our emergency food network serves all who are hungry, we specialize in the provision of emergency food that meets the cultural and religious dietary needs of food insecure kosher- and halal-observant households. We combine our expertise in the rules of kosher and halal dietary restrictions with innovative technology to ensure that efficiency, dignity, and nutrition remain paramount as we help people access needed food.

Met Council on Jewish Poverty hosted a Virtual Listening Session including 70 participants from Jewish and Muslim emergency food pantries in eight states and 10 cities.

On July 11, 2022, we convened a virtual listening session to hear from pantries across the country who also specialize in providing emergency food to kosher- and halal-observant Americans. Of the 70 participants in attendance, nearly all worked in or had been served by pantries that serve Jewish and Muslim communities that adhere to kosher and halal diets. In addition to New York based pantries, pantries from ten cities across eight different states contributed to the discussion. Ninety-five percent of those in attendance had not previously participated in a listening session for the conference. All were excited to have their voices heard on how to build more equity and dignity into the nation's emergency food system, which has long underserved Jewish and Muslim Americans who have religiously informed dietary requirements.



Over the course of an hour and a half, attendees answered polling questions intended to collect quantitative data on direct service work and participated in small group discussions framed around four of the five pillars laid out by the White House, while focusing on the specific needs of kosher- and halal-observant communities. The group then reconvened for one large discussion to share feedback from their breakout rooms and consider policy ideas that would have the greatest impact on ending hunger in their communities.

Our nation's emergency feeding system is not designed to meet the needs of kosher- and halal- observant households.

Above all, participants in our listening session repeatedly emphasized the fact that USDA and Feeding America affiliated food banks across the country consistently lack the necessary competency as it relates to Jewish and Muslim cultures and dietary requirements. This failure has resulted in a system that has inadvertently discriminated against millions of Jewish and Muslim Americans who have religiously informed dietary requirements. Our nation's emergency feeding system is not designed to meet the needs of kosher- and halal- observant households.

Food Banks don't adequately understand kosher and halal requirements, certification needs, or cultural norms and preferences to provide sufficient support to pantries that serve these clients and, as a result, they not only do not have the right product but also don't have systems and procedures designed with these needs in mind. It is, therefore, incredibly difficult for these pantries to rely on Food Banks to provide their communities with healthy and appropriate food. ***USDA should create a designated office to focus on the specific needs of these communities and rectify the inequity that has persisted in our nation's emergency feeding system. Doing so would have a transformational impact on ending hunger in America and it encompasses many of the policy recommendations in our report.***

White House Conference Pillars & Policy Suggestions

After robust conversations, participants suggested the following policy changes:

GROUP RECOMMENDATION

Establish an office of kosher and halal within the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) to monitor programs and funding to ensure that healthy, culturally appropriate food is made available to pantries serving kosher- and halal-adherent communities.

Policy recommendations as guided by the following pillars:

Pillar

1

Improve
Food
Access

Remove The Emergency Food Assistance Program (TEFAP) attestation requirements or replace these individual attestations with a community eligibility standard.

Increase access to Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) benefits.

Pillar

2

Integrate
Nutrition &
Health

Have USDA invest in infrastructure to support the storage and distribution of fresh food commodities while increasing the availability of fresh and healthy food.

Pillar

3

Enhance
Nutrition &
Food Security
Research

Develop a grant program for pantries that will allow emergency food providers to invest in digital choice ordering and scheduling platforms as well as the necessary technological upgrades and staff training that would allow these systems to function.

Pillar

5

Empower
Consumers
with Access to
Healthy
Choices

Require USDA's Economic Research Service (ERS) to conduct research and monitor trends in kosher and halal emergency food need in collaboration with non-profit research organizations.

Introduction

Nearly 11 million Jewish and Muslim Americans live in the United States.¹ Recent studies found that a third of all Muslim American families live near or below the poverty line, and more than one-quarter of American Jews had trouble paying for essential bills, including medical care, housing costs, and food.² Yet, Muslim and Jewish Americans do not have the same access to emergency food that all other Americans are afforded. *We believe that the upcoming White House Conference must consider the unique issues and concerns of programs that serve clients with religiously informed dietary needs.* To ensure that these voices are heard, Met Council held a partner-led convening on July 11, 2022, of kosher and halal direct service providers from across the country for a listening session inspired by the *White House Partner Led Convening Toolkit*.

Met Council on Jewish Poverty was founded 50 years ago in New York City as a social service organization committed to fighting poverty. Today, in addition to operating the largest kosher food program in the United States, we offer comprehensive wrap around services by providing benefits access support, affordable housing, services for seniors and holocaust survivors, family violence intervention, and crisis management.

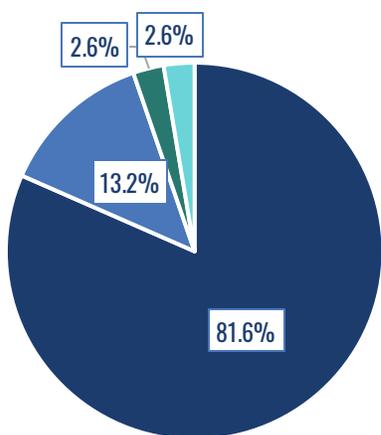
Our emergency food program is available to anyone struggling with food insecurity, but what makes this program unique is that we offer exclusively kosher and halal food commodities through our food bank-inspired operation and direct service pantry programs. Our 22,000 square foot warehouse enables us to store and distribute millions of pounds of kosher and halal emergency food to an average of nearly 100 pantries a month throughout the tri-state area. We also operate a mobile pantry, hub-and-spoke localized distribution centers, a home delivery program for frail seniors, and leverage best-in-class technology to support an online ordering platform, which we call our digital pantry. Through all our food programs we feed, on average, 200,000 food-insecure New Yorkers every month.





As experts in providing kosher and halal food to families across the tri-state area, we've come to understand the unique barriers to access that our clients and food programs like ours confront. Met Council's food policy team engages kosher and halal emergency food service providers throughout the country to share best practices, conduct research, author reports, and work with our partners in government to advance legislative, budgetary, and administrative solutions that will lead to a more equitable emergency feeding system, one that better accounts for people with religious dietary restrictions.

How often do you serve clients that adhere to religious dietary restrictions?



- Often
- Sometimes
- Seldom
- Never

We support President Biden's goal to end hunger by 2030 and are proud to be working with his administration as well as other partners in Congress, including members of the New York delegation, Representative Debbie Wasserman Schulz, and Representative Jim McGovern to address barriers to access in the emergency feeding system. We have participated in several listening sessions and planning calls related to the upcoming White House Conference on Hunger, Nutrition, and Health. Additionally, over the last year our policy team has met with the USDA Food and Nutrition Service numerous times to advocate for policies that would enhance service to those requiring kosher and halal foods.

Met Council's food policy team engages kosher and halal emergency food service providers throughout the country...



Listening Session

goals and description

The chief goal of this session was to collect direct input and data from kosher and halal pantry providers, as well as those with lived experience, and to recommend to the White House policy proposals that would serve to reduce hunger by 2030. To accomplish this, we invited more than 120 kosher and halal direct service providers from the New York region and across the country. Altogether, 70 participants from eight states, representing 10 cities attended our session. We framed our discussion around four of the five pillars provided by the White House but focused our questions on the specific needs of kosher- and halal- observant communities.



Use the partner led convening toolkit to craft questions about kosher and halal emergency food service.



Solicit input from kosher and halal direct service providers across the United States.



Draft policy solutions and conference topics directly informed by input from our network.

Our session included three breakout rooms for smaller group discussions, and we leveraged technology to conduct polling questions that allowed us to collect quantitative data on direct service work, in addition to the qualitative data that was shared in the discussion sessions. Over the course of an hour and a half, participants from across the country offered their *expert opinions on how to increase access to healthy and religiously appropriate emergency food, how government funding and requirements affect food pantries, how data and technology can be leveraged to address food insecurity, and how the federal government can address inequity* in our feeding system to better support pantries that serve kosher- and halal- observant households.

Discussion Questions



Session 1 Questions

1. Do current government food programs support the religious and/or cultural needs of the clients you serve? If so, how? If not, what would you like to see improved?
2. What challenges are unique to your community that keep people from accessing emergency food?
3. What are the challenges you face in making healthy food accessible to your clients?
4. How do you address — or would you like to better address — barriers to accessing your services? And what, if any, role does technology play in that?

Session 2 Questions

1. What are some of the obstacles you encounter when trying to access funding or food products from public resources to feed your clients?
 - a) Are these obstacles with funding or resources from the City, State, or Federal government? All or some of the aforementioned?
 - b) Do these obstacles inhibit your ability to provide a balanced pantry bag or meet MyPlate standards? Is MyPlate applicable to your community, or is it a burden?
 - c) Have program reporting requirements impacted your ability to access government funding or food sources?
2. The White House is interested in data-driven decision making, using service statistics, the census, and polling. What information would help you reach more people or better understand the communities you serve?
3. Are there any new trends among your community that you are seeing? If so, what have you seen? More clients/Fewer clients, more/less need per household, younger/older, more/fewer families, etc.?

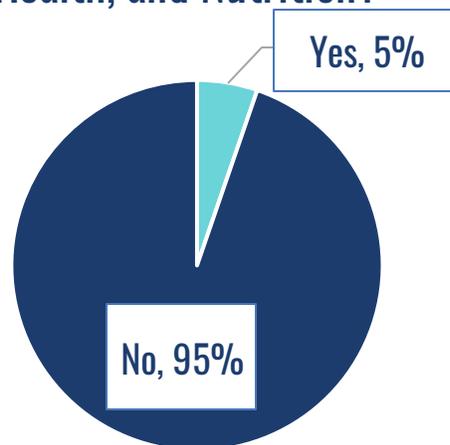
Challenges for Providers *of kosher and halal emergency food*

To our knowledge, ours is the only convening of this kind, as 95 percent of our attendees reported that they had not participated in a White House listening session before and many told us that they had not heard about the conference prior to our invitation. Yet, these pantries are on the frontlines of hunger in America. Hundreds of thousands of Americans rely on them every week. It's important to understand the invaluable role these pantries play in their communities because, without the kosher and halal food they provide, their clients would have nowhere else to turn.

All the providers who participated in our session expressed concern about how the expiration of pandemic relief coupled with rapid inflation and slow economic recovery have placed greater demands on their food pantries. As consumer costs have risen, so have clients' reliance on pantries to sustain their families. Of our attendees, ***95 percent reported serving as many or more clients in 2022 than they did in 2021.*** Unlike earlier in the pandemic, this year, pantries are struggling to serve more clients with dwindling government support.

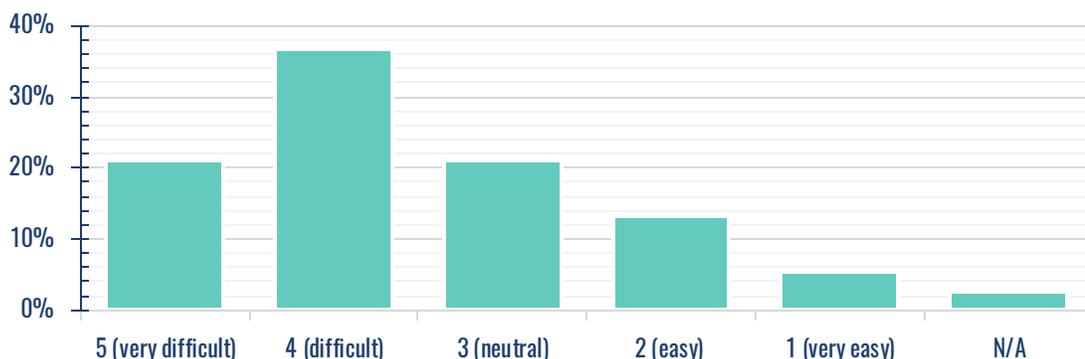
Nationally, relief programs established at the start of the pandemic to support economically insecure Americans are expiring. To offset diminished public support, the providers who attended our listening session have increasingly grown to depend on philanthropy and private purchasing. Unfortunately, inflation has made the money they are able to obtain less powerful.

Have you already participated in a listening session for the WH conference on Hunger, Health, and Nutrition?





On a scale of 1-5 how difficult is it for your organization to create a balanced kosher/halal pantry bag that includes vegetables, fruits, grain, dairy, and protein?



While these challenges are no doubt felt by emergency food providers across the country, the communities served by our network are more acutely impacted. For example, Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) only approves one baby formula that is certified kosher. Until very recently, the TEFAP commodities list only required six products to have kosher certifications and one to have a halal certification. TEFAP is supposed to be the baseline that makes up a pantry, but for kosher and halal pantries it does not come close to providing an adequate, nutritious baseline.

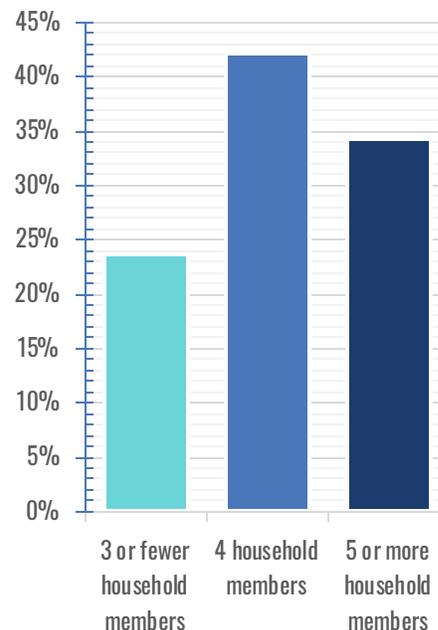
Recently, TEFAP announced they'll be adding three additional canned products to the kosher list, which is meaningful progress. However, as it stands there will be ***only nine products, out of 133 available to other providers, that are required to have a kosher certification, and just one that is required to be halal certified.*** There is no acknowledgement of this disparity in the federal funding allocation. There is also no mechanism in the system for prioritizing that kosher and halal pantries receive kosher and halal items. Although kosher and halal pantries cannot utilize over 120 of the TEFAP products, we do not receive additional monetary support to compensate for this imbalance. ***Put plainly, the emergency feeding system as its designed is unfair to those who require kosher and halal food.***

With less access to government food sources and no additional federal funding, our pantries are increasingly reliant on philanthropy and private purchasing to procure kosher and halal certified food commodities, which can be more expensive than their non-certified analogues at both the consumer and the commercial level. Participants in our session talked about the struggle to afford fresh or frozen proteins.



In the last fiscal year, Met Council has begun engaging in collective purchasing with agencies of a similar capacity to obtain lower pricing, even at times lower than the contracts New York State is able to achieve. However, most of the providers we spoke to across the country do not have this ability. As such, *pantries that serve communities only able to eat kosher or halal food have less purchasing power than pantries serving communities without religious dietary restrictions.* Thus, pantries that provide kosher and halal food are not able to procure and provide as much food for their communities as their non-kosher/non-halal counterparts.

Average household size of the clients you serve.



Exacerbating these challenges, many Jewish and Muslim households are multigenerational and larger than the average American household. More than one-third of our attendees reported that the average household size for their clients is five or more. Seventy-one percent said that the families they serve are composed of young children, adolescents, adults, and seniors all within one household. To accommodate these demographics, pantries must not only provide enough food to accommodate household size but also account for the difference in nutritional needs across a large age range when packing pantry bags. All of this is made more difficult by not having equal access to the funding and products available to general service pantries.

The fact is that kosher and halal pantries receive less support from the federal government than other pantries due to the lack of kosher and halal product availability. When asked if our attendees get sufficient government support to operate their pantries, 89 percent disagreed, and 58 percent reported that it was either difficult (37 percent) or very difficult (21 percent) to pack a balanced pantry bag with their current inventories. Clearly, *existing government support doesn't adequately meet the needs of the food insecure kosher- and halal-adherent population.*

Group Policy

Recommendations

During our two breakout sessions, we posed a series of questions designed to solicit feedback for any pantry in America. Their responses, anecdotes, and unique challenges yielded the following policy recommendations. Each of these corresponds to the pillars outlined in the toolkit provided by the White House to facilitate this session.

Policy Solutions to Support Culturally Responsive Emergency Food Providers

Establish an office of Kosher and Halal within USDA to monitor programs and funding to ensure that healthy, culturally appropriate food is made available to pantries serving kosher- and halal-adherent communities.

“Requirements for appropriate food products differ widely among Jewish community members, and many Jewish food pantry patrons will exercise extreme caution in selecting their food to ensure it meets their kosher requirements. For this reason, among others, it is not enough that the product be appropriate, but that it also be offered by providers who operate in culturally competent and relevant ways.”

- Rabbi David Niederman, President of the United Jewish Organizations of Williamsburg and North Brooklyn

This solution speaks to multiple pillars of the conference. Many participants in our listening session highlighted the fact that USDA and Food Banks across the country consistently lack the relevant and necessary competency in Jewish and Muslim cultures, exacerbating the challenges in acquiring and distributing healthy food to their clients. ***Presently, TEFAP only has six items on their commodities list that are required to be kosher and one that is required to be halal, and WIC approves only one baby formula that is certified kosher.***

Additionally, Food Banks don't have knowledge of kosher and halal requirements, certification needs, cultural norms and preferences, or the necessary system to reflect product information accurately, all which makes it extremely difficult for pantries to rely on them to provide their communities with appropriate food. Creating an office to address the specific needs of kosher- and halal-observant Americans would significantly help address hunger in these communities and would facilitate many of the policy recommendations listed below.

Pillar 1: Improve Food Access

Remove TEFAP income attestation requirements or replace these individual attestations with a community eligibility standard.

Nearly all our participants agreed that TEFAP income attestation requirements should be removed or replaced, as they currently create a barrier for clients who need food. These attestations force clients, who are often distrusting of government, to divulge personal information. Many clients find this process intimidating and invasive, and as a result are scared to access services. Others don't meet eligibility requirements because income attestation does not reflect variable costs of living throughout the U.S.

Lastly, the reporting requirements associated with the TEFAP income attestation are onerous for pantry staff and detract from their ability to serve clients. Pantries have limited time, personnel, and resources and are not provided additional compensation to support the paperwork associated with TEFAP, which they're required to file and store for three years in addition to being subjected to audits.

Increase access to Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) benefits.

Participants emphasized their pantries' role in providing emergency food to the “working poor.”

Increasingly, pantries are being utilized by individuals who don't qualify for government benefits such as SNAP because these programs fail to account for the variance in cost of living across the country. Most Jewish and Muslim Americans live in major metropolitan cities where the cost of living is higher; they also tend to have larger families.³ When they attempt to earn enough to support their families, clients often lose access to public benefits. *Recently, Met Council surveyed 290 clients at six different pantry sites and found that 60 percent of our clients who did not receive SNAP were not eligible for the program.*

To improve access to food, the government must make significant changes to SNAP, including broadening eligibility, reducing barriers to enrollment, and increasing SNAP benefit levels.

Pillar 2: Integrate Nutrition and Health

Invest in infrastructure to support the storage and distribution of fresh food commodities while increasing the availability of fresh and healthy food.

While we recognize that USDA recently provided \$100 million to fund infrastructure grants throughout the country, in our experience, this funding has remained at the Food Bank level and does not account for the need for continued funding that would support a pantry's expanded storage, refrigeration, as well as the ongoing costs associated with the maintenance and monitoring of these systems.

We repeatedly heard from participants that their pantries want to stock more fresh produce and proteins, but they lack the equipment and storage space to do so.

Accordingly, many of the pantries who attended our session disproportionately relied on canned products, which are often higher in sodium and sugar, to feed their clients. Funding for equipment such as refrigerators and freezers as well as dollars to support the ongoing operation and maintenance, would allow pantries to store and distribute nutrient rich produce such as leafy greens or eggs that require refrigeration, increasing the availability of such foods for clients.

Expectations for availability differ for Muslim community members. Many Muslim food pantry patrons exercise caution in selecting food options and prefer whole foods so they can supplement their halal diet with ingredients they know with confidence to be permissible. “Frozen, canned, or cooked food is less accommodating for some community members who may experience skepticism about the contents of more processed food.”

*- Maia Dillane, Director of Research & Evaluation,
Arab-American Family Support Center*

Pillar 3: Empower Consumers with Access to Healthy Choices

Develop a grant program for pantries that will allow emergency food providers to invest in digital choice ordering and scheduling platforms as well as the necessary technological upgrades and staff training that would allow these systems to function.

Met Council's Digital Pantry system allows clients to engage in client choice from their homes, offices, and anywhere in between. This system allows us to translate products in multiple languages, use pictures when language barriers are still a concern, pre-package orders, and schedule pick-up times. At every step along the way, this system empowers consumers to get the food they need when they need it and can be adapted to include other information such as recipes, referrals, and other information that will support healthy choices. Pantries that have adopted this system, and the clients they serve, laud the efficiencies and programmatic improvements this technology offers.

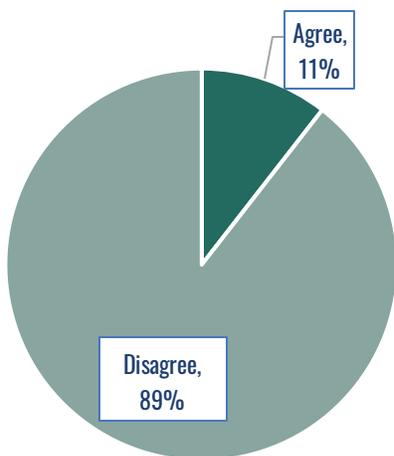
Specifically, the pantries we work with, that serve communities with diverse cultural needs, can list each product and its specific certification right on the ordering platform. In addition, with appropriate investment, such platforms can be intentionally linked with programs like ProjectDash, allowing the barrier of transportation to be seamlessly addressed for those clients who are homebound or otherwise unable to access a physical pantry. Considering the recent Build Back Better plan and the investment this administration has made in technology, training, and broadband infrastructure, a system of this kind could and should be scaled nationwide.

Do you operate a client-choice pantry (not pre-packed food bags)?	
Yes	58%
No	29%
Sometimes	13%

Pillar 5: Ensure Nutrition and Food Security Research

USDA's Economic Research Service (ERS) should conduct research and monitor trends in kosher and halal emergency food need while also working with non-profit research organizations to conduct data disaggregation, analysis, and outreach.

Agree or disagree with the following statement: Your organization gets sufficient government support to operate your pantry.



Census data does not account for the needs of these culturally distinct ethnic communities, and both communities also have genuine concerns about privacy that must be accounted for when considering data collection. USDA ERS plays a critical role in national research on food security metrics in the U.S. This body must expand their research focus to include analysis of communities and households that adhere to religiously informed diets and the organizations tasked with supporting them.

In conducting this work, which is sensitive, USDA ERS should support the work of non-profit research firms that study Jewish and Muslim populations.

To understand the unique needs of these communities we propose that ERS work with trusted non-profit partners who have already worked in this space, to collect appropriate data on food insecurity as it relates to communities with religious dietary restrictions.



Conclusion

Met Council was proud to host a partner-led convening in anticipation of the upcoming White House Conference, bringing together kosher and halal pantries from across the country to share their ideas on how to end hunger in their communities. Based on decades of experience in food benefits access and kosher and halal emergency food procurement and distribution, participants in our convening proposed solutions to address inequality, expand food access, and leverage data and technology to close the gaps in our emergency feeding system and meet the President's goal of ending hunger in America by 2030.

Sadly, millions of Americans go to bed hungry every night, including Americans with religiously informed diets. *They deserve a better emergency food system that is culturally responsive, innovative, and adaptive, and reflects the religious diversity which makes this nation great.* Met Council, our pantry network, and our partners across the country rely disproportionately on private food donations and philanthropy. *We need adequate support from USDA and the federal government to continue to meet the needs of kosher- and halal-observant Americans.*

Through our work with White House Staff, USDA FNS, Representative McGovern, Representative Wasserman-Schultz, and the members of the New York Delegation, we have been able to share the challenges our network faces and work towards sustainable long-term solutions to end hunger in our communities. *While we are grateful to all those who have heard our message, long-term policy solutions are still needed.*

We thank President Biden for creating this conference and the guidelines for holding partner led convenings, and we look forward to continuing to work towards a robust and productive conference this September.



Acknowledgements

On behalf of Met Council CEO David Greenfield, Co-Presidents Joseph Allerhand and Ben Tisch, and Chair Richard Mack, a special thanks is extended to the following individuals for their work in researching and authoring this report: Dara Adams, Jessica Chait, Malka Himelhoch, Dickran Jebejian, Jennifer Rosenberg, and Gabrielle Williams.

Met Council also recognizes the important contributions to this report made by the following staff members: Malka Chu, Aaron Cyperstein, Rebecca Glass, Carla Kay, Hannah Lupien, Shannon McChesney, Rob Newman, Leah Nomkin, Benjamin Segal, and Benjamin Zaiantz.

Additionally, Met Council would like to acknowledge Congressman Jim McGovern's Office and the New York City Congressional Delegation for their leadership. Much appreciation is extended to Klein Johnson Group and Downfield for their guidance.

We're most grateful to UJA-Federation of New York, New York Community Trust, and all the participants in the July 11, 2022 virtual listening session; Aishel Shabbat, Arab American Family Support Center, Be Proud Inc., Bnai Raphael Chesed Organization, Inc., Boro Park Chesed Center - Met Council, Chabad F.R.E.E. NYC, Commonpoint Queens - Sam Field Y, Council of Jewish Organizations Staten Island, Crown Heights Jewish Community Council, Flatbush Community Fund, Hannah Kosher Foods, Hebrew Educational Society, Islamic Circle of North America Relief USA, Jewish Community Council of Canarsie, Jewish Community Council of Greater Coney Island, Jewish Community Council of Marine Park, Jewish Community Council of Pelham Parkway, Inc, Jewish Community Council of Rockaway Peninsula, Jewish Community Council of Staten Island, Jewish Community Council of Washington Heights Inwood, Jewish Family & Children's Service of Greater Mercer County, Jewish Family and Career Services Atlanta, Jewish Family and Community Services Pittsburgh, Squirrel Hill Food Pantry, Jewish Family Service Association of Cleveland, Jewish Family Service Cincinatti, Jewish Family Service of Central NJ, Jewish Family Service of South Florida, Jewish Family Services of Greater Kansas City, Jewish Federations of North America, Kehilat Sephardim Food Pantry, Kinyen Torah, Maot Chitim of Greater Chicago, Inc, Metropolitan Russian American Parents Association, Musliim Ummah of North America Social Services, NYC Comptroller's Office, Ohel Children's Home and Family Services, Pathway Study Center Inc, Preston Court Pantry - Met Council, Project Hospitality, Queens Jewish Community Council, Inc., Rav Chesed, Shaarei Menachem, Shalom Senior Center, Shomray Habreet, Shorefront Jewish Community Council, Talmud Torah Bobov, The Hope Center Development Corporation, The Marion & Aaron Gural Jewish Community Council, Triumphant Deliverance COG, United Jewish Council of the East Side, Inc., Urban Outreach Center, and Yad Ezra.

Published, July 2022, Met Council.

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End Notes

¹ Pew Research Center estimates that in 2020 the Jewish Population was about 7.5 million. Previously, Pew estimated the Muslim population was 3.45 million in 2017 (this figure was expected to increase to 3.85 million by 2020, but no new estimates have been reported). "Jewish Americans in 2020." *Pew Research Center's Religion & Public Life Project* (blog), May 11, 2021.

<https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2021/05/11/jewish-americans-in-2020/>;

"1. Demographic Portrait of Muslim Americans." *Pew Research Center's Religion & Public Life Project* (blog), July 26, 2017.

<https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2017/07/26/demographic-portrait-of-muslim-americans/>.

² "Community in the Time of Corona: Documenting the American Muslim Response to the COVID-19 Crisis | ISPU," May 18, 2020,

<https://www.ispu.org/community-in-the-time-of-corona-documenting-the-american-muslim-response-to-the-covid19-crisis/>. "Jewish Americans in 2020," *Pew Research Center's Religion & Public Life Project* (blog), May 11, 2021, 197, <https://www.pewforum.org/2021/05/11/jewish-americans-in-2020/>.

³ Estimate of average population percentage based on the combined average population percentages sourced from Brandies 2020 American Jewish Population Project estimates and the Association of Religion Data Archives 2010 within the following MSAs; New York City-Newark-Jersey City, NY-NJ-PA, Los Angeles-Long Beach-Anaheim, CA, Miami-Fort Lauderdale-West Palm Beach, FL, Chicago-Naperville-Elgin, IL-IN-WI, Philadelphia-Camden-Wilmington, PA-NJ-DE-MD, Boston-Cambridge-Newton, MA-NH, Washington-Arlington-Alexandria, DC-VA-MD-WV, San Francisco-Oakland-Berkeley, CA, Phoenix-Mesa-Chandler, AZ, Atlanta-Sandy Springs-Alpharetta, GA, Dallas-Fort Worth-Arlington, TX, Detroit-Warren-Dearborn, MI, Seattle-Tacoma-Bellevue, WA, Houston-The Woodlands-Sugar Land, TX.



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Met Council is America's largest Jewish charity dedicated to serving the needy. Met Council's ten different departments are staffed by experts who helped over 305,000 clients in 2020 and continuously advocate on behalf of all needy New Yorkers. Our holistic programs range from 100% affordable housing at 20 locations to our award-winning family violence program to comprehensive Holocaust survivor assistance to senior programming to crisis intervention to the largest free kosher food distribution program in the world. Our network of 101 food pantries, 20 affordable housing sites, and 15 JCCs provide services directly in neighborhoods across New York.

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