February 11, 2020

A.1624 (Gottfried)/S.1472 (Hoylman)

Title: An act to amend the education law, in relation to requiring public schools to offer plant-based food options in food service

Statement of Support: A 2016 United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) report recommended plant-based diets as beneficial both for health and the environment. Plant-based diets are those free of animal products such as meat, seafood, dairy, and eggs. An increasing number of New Yorkers are consciously reducing or removing animal products from their diets for reasons relating to their health, personal ethics, or efforts to reduce their carbon footprint. Nutritional guidelines have increasingly emphasized the health benefits of consuming vegetables, fruits, whole grains, legumes and beans, and nuts and seeds. Doctors often suggest diets emphasizing plant-based food for treating conditions such as heart disease, obesity and diabetes.

In 2019, legislation requiring hospitals to offer plant-based food options to patients upon request was signed into law in New York. Now, we are supporting another bill with the same concept, in public schools. Diet is a key component of a child’s physical and cognitive development, and schools should do their best to ensure that children receive the adequate nutrition needed to grow and flourish. According to the U.S. Department of Agriculture, more than 11 million children in the United States live in "food insecure" homes, meaning they lack reliable access to a sufficient quantity of affordable, nutritious food. A staggering 1 out of 7 children in the United States lives with hunger, and 22 million children nationwide rely on free or reduced-price school lunches. All children, including and especially those who depend so heavily on school meals, should have the right to nutritious food that meets their dietary, religious, or ethical needs. This legislation would not mandate schools to fully change menus for all students, but simply make sure that students have access to healthy plant-based food options if requested.

New York has recently adopted the most aggressive greenhouse emissions reduction mandates in the country. We will not meet our commitment of 85% reduction in GHGs by 2050 unless we make efforts to curtail the considerable emissions that emanate from meat and dairy production. Animal agriculture is responsible for at least 14% of worldwide greenhouse gas emissions, according to conservative estimates by the Food and Agriculture Organization. Even simple legal gestures, such as requiring public schools to accommodate those that responsibly choose not to eat meat, can help foster positive behavior and lifestyle changes that will push New Yorkers closer toward our climate goals. When possible, schools should also prioritize the purchasing of locally sourced plant-based foods.

The Sierra Club Atlantic Chapter Strongly Urges Your Support of A.1624/S.1472

1 https://www.ers.usda.gov/publications/pub-details/?pubid=90022
2 https://www.nokidhungry.org/who-we-are/hunger-facts