STAT
Color Code
Season 2, Episode 3: ‘Food apartheid’ starves minority neighborhoods on Long Island

Transcript Key:

In this written version of the episode, all words, including speakers, ambient sound, effects, and music, will appear in size 11 black type. SPEAKER NAMES are in bold. Music and other sound descriptions are indicated by [brackets] in regular font.

Speakers:
- **Nicholas St. Fleur (Nick)** is the host of Color Code and a science reporter for STAT, where he often covers the intersection of race and medicine. Based in Long Island, NY, he is in his early 30s.
- **Jame Boone** is a long time resident of Hempstead, who has been volunteering and distributing food for his community for 16 years.
- **Allan Acosta** is another volunteer with community solidarity.
- **Jon Stephanian** is the president and CEO of Community Solidarity, the food share that’s running this program in Hempstead.
- **Jessica Rosati** is the Chief Program Officer for Long Island Cares Inc, a large food bank.
- **Tambra Raye Stevenson** is the founder and CEO for WANDA: Women Advancing Nutrition Dietetics and Agriculture.
- **Anne Henderson** is one of the folks visiting the food drive on easter.

**Nick:** So it is Easter Sunday and I just pulled up to a spot in Hempstead where members, volunteers from Community Solidarity are setting up to give away food to members of the community here. There's about. A dozen, maybe two dozen folks wearing masks, pulling out boxes and boxes of what looks like fresh produce. I'm going to go and see if I can speak with one of the organizers.

[Xylophone music begins to pick up. Then you hear the sound of jangling keys and the crunching of gravel]

Nick (in parking lot): So where's the line start?
Volunteer: Right there.
Nick: Oh all of those cars? Oh, oh wow.
Volunteer: Yeah. You're gonna watch people cuttin' in line?
Nick: Uh-huh.

**NICK (narrating):** Community Solidarity is a vegetarian food share that gives out free fruits, vegetables, bread and other groceries to low-income communities
across Long Island. Every Sunday they set up shop in this Hempstead parking lot about 3/4ths of a mile away from the train station.

Parts of Hempstead are food deserts. That means that many of the people who live here don’t have easy access to fresh produce and groceries. The Nassau County Comptroller had identified 13 census districts in the county that face food insecurity. In these locations at least 500 people live more than half a mile away from a supermarket or grocery store. Five of those 13 neighborhoods are here in Hempstead.

When I went out to visit this food share in Spring, it was a chilly, windy afternoon.

[People chat and walk around the parking lot]

The food share volunteers had some cool tunes playing in this parking lot. It really set the mood. Almost gave me a community barbecue type of vibe. There were scores of cars lined up in rows at the back of the parking lot. It was similar to something you would see at the start of a NASCAR race. Each one of the cars had a family waiting inside, some with kids in the backseat… Some of the cars start lining up as early as 10 a.m. in preparation for the free boxes of food that’s given out around 3 p.m.

I met a man named James Boone, a resident of Hempstead for more than 30 years.

James Boone: It's it's bad because on any given Sunday, we get over 300- 400 cars, and we have a walk-up line and we get like two, 300 bags for them. But in Hempstead in general, it's bad because there’s no food here. Everybody's struggling because there's no money.

NICK (narrating): James tells me that in the 16 years he’s been giving food out to his community, this year he’s seeing people struggle more than he’s ever seen before.

James Boone: It's crazy because it's more people than we had imagined that we would have here. You know, I've never seen it, this bad out here as far as the food insecurity goes.

[Piano music begins to rise, this is the theme music for Color Code]
NICK (narrating): My name is Nicholas St. Fleur. And this is Color Code, a podcast about health disparities and racism in medicine. This season, we’re focusing on health equity issues on Long Island. In this episode, we’re taking a look at food insecurity. We’ll be talking about how food insecurity disproportionately impacts Black and Brown communities, and we’ll also highlight some of the community efforts helping struggling Long Islanders feed their families.

[Theme music rises before fading into interview recording]

Nick: So tell me a bit about what you have so far. I see some strawberries.

Allan: I got potatoes, strawberries, broccoli, cucumbers. I don't know what this is. Cilantro, apple, mandarin, a little bit of everything, you know.

NICK (narrating): Allan Acosta has been volunteering with Community Solidarity for over a year. Because he speaks Spanish, he also serves as a translator, which is helpful because many of the people who come to the food share in Hempstead are Latino. Each box that volunteers like him fill is piled high with fruits and veggies. There’s oranges, mangoes, apples, cucumbers, tomatoes, bananas, asparagus, salad mix, sweet potatoes and more. Once he fills up his box, Allan then puts it into an enormous pile of cardboard boxes that are also overflowing with colorful vegetarian food.

What's going on here in Hempstead is something we’re seeing happen all across the country. With extended pandemic benefits to SNAP, the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, winding down in February and inflation sky high, many families are struggling to put food on the table, especially in places with a high cost of living, like Long Island.

Some volunteers like James Boone wake up every Sunday at 6 a.m. to drive vans to Trader Joe’s and other grocery stores. There they pick up produce that’s about to be thrown out in the dumpsters. It took James, Allan, and the dozen or so other volunteers several hours to unpack the van and put together a couple hundred boxes.

There’s also a spot near the sidewalk where the volunteers have about 75 grocery bags filled with food. The bags are for people who don’t have cars, who walked or took the bus to the food share.
I spent the entire day with these volunteers, and man, they were just going nonstop. On some days, they serve several hundred people, so much so that they have to turn people away as supplies often run out.

Nick: Look at that. You have one, two, three, four, five, six, seven, eight, nine rows going down. One, two, three, four, five, going up. And then on the side, it's another one, two, three, four, five, six. So I can't do the math off my head but probably.

Allan: You need a lot. Yeah. *laughs*

It’s getting close to 3:30 p.m. when the distribution starts.

Allan: Right now is going to be like rush time, you know, rush hour when they come out with you, fill them up, depending on how many people are in the car. And let's say there's three people in the car. We put four boxes and if we've got plenty today, so they might get two extra boxes.

Nick: It's going to be a good Easter for a lot of folk.

Allan: Correct. That's that's good. You know, especially in these times right now. Times are tough for a lot of people. Getting off winter into summer. You know, some people don't work that much. So this is a good a lot of help. But I know a lot of people who come in the car and I've been living in Hempstead for like 19 years already, so I know a lot of people here, you know,

Some people come here really early, like ten in the morning. They're already in line, waiting,

Jon in background: *Ready time.*

Allan: Okay.

Nick: And with that, Jon says he's ready. The cars are filing in.

[Xylophone music picks up]

Nick (narrating): To learn more about food insecurity on Long Island, I spoke with Jessica Rosati, she’s the Chief Program Officer for Long Island Cares Inc., which is a large food bank. She walked me through what she's been seeing at her food bank.
Nick (narrating): When we talk about insecurity, food insecurity, what does that mean?

Jessica Rosati: Food insecurity really means that you do not have sufficient means to adequately meet your needs.

Food is a basic necessity. So when we look at food needs and in determining if someone is food insecure, we're really asking questions that surround how do you get your food? Do you have access to food? Do you have the means to source and procure your food? And that's just the basics, right?

Nick (narrating): Her organization estimates that more than 221,000 Long Islanders experience food insecurity. Of that about 65,000 are children. As Jessica explains, food insecurity is when people don’t have enough reliable access to healthy food. Often it's the result of poverty or the unequal allocation of food and other resources.

Jessica: And that's why I think, sadly, there's a correlation between obesity and poverty and obesity and food insecurity, because a lot of times when a family is destitute, they'll seek to secure their food needs at whatever means cost. Right. And cheap foods are really the bad foods. They're foods that are mostly processed. Where food banking really rests and a lot of education and educating families on healthy food options, even if you have limited resources.

Nick (narrating): According to Long Island Cares, 70 percent of people facing food insecurity here are from minority populations. Many experience language, education or transportation barriers. And beyond Long Island, these disparities exist in many Black and Brown communities across the country.

About 20 percent of Black Americans and 17 percent of Latino Americans face food insecurity, while only 7 percent of White households are impacted, according to the USDA.

Jessica said that the majority of the Long Islanders who use emergency food networks, like food banks and food shares, are people working full-time or multiple part-time jobs.

Jessica Rosati: So, you know, we serve, truly, the working poor individuals who are working and still, unfortunately, do not make enough means to successfully, independently maintain for their family. That's where food banks come in, food pantries or supplement to your food needs. And on Long Island, sadly, all we've seen
as a result of the pandemic, coupled with inflation and the rising cost of goods, is an increased need of the regular working family here on Long Island. Turning to the food pantries to supplement their food needs.

**Nick (narrating):** Nearly half of the people that Long Island Cares serves are considered “working poor.” And about 60 percent of those people make less than the federal poverty rate, which is $30,000 for a family of four.

I asked Jessica to share some of the reasons that Long Islanders face food insecurity.

**Jessica:** The cost of living here on Long Island is extraordinarily high. It's very high. And as a result of that, the other things that we have to have – right – in order to live independently: a roof over our heads, heating our homes, gas in our cars, these things take precedence over choosing healthy foods for ourselves and our families.

And, you know, when you experience individuals or families that have specific dietary restrictions, oh, man, that just, you know, adds on to the stress of being able to procure the foods that they need.

**NICK (narrating):** There’s also about 63,000 Long Islanders who are food insecure and yet not eligible for SNAP because their income might be too high.

**Nick:** So can you tell us like food insecurity on Long Island? What are we seeing today? Is it going up? Is it going down?

**Jessica:** I had like a brief, I don't know, maybe six week period in 2022 that I was doing the happy dance in my office. And I was like, “Yes, numbers are going down!” And then they went up because all of the provisions that were in place for the pandemic slowly ended. With that ending February 28, from March 1st to what was Friday, March 17th, we had 207 new families registered just along in our pantries. 207 new families. So that's a direct result of a government program ending and the direct result of what happens when that ends, that's going to continue to happen.

Government subsidies, SNAP benefits, food stamps or, you know, cash allotments, all of those programs are now ending because the pandemic is now, if you will, in remission. Right? But what we've seen on the flip side is now this whole new basis of people that weren't in need before but now are.
Nick (narrating): But it's not just the greater geopolitical climate that's driving food insecurity on Long Island. There are also local structural forces at play here, according to Jon Stephanian. Jon is the president and CEO of Community Solidarity, the food share that's running this program in Hempstead.

Jon: So the way Long Island is set up, it's a series of towns, villages and hamlets, and it's very segregated where you have very, extremely wealthy communities that control most of the townships.

But most of the townships will have poorer communities that are in these villages. And so they'll, they'll starve out those villages from a lot of services. So people that are in Hempstead Village, they pay the same exact school taxes [as] people that are in Garden City. And yet the schools in the Hempstead Village are nowhere near what the schools in Garden City are like. You can just literally go down the road in Garden City and the roads are beautiful and like brick lined sidewalks and like beautiful potted plants everywhere. And then over here, there's potholes everywhere. And, you know, things are kind of left to rot. There's a lot of structural discrimination that goes on in these communities, and there's a lot of need in these communities.

And so for a lot of these people like, you know, 40, 50 pounds of groceries that used to be 120 bucks, now it's probably like 200 bucks. And so each person coming down on this line is saving $200 a week. That's money they can put towards other things that are more important in their lives, like it's gas to get to work. It's, you know, a kid's education. It's shoes for your kid. It's just it's that wiggle room that people really don't have anymore.

[Conversation fades as xylophone music picks and eventually fades]

Nick (narrating): Walking around Hempstead, I noticed a market here and there, but not a lot of places to get fresh produce. As we mentioned earlier, in the beginning of the episode, Hempstead is classified as a food desert.

There are about 25 food deserts across Long Island according to the USDA. Food deserts, again, are locations where it's nearly impossible to get access to fresh, nutritious produce and groceries. But food deserts aren't the only words used to describe what's going on in these communities.

Jon: There's a governmental term. It's really fucked up. It's called, sorry, it's called weed and seed. So this is a weed and seed community. And so like back in the
seventies, sixties and seventies, they used to have redlining for, you know, like institutional discrimination.

And then everyone realized what that was. So now they come up with this new name called “Weed and Seed” which is like, you want to weed out the people in the community you don't want, and then you want to seed in new people. And that's like a form of gentrification. So this is a weed and see community where they're purposely trying to starve people out and push them out.

Nick (narrating): Tambra Raye Stevenson uses an even stronger term for what we see in places like Hempstead, which has a large Black and Brown population.

That term: food apartheid.

Tambra: So when we talk about a food apartheid that understands structural inequities rooted in historical policies and contemporary that still play out the same injustice. And it's understanding that it's rooted not only in race and geography, but also in economics.

Nick (narrating): Tambra, is the founder and CEO for WANDA: Women Advancing Nutrition, Dietetics, and Agriculture. WANDA helps empower Black women to tackle issues of systemic racism in the food system. They host workshops, fellowships and they do advocacy work. She lives in Washington D.C. but her work also addresses issues across the country.

Tambra: And so when you look at South Africa and how apartheid showed its ugly head, with this extreme living conditions and and suffering and oppression, this is what we see when we think about food apartheid is how have we've created an environment where we have disabled and created an obesogenic environment that ensures that anyone who is living in that community will have a life expectancy at least 10 to 30 years shorter than someone on the other side of town.

And so beyond redlining that we see around housing inequities, these pervasive systemic inequities are seen through the lens of food, and it's all connected to economic disparities. The basis is poverty. If you cannot afford food, you are insecure.

Nick (narrating): In addition to Hempstead, there are some other food deserts on Long Island. One such place is Wyandanch, which is in the western part of Suffolk County, it’s about 40 miles from Manhattan.
Earlier this year, Jessica authored a report called “Equitable Food Access, An Assessment of Racial and Cultural Food Barriers on Long Island.” As part of the report, they took a closer look at Wyandanch. Wyandanch has about 13,000 people. It’s about 60% Black and 35% Hispanic. Nearly a quarter of the population live below the poverty line.

Long Island Cares reported that from January 2022 to October 2022, their food pantries and other emergency food providers had given 854,000 meals to people in the Wyandanch community.

Jessica: And although Wyandanch is very, I want to say, heavily supported with community organizations. So there's a lot of nonprofit action. There's a lot of really good resources. They still remain impoverished. We're missing something, right? If we have all the support and people remain in poverty, then there's an issue there. we're not, we're not moving the needle.

Nick (narrating): For the report, they interviewed members of the community to get their views about food access in Wyandanch. The researchers came back with some themes from their conversations: food deserts, lack of transportation, inflation, wealth inequality, high cost of living, inadequate and inefficient government programs, and generational poverty.

A few of the quotes really struck me. It said “Half of the people are holding onto their houses by the skin on their bodies.”

Another said “Inflation is killing me. It's killing me because of food shopping. I used to go into the store and spend a good $280 and be alright, but now I go in the store and I’m spending $500.”

So, I asked Jessica for solutions to Long Island’s food insecurity issue. What can be done?

Jessica: Advocate, advocate, advocate. In the New York state budget, there's a cut to hunger prevention. So we've been advocating wholeheartedly for Governor Hochul to put that back in her budget. For us, it kind of creates a perfect storm, right? When you see an increased need and then you see cuts to programs, you're like, What? Because we still have an ethical responsibility to serve that need, so that's where our advocacy and our education come in twice as full.
Nick (narrating): Jessica is also in favor of changing poverty guidelines to make them relative to a person's location. The guidelines are used to determine if someone's eligible for low-income assistance. For a family of 4, the federal poverty guideline is an income of $30,000. Jessica said that puts Long Island at a disadvantage. Because the cost of living is so high.

While estimates vary on what a living wage is on Long Island, it's clear that Long Islanders need more than double $30k that pay for everything that they need.

Jessica: It's just it doesn't match what it looks like here. In other words, we have to set similar poverty guidelines to a demographic across the nation that may be suburban by landscape, two counties and what they can afford to do with the same amount of money as a whole lot more than what we can do. And until that's addressed, we're always going to be in this kind of rut of being able to provide for the working poor.

Nick: So what is it that needs to change. Who needs to be listening?

Jessica: Regionalize the poverty guideline.

Nick: Say that again.

Jessica: Regionalize the poverty guideline.

Nick: And what would that do exactly?

Jessica: Ah, that would make all the people who are not currently eligible for SNAP benefits eligible. So they too can have relief like everybody who is.

But SNAP is just a piece. SNAP provides food support. It does not provide household items, personal care items — toilet paper. You know, things that you like. My God, that's a basic necessity. That's not included. Those programs have to be looked at when they were created under President Johnson back in the sixties. They have not changed. They need to change. They need to kind of evolve just the way our network constantly has to reinvent, constantly evolve. You know, and I think that's what Long Islanders deserve. I think that's what every citizen deserves. Forget that every person living within our United States deserves, period.
Nick (narrating): Back at the Hempstead food share, I catch up with Allan, he’s the volunteer who also acts as a Spanish translator from earlier.

Nick: Allan is putting the boxes, as many as he can, into the actual trunk.

Allan: But they just won't fit.

Nick: Could I just ask you a bit about what brought you here today and what this means to you?

Anne Henderson: I'm just very honored to be able to come here. I’ve come here before and the quality of what they give us is always excellent and they always doing some surprises, like maybe a candle or something that you're not expecting or some vitamins or something. That’s why I like them.

NICK (narrating): These sort of interactions are what makes all of this hard work worthwhile for Allan.

Allan: The best, best feeling, You know, like I'm here. I feel good. Like some of the people, they say Sunday is fun day. They go to a bar and go there. So this is, for me, fun day. You know.

NICK (narrating): Over the next hour or so more than a hundred cars come by and pick up their food. Around 5pm, I start to see the end of the caravan.

Volunteer: Ok, how many you’ve got left?

Allan: Two!

Volunteer: And you only got two boxes. Only got two people and that's it. Come on up. Did you get her?

Nick: He’s loading up the last two cars

Group: Your welcome Yay! *claps*

Volunteer: We did ‘em all. Every body got today. Everybody got!

Jon: Wow. Perfect! You couldn't ask for anything better.
Nick (narrating): But just as the volunteers were wrapping up, one last car pulled up. But there were no more boxes left for the family inside. It just goes to show how much is needed here.

[Music begins to play]

Nick (narrating):
Food shares alone won’t solve Long Island’s food insecurity problem, there are just too many contributing factors to it. High housing prices are a serious problem. SNAP benefits dissipating is a serious problem. Lack of access to reliable transportation is a serious problem. Inflation is a serious problem. As Jessica from Long Island Cares said, there are concrete policy changes that our leaders need to make. And it seems the best way to pressure them into taking action is for people to advocate, advocate, advocate.

But we all know governments are slow to action, especially when it comes to helping those that are most marginalized. So I’m not holding my breath to see what happens there on the political side of things. But in the meantime I’m happy to see that there are people like Jon, James, and Allan on the literal front lines rolling up their sleeves and addressing food insecurity, one box of fruits and veggies rescued from a dumpster at a time. Even if that means coming out on Easter Sunday – or…on their birthday!

Group singing: Happy birthday to you! Happy birthday to you! Happy Birthday to dear Jon. Happy Birthday to you!

Jon: Thank you everyone.

Nick (narrating): Thank you for listening and for being part of our Color Code community.

Our team here at STAT is Alissa Ambrose, Hyacinth Empinado, Theresa Gaffney, and me Nick St. Fleur. Anil Oza is our intern. Our theme music is by Bryan Joel. Hyacinth Empinado contributed reporting to this episode.

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