

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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**NEW YORK CITY'S FOOD STAMP PROGRAM RECEIVES
UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE
HUNGER CHAMPION AWARD FOR 2011**

Human Resources Administration's (HRA) award-winning, citywide model improves communication between processing centers and over 70 community organizations providing food stamps application assistance

In recognition of exemplary service in assisting eligible clients to obtain food stamps benefits, New York City Human Resources Administration Commissioner Robert Doar today received the 2011 Hunger Champion Award from USDA Northeast Regional Administrator James Arena-DeRosa. HRA was nominated by the Food Bank for New York and, out of 85 nationwide nominations, HRA was selected for one of ten annual awards. The award is in recognition of a citywide "mediation model" communications process developed by HRA, in partnership with the Food Bank for New York, between the food stamp processing centers and over 70 community organizations providing application assistance that resulted in significant service improvements. The Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program or Food Stamps Program's Hunger Champion Award honors local offices that provide exemplary service in assisting eligible clients to obtain food stamps benefits.

"Our Food Stamp Program has responded with excellence to the increased need for assistance by significantly increasing enrollment," said HRA Commissioner Robert Doar. "There is no question that the \$280 million in benefits that the program distributes each month have been an important ingredient in New York City families weathering tough financial times. I would like to thank the USDA, the Food Bank for New York and all our community partners for their recognition and support of the work we do every day. We are extremely proud to be honored with this award."

"We congratulate the City of New York on receiving this prestigious award. Serving the needs of citizens who need resources the most is an honor that we hope this award will allow all New Yorkers to share and better understand," said Margarete Purvis, President and CEO, Food Bank for New York City.

The Mediation Model was created by HRA in a 2009 partnership with the Food Bank for New York. It enables CBOs to work on behalf of clients to troubleshoot and resolve problems that may be encountered during the food stamp application process and greatly improves collaboration between these social service providers and HRA staff. Over 70 community organizations in the five boroughs have been trained to use the Mediation Model, which also has been shown to reduce the need for Fair Hearings by efficiently resolving issues before they get to

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the hearing level. Since January 2011, community based organizations and HRA have reported the resolution of over 2004 cases through the model.

HRA has been actively engaged in the feedback process with CBOs both at task force meetings and by sending managers to the community to learn more about the barriers clients face during the application process. As a result of this exercise, HRA has developed internal processes to address issues that are identified by the Mediation Model on an ongoing basis. HRA also developed internal performance indicators, such as the number of mediation cases and the time it takes to mediate a case at any given mediation site. Other performance indicators as a result of the implementation of the Mediation Model also include:

- From January 2011 through November 2011, 48 organizations participated in the Model, submitting information on 3,087 cases involving NCA Food Stamp Centers throughout the 5 boroughs.
- The current resolution rate for all users reporting on the model is 78%
- Through ongoing partnership with Taskforce members and HRA, major revisions have been made to the homebound status determination process, making it easier and quicker for homebound clients to apply for benefits.

The Food Stamp Program has expanded to meet rising demand: as of December 2011, over 1.8 million NYC residents are enrolled in the program, which has increased by 124 percent since Mayor Bloomberg first took office. Food stamps are a critical work support, and provide food assistance to families, the elderly and the disabled. Applications are evaluated on an individual basis and qualifying is based on income. An applicant who own a home, a car or has money saved may still be eligible for food stamps. Those eligible receive their food stamps within 30 days, and in some cases, emergency benefits can be issued sooner.

“I lost my job and needed to apply for food stamps in June of 2010. For months I lived on an almost non-existent income while embarking on a job search that almost always led me to dead ends,” said Rahisa López. “I used to go to the grocery store and found myself with insufficient cash to buy very basic food items. My food stamps always complemented my budget for food while I could put aside enough to pay for my rent. HRA and America Works also helped with job tips and soon after I found a job in a large car dealership in Brooklyn as a receptionist. Then I was screened for a customer service position with NYC’s 311 vendor. I was hired right away and because I work very hard, I have always received good evaluations. Food stamps helped me in between jobs and today, I no longer need them or any kind of public assistance. I see myself with the company for a very long time and why not, maybe I will be able to become a team leader.”

Despite the increased caseload, HRA’s Food Stamp Program has maintained a high payment accuracy rating of 95.61% even with the programs significant growth. Other improvements to the program include: helping food stamp recipients find employment, on-site coaching of new staff in addition to regular training; quality assurance staff located in food stamp centers to help review complicated cases; and an increase in online applications.

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Under the Bloomberg administration, access to food stamps have been made easier through a variety of initiatives including streamlining the application process, improvements in technology, and continued outreach. One important change to access has been the income resource test waiver that has allowed families to be eligible for food stamps at 130 percent of the poverty rate, and for seniors, 200 percent of the poverty rate. Other changes include: online applications through ACCESS NYC, an increase in the recertification timeline from 6 to 12 months, and an interactive telephone system to recertify have all been put into place, lifting the burden on working adults to come into the office more often than necessary.

The primary goal of the program is to help families supplement the cost of their diet with nutritious foods. New York City encourages using food stamp benefits to make healthier choices by purchasing fruits, vegetables and other nutritious items. Food Stamps can be used at many locations, including supermarkets, most farmers markets, and some Green Carts.

HRA's nomination by Food Bank for NYC was based on the Award's nomination notice which states, "any individual, agency or organization who has worked, observed or has personal experience with a local office may nominate that office for the Hunger Champion Award."

HRA's Food Stamp Program Facts

- A total of 1,825,377 New Yorkers receive Food Stamps.
 - The vast majority (1,157,444) does not receive Cash Assistance or Supplemental Security Income (SSI).
 - Participation in the Food Stamp program has increased by 129 percent since Mayor Bloomberg took office, while Cash Assistance has shrunk to its lowest levels since the 1960s.
 - Despite the rapid growth, HRA has maintained a high rate of accuracy without substantially adding staff.
 - The Food Stamp Program's payment error rate was only 4.39 percent for 2011.

Awards

- 2009: Nine HRA Job and Food Stamp centers were honored by the U.S.D.A. as well as the City and State for excellent accuracy ratings.
- 2010: HRA received the 'Nor'easter' award for outstanding efforts to increase participation in the Food Stamp program.
- 2011: HRA won a "Silver Plate" U.S.D.A. Hunger Champions Award for efforts to improve service by increasing communications between Food Stamp Centers and non-profit and community groups.

For more information on HRA's Food Stamp Program and other HRA services, visit NYC.gov or call 311. Follow us on Twitter @NYCHRA