

## **Testimony of Seth Diamond Executive Deputy Commissioner Family Independence Administration/Human Resources Administration before the City Council Committee on General Welfare "NEW YORK CITY'S HUNGER RELIEF PROGRAMS"**

Good afternoon. My name is Seth Diamond, Executive Deputy Commissioner for HRA's Family Independence Administration. I am here this afternoon to discuss the agency's Food and Food Stamps Programs.

Food assistance plays many critical roles in our City. For some working families struggling to pay bills in a difficult economy, food assistance allows them to continue using their limited income for other critical needs. For senior citizens with high medical costs, having food assistance may give them the ability to afford all the medications they need. For someone making the transition from welfare to work, food stamps can give them a little extra cushion as they move into the working world. HRA is committed to working with individuals in all situations and to ensuring that all eligible New Yorkers receive the food assistance to which they are entitled.

To meet this enormous challenge HRA has continued to adapt the Food Stamp program to meet the needs of New Yorkers. We already have a network of offices throughout the City where individuals can apply for Food Stamps. Currently there are offices located in almost every neighborhood in the City where individuals can apply for food stamps: 24 of those offices are for food stamps only and 30 for those interested in applying for food stamps combined with cash assistance. In addition to being open during business hours, at least one non-PA Food Stamp office per borough, except Staten Island, is open during the evenings and on weekends to handle food stamp only individuals who cannot apply or be seen during traditional hours. We also have recently hired nearly 120 staff to work specifically in Food Stamp offices. They recently completed training and are now serving people in offices throughout the City. We welcome assistance from Council members and community based organizations in directing people in need of food stamps to a convenient office.

We acknowledge that getting to an open office is only part of the challenge to obtaining Food Stamps. Applicants must also be able to understand what materials they need to complete the requirements for obtaining Food Stamps. As you know, the Food Stamp Centers use the State application form that is normally available in English and Spanish only. However, the State application was recently revised, and the Spanish version has not been made available yet. To help our diverse population meet their need to understand the requirements for obtaining Food Stamps, at great cost to the City, we have translated the City's joint public assistance and food stamp application, as well as a number of City-developed Food Stamp-related forms into nine languages. These languages are Arabic, Chinese, French, Haitian-Creole, Korean, Russian, Spanish, Vietnamese and Yiddish. We also have increased the number of bilingual workers in our centers and, if additional assistance is needed, we have other resources available to provide interpreter services including a Directory of Community Organizations with Bilingual Interpreter Staff and contracts to provide telephone and on-site interpreter services. Finally, our agency call center, the HRA Infoline office, has bilingual operators available to handle calls from individuals who need assistance.

HRA also works with outside organizations to provide food stamp outreach services. Hundreds of workers at community-based organizations have been trained by HRA and regularly refer individuals to food stamp offices. Joel Berg of the New York Coalition Against Hunger is a member our Citizens Advisory Board. I think this demonstrates our willingness to work with the advocates and hear new ideas.

We also do our own outreach through a variety of organizations to let individuals know about what assistance may be available. For example HRA is working with the Mayor's Office to coordinate a major campaign to let immigrants know that they may now be eligible for food stamps. As you may know, the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996 denied Food Stamp eligibility to thousands of legal immigrants. New York City believed this denial was wrong and together with the State we developed a separate food stamp program for many immigrant individuals who were ineligible for federal assistance. While a local program existed, the City believed the better approach was for legal immigrants to be restored to food stamp eligibility.

Fortunately, in 1998, Congress restored Food Stamps to immigrants who were 65 years of age or older and lawfully residing in the United States on or before August 22, 1996, as well as to those immigrants who were, or subsequently became, disabled, and to immigrant children under age 18 who were in the United States on or before that date. The Food Stamp Reauthorization Act, signed into law on May 13, 2002, further extended food stamp eligibility to any qualified alien who receives blind or disability benefits regardless of date of entry (effective October 1, 2002), is under 18 years of age regardless of date of entry (effective October 1, 2003), or has lived in the U.S. as a qualified alien for five years beginning on date of entry (effective April 1, 2003).

We will be working closely with the Mayor's Office of Immigrant Affairs and with community organizations that serve immigrant populations to ensure the affected groups know of their eligibility and can apply for the benefits. We anticipate this campaign being successful and we welcome participation by Council members and their staff.

We also take very seriously the right every individual has to obtain an application for food stamps and to be seen by a worker on the first day they present themselves to an office. We regularly ask undercover workers to go to Job Centers, often late in the day, to seek to obtain an application and ensure that they will be seen that same day. While in the overwhelming number of cases individuals are told they will be seen the same day they apply, in the cases where the potential applicant is told they will not be seen, we have taken disciplinary action against the worker. This information is also used in our JobStat process for evaluating the performance of center directors. In this respect, we appreciate the feedback afforded us through the report on the availability of food stamp applications that was issued by the Committee on Investigations last week. We have already corrected all the addresses on our Internet site that were noted as being incorrect, for example. As to the other findings, we are investigating them to determine what is the situation at our offices and what corrective actions, if any, need to be taken. By continuing to "test" our

system with undercover applicants, be they yours, or ours, we can continuously gauge how well our response to applicants is actually working and make appropriate adjustments as needed.

As a result of these and other efforts, the Food Stamp rolls have been increasing. As of December 2002, nearly 22,851 more households (including 37,748 more people) are receiving Food Stamps today than were receiving them a year ago. This includes a 12% increase (from 226,428 to 254,210) in the number of SSI and food stamp only households (those not combined with welfare). This is the highest number of SSI and food stamp only households in over 20 years, since in May 1981 there were 208,968 such households. These substantial increases have provided much needed assistance to many New Yorkers facing difficult times.

We have not stopped with the efforts I have outlined. We are always looking for ways to improve the system to provide benefits to those who are eligible to receive them.

We have worked closely with New York State to put technology to use to ensure that people receive the food stamps to which they are entitled. For example, many individuals whose federally-funded cash assistance case closes because they obtained employment now receive five months of additional food stamps. No separate application from the individual and no action, other than entering the new income, is required on the part of the HRA worker during the initial five-month period. After that, if the individual requires further Food Assistance, they can apply at one of our offices. Food assistance has now joined child care and Medical insurance as part of a critically important transitional benefits package available to newly employed individuals.

Also just last week, we began to process automatically food stamp benefits for individuals who have been on cash assistance and are now receiving SSI. This process, which replaces a cumbersome manual process, will ensure these vulnerable individuals receive food stamps when they transition from public assistance to SSI. We also implemented a two-year recertification for SSI food stamp recipients, replacing an annual requirement. This improvement will allow these individuals to maintain eligibility for benefits more easily.

In addition, we are working closely with the State to ensure that other individuals who receive cash assistance combined with food stamps can, if they are eligible, make a seamless transition to receiving food stamps only. Over the next several months, the State will be adding additional categories of cases to those for whom an automatic transition process can be completed. We are now using a labor-intensive manual process; so the transition to an automated process will improve matters for the workers and for the people we serve.

We have tried to better serve low income New Yorkers by trying to simultaneously meet their food assistance and medical needs. If individuals apply for food stamps only we now ask them if they have health insurance. If they do not, the worker completes a form and begins the Medicaid enrollment process. We believe this coordinated response better addresses the realities our clients face.

We believe all of these steps have improved our program. For example the city's food stamp error rate for federal fiscal year 2001 (the last year for which complete data was available) showed a 36% improvement over the previous year. This level of improvement was one of the top five in the nation. This year's data is not complete, but at this time, we are ahead of last year's result. We have also begun working with the Rushmore Group, a nationally known organization that provides assistance on improving food stamp quality control issues. The Rushmore Group is under contract to the State of New York and is actively working on food stamp quality control issues. They will provide case reviews, staff training, and other guidance over the next 12 months.

The federal government has also noted significant improvement in the city's administration of the food stamp program. I was told that you may be discussing a recent USDA report later, but I wanted to make sure you were aware that the beginning of the report mentions several areas where the City program has improved in recent years. These areas include the availability of applications, the ability of individuals to apply on the same day they arrived at the center and the screening of individuals for expedited or emergency service. The report did list several areas where further work is required. We have a plan in place to address each of these matters and have shared the plan with the State of New York. It is also important to note that in several instances the USDA report states the city provided food stamp benefits too generously. For example the report cites the city for providing emergency or expedited benefits to individuals who have not come back to complete an application interview from some previous application.

One problem the City and its workers confront daily and is a barrier to effectively administering the Food Stamp program is its complexity. We welcome the Council's suggestions and advocacy for simplifying the Food Stamp application rules. Working together we can develop a program that provides the benefits people are entitled to while ensuring the integrity our constituents demand.

Assisting people to access Food Stamps is only one part of our efforts to provide food assistance to New Yorkers. In addition, HRA's Office of Food Programs and Policy Coordination (OFPPC) seeks to improve the nutritional status of low-income New Yorkers by providing education about Food Stamp eligibility and general nutrition and administering the distribution of non-perishable food commodities to 620 active emergency food programs (soup kitchens and food pantries).

OFPPC has two components. The Emergency Food Assistance Program (EFAP) funds and monitors the operations of 620 food pantries and soup kitchens. The staff visits the emergency food relief organizations at least four times per year to ensure that eligibility criteria/guidelines and food safety regulations are adhered to. In addition, technical assistance is provided to aid the programs with maintaining the maximum quality of service. In CYF 2002, HRA distributed 14.6 million pounds of food that fed 11.1 million people.

OFPPC's Food Stamp Nutrition Outreach Program (FSNOP), also known as Project T.E.N. (Teaching, Education, and Nutrition) specializes in educating the general public about the Food Stamp program. The staff disseminates eligibility information and assists with the application process at sites such as emergency food programs, hospitals, public libraries, and community council offices where people seeking food stamps appear on a recurring basis. On average, we assist 232 households per month at these locations.

The unit is also regularly invited to health and school fairs. They share nutritional recipes and materials on the effects of good nutrition with the public. All nutritional materials are obtained through OFPPC's association with Community Food Resource Center (CFRC), Cornell Cooperative Extension (which sponsors the Eat Smart New York campaign) and the New York City Nutritional Education Network.

The funding for CFRC's Food Force is administered through OFPPC. This contract provides for additional Food Stamp Outreach. Food Force is designed to increase poor New Yorker's access to Food Stamps and other food benefits by providing a computerized prescreening to an interested participant. This information assists the applicant with the process. Moreover, we are coordinating our Food Stamp outreach efforts with the Mayor's Office of Health Insurance Access. When they distribute information about access to health care, they include information about access to food stamps. In addition, CFRC operates the Food Stamp Media Campaign (The Food Card). This initiative serves to advertise the Food Stamp program and disseminates general information through radio, pamphlets, and transit billboards.

The Office of Food Programs is a member of the Policy Committee on New York City Hunger Resources. This committee is composed of representatives from City Harvest, The Food Bank for New York/ Food for Survival (FFS), United Way-New York City, NYS Hunger Prevention and Nutrition Assistance Program (HPNAP), and NYC Department of Health and Mental Hygiene. Through a collaborative effort, this committee seeks to coordinate, maximize, and enhance the resources that are accessible to all New York City emergency food programs.

We at HRA are committed to continuing to do what we can to ensure that individuals who need and are eligible for assistance receive the assistance. We have taken important steps in this effort and are prepared to do more. We are willing to discuss with you further steps that can be taken. For example, I know the Food Stamp application itself has raised concerns. The State is conducting a pilot in Onondaga County involving a shortened form, and we await the results of that trial. The Council should be aware, however, that, while food stamp benefits are fully federally-funded, the costs of staff to administer the system are not. New York City's costs for fiscal year 2002 were \$237 million; however, it is important to note that each additional person hired will cost the city 62% of their salary. Further outreach plans need to be considered in light of the cost and the City's overall funding.

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