



TESTIMONY

OF

PATRICIA M. SMITH

FIRST DEPUTY COMMISSIONER

**HUMAN RESOURCES ADMINISTRATION/DEPARTMENT OF SOCIAL
SERVICES**

BEFORE THE

**CITY COUNCIL
GENERAL WELFARE COMMITTEE**

ON

HUNGER RELIEF IN NEW YORK CITY

SEPTEMBER 29, 2004

Good evening. My name is Patricia M. Smith, and I am the First Deputy Commissioner of the Human Resources Administration/Department of Social Services (HRA). I am here tonight to update you on our continued efforts to maximize the accessibility and efficiency of the City's Food Stamp Program and to inform you as to the City's role in food programs.

As Commissioner Eggleston has stressed repeatedly in the past, we recognize the critical role food assistance plays in the lives of low-income New Yorkers. HRA is committed to ensuring that the Agency's food programs provide assistance to all eligible individuals as efficiently and with as little administrative burden as possible.

HRA's food assistance activities include our administration of the Food Stamp Program and the Emergency Food Assistance Program, as well as related activities. In my testimony, I will update you on the status of each of these programs.

Before I discuss any specific initiatives, I would like to note the substantial increase in the number of people receiving food stamps, particularly those receiving food stamps alone (that is, independent of cash assistance or Supplemental Security Income (SSI)) in the past two and a half years. Food Stamp enrollment has grown significantly under the leadership of Mayor Bloomberg and Commissioner Eggleston. Since the beginning of this Administration, there has been nearly a 30% increase in overall Food Stamp enrollment, and an 85% increase in the number of individuals receiving food stamps alone. The latter number now stands at its highest point in 20 years. In July of this year, total Food Stamp enrollment surpassed one million individuals. And, in fact, overall Food Stamp enrollment increased by nearly 25,000 individuals in the last month alone, the largest one-month increase in food stamp enrollment in New York City in the history of the program.

Since we are meeting in Staten Island, I want to point out that the number of residents of this borough receiving food stamps has increased significantly over the past two and a half years by 43%, in accordance with the citywide pattern. As of June 2004, there were approximately 27,000 Staten Islanders receiving Food Stamp benefits. The number of Food Stamp recipients on Staten Island who do not receive public assistance or SSI has risen during this Administration by 112%.

We are pleased with the assistance provided to those eligible as seen through the increasing enrollment numbers and while we have every intention of continuing to improve access to Food Stamps, we are concerned about our ability to support the administration of this rapidly growing program and ensure its integrity and regulatory compliance because of the financial burden imposed upon us by the State's administrative cap. In City Fiscal Year (FY) 2003, for example, the City's share of Food Stamp administrative costs was approximately

\$22 million. The State has reduced the social services administrative cap for FY'05. They continue to apply this cap to HRA's administrative expenses related to the Food Stamp Program that does not take into account the growth of the caseload. We hope that we can count on the City Council, and specifically this Committee, to join us in our continued efforts to petition the State to exempt from the administrative cap the costs incurred in handling increases in our food stamp caseload.

Food Stamp Access Initiatives

As we have discussed in previous appearances before this Committee, we have made numerous efforts in the Food Stamp Program to ensure that all eligible New Yorkers are afforded the opportunity to participate. Although we have achieved success in improving accessibility to the Food Stamp Program as evidenced by the large increase in our enrollment numbers, we are maintaining our efforts to expand awareness of Food Stamp eligibility. The Agency has implemented the following initiatives toward this end:

- Since the beginning of the Administration, we have hosted informational sessions on Food Stamp issues for City Council members and staff, for faith-based organizations and food providers, and for community groups serving immigrant New Yorkers.
- We have further developed our partnership with the United Way to include a program originally initiated with the New York State Office of Temporary and Disability Assistance that improves access to the Food Stamp Program. Through a contractor HRA and the United Way provide information about the Food Stamp Program to individuals at soup kitchens, community sites and other locations, and pre-screen interested applicants for eligibility. To date under this program, six organizations, working closely with HRA food stamp offices in neighborhoods throughout the City have distributed more than 80,000 information packets and pre-screened over 15,000 individuals.
- The City adopted the State's new two-page Food Stamp application to ease the administrative burden on applicants imposed by the original 16-page application. The new application has now been implemented at all of the City's Food Stamp offices.
- We continue to ensure that individuals with language barriers have access to our services. We have translated almost all Food Stamp-related forms into the following nine languages: Arabic, Chinese, French, Haitian-Creole, Korean, Russian, Spanish, Vietnamese and Yiddish, and we have reached out to immigrant communities to let them know of changes in federal law affecting Food Stamp eligibility.

The State also mailed letters to those who may be eligible for Food Stamps under the new rules for immigrants, directing them to visit an HRA office to discuss their eligibility.

- Although the State has responsibility and funding to conduct official statewide outreach, on a local level HRA's Office of Food Programs and Policy Coordination (OFPPC) supplements outreach through that office's Project T.E.N. (Teaching, Education, and Nutrition), a program that specializes in educating the 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.
- The State and Federal funding for the Community Food Resource Center's (CFRC) Food Force Program is administered through HRA's OFPPC. Food Force is designed to increase poor New Yorkers' access to Food Stamps and other food benefits by providing computerized pre-screening to interested potentially eligible participants.
- HRA, as the local district for the State's outreach campaign, contracts with CFRC to operate the Food Stamp Media Campaign (The Food Card). This initiative seeks to encourage enrollment in the Food Stamp Program and to disseminate general information by conducting a multi-language, highly targeted advertising and outreach campaign that includes: airing more than 2,000 radio commercials in multiple languages; printing 500,000 brochures for delivery to selected locations; posting bus shelter ads in low-income neighborhoods; and conducting outreach events that include Food Stamp eligibility pre-screenings at supermarkets in low-income neighborhoods.

HRA has taken a very active role in promoting the State's Nutrition Improvement Project, known as NYSNIP, for SSI recipients. Under this project, SSI recipients not currently receiving Food Stamps who are categorically eligible are enrolled automatically in the Food Stamp Program. SSI recipients can receive a minimum of \$16 per month, or more depending on their rent and utility costs.

To promote this project, HRA convened a meeting in April of this year with community-based organizations, the staff of elected officials, and other social services organizations and has made presentations at Borough Presidents' meetings in Manhattan and Staten Island, the first two boroughs where NYSNIP was rolled out. HRA has also worked with Social Security Administration staff to ensure that clients who come for recertification appointments at the Social Security Administration are aware of NYSNIP. As of August 1, 2004, approximately 25,440 cases were opened, including roughly 1,500 in Staten Island and 7,500 in Manhattan. We estimate that, citywide, there are

approximately 62,000 SSI recipients who will be enrolled automatically for Food Stamps due to the NYSNIP program and we are continuing to work with the State on the rollout.

We continue to closely monitor a new process introduced last year that automates much of our separate determination process. As a result of these efforts, cases that close or are not eligible for cash assistance now receive an evaluation for food stamp eligibility.

In many situations, individuals who had previously been in receipt of food stamps automatically receive five months of transitional food stamps when their public assistance case closes, easing the transition from welfare to work. By the end of the five month period, the client is instructed to go to a Food Stamp Office if they would like to continue receiving the benefit.

While the number of Food Stamp recipients has increased, we have continued to maintain and improve the quality of the program. The City continues to make remarkable progress in reducing its Food Stamp error rate. For Federal Fiscal Year 2003, the last full year for which data is available, New York City's error rate was 4.34%, lower than the rest of the State and lower than the national rate of 6.29%. The error rate is at its lowest level in the history of the federal payment error rate program in NYC. The 4.63% error rate for the first seven months of this fiscal year remains low and is again below the rate for the rest of the State.

Emergency Food Assistance Program

There are approximately 1,300 emergency feeding programs in New York City, as reported by the Food Bank for New York City. The HRA Emergency Food Assistance Program (EFAP) partially funds and monitors the operations of about 45% of these programs, a total of 575 food pantries and soup kitchens citywide. Organizations participating in EFAP also receive funding from Federal and State sources, and private donations. Approximately 70% of EFAP participants are food pantries, and 30% are soup kitchens. EFAP is a supplemental emergency feeding program and, as such, EFAP providers must have other funding sources to qualify for the program. The remaining 55% of the programs are funded solely by Federal and State sources and/or private donations.

HRA's EFAP is allocated \$8.3 million in this fiscal year for the purchase of non-perishable food. Individual program allocations are in the form of credits toward the purchase of non-perishable foods and are determined according to a formula set by the City Charter.

HRA responds to demand as reported by EFAP providers. All providers self-report. In general, emergency food programs do not collect the names of clients,

nor do they keep an unduplicated count of the number of people they serve. What they maintain is a daily count of the number of people for whom they have provided a meal or meal ingredients. For FY 2004, the total of the daily counts of the number of persons provided with a meal or meal ingredients was 12,118,000.

In FY 2004, HRA distributed 14.6 million pounds of non-perishable food. A comparison of FY 2004 with FY 2003 shows an overall increase of 296,219, or 2.5%, in the total of daily counts of persons provided with meals or meal ingredients. Again, the sources of the data are the soup kitchens and the food pantries we support. HRA's EFAP funds approximately 45% of the total number of programs citywide. On Staten Island there are 16 food programs that receive EFAP funding. In FY'04 these programs reported providing Staten Islanders with 260,665 meals or meal ingredients.

HRA's 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, the NYS Hunger Prevention and Nutrition Assistance Program (HPNAP), and the 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 NYC emergency food programs.

We believe that our current efforts have been successful, as evidenced by the rise in food stamp enrollment in NYC and by the broad reach of our EFAP program. Despite our continued efforts to maximize access to the City's food programs, we recognize that continued improvement is possible. We look forward to working with this Committee, the network of food programs, advocates, and other stakeholders to further the City's progress.