



TESTIMONY

OF

SETH DIAMOND

**EXECUTIVE DEPUTY COMMISSIONER
FAMILY INDEPENDENCE ADMINISTRATION**

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

BEFORE THE

**CITY COUNCIL
GENERAL WELFARE COMMITTEE**

ON

NEW YORK CITY'S FOOD STAMP PROGRAM

APRIL 21, 2005

Good morning. My name is Seth Diamond, Executive Deputy Commissioner for the Family Independence Administration within the Human Resources Administration/Department of Social Services. I am here today to discuss the remarkable progress the agency has made over the past three and a half years in assisting eligible New Yorkers to obtain food stamps.

Since the beginning of her tenure, Commissioner Eggleston has recognized that access to food stamps is a critical component of the agency's overall effort to assist New Yorkers in gaining their highest level of self-sufficiency. For working people, food stamps can represent a vital support that will allow them to keep working and supporting their families. For seniors or disabled individuals, food stamps can be a life line, allowing them to buy food while preserving their limited income for medical and other vital needs. For hundreds of thousands of children in the city, the nutritious meals supported by food stamps enable them to effectively participate in academic activities and to realize their full potential.

This commitment has translated into a number of activities and programs that have substantially increased the food stamp rolls. While overall the number of people receiving food stamps now stands at over one million, an increase of over 35% since January 2002, the most significant indicator is the growth among those receiving food stamps independent of public assistance. For that group, enrollment growth has been even more substantial. The non-public assistance food stamp population has increased by over 75% from January 2002 until the beginning of April. Further, the group of food stamp recipients which includes

low-income working people and other able bodied recipients who are receiving food stamps independent of cash assistance or SSI, has grown by 94.8% in that same period. Put differently, the number of recipients in this group has almost doubled in a little more than three years. These kinds of significant increases can only occur in an environment where there is meaningful access to food stamp offices and where the offices function to effectively process applications for those who apply and where intensive efforts continue to ensure those eligible receive food stamp benefits.

HRA has frequently briefed this committee on many of the initiatives we have taken to improve access. These steps include implementing, ahead of a state deadline, the shortened food stamp application and making, through a link to the State's web site, that application available on our own web site where today any individual, community group, soup kitchen or food pantry can print it out and begin distributing it to interested individuals. We continue to translate our material into nine languages so that those who do not communicate in English can easily apply and remain eligible for food stamps. We have completed implementation of the New York State Nutrition Improvement Program (NYSNIP). Under this program over 60,000 food stamp cases were automatically opened for SSI recipients. Our efforts with the United Way and a number of community groups that pre-screen individuals remain strong, and to date nearly 145,000 have received information through the project and almost 25,000 screenings

have occurred. We have also progressed further in our efforts to provide food stamps in an automated fashion to those no longer eligible for cash assistance.

I want now to spend a few minutes discussing some more recent steps we have taken that have not been as extensively discussed.

First, in response to concerns raised by the City Council and others about access issues on Staten Island, we did, in January, extend our hours at our food stamp site for residents of the borough. Staten Island now joins the other boroughs in having an office that is open until six each evening and for a full business day every Saturday. This effort assists those needing food stamps on Staten Island to more easily apply for and receive that benefit.

While we have reported to you on the opening of our Model Job Centers, these Model Offices now fully incorporate their co-located Food Stamp Offices into the model office process. Applicants and recipients entering Food Stamp Offices now first see a receptionist who directs them to the appropriate location. A queuing system at the designated location calls their number as soon as someone is available to see them. Those receiving food stamps who just need to drop off a document or have some other quick service item taken care of can visit customer service without the need to wait to see their worker. Those interested in food stamps can also use the information kiosks where they can obtain helpful information such as finding out about available jobs and printing their own copy

of a food stamp application. These improvements have received national recognition. The United States Department of Agriculture has asked for information on the model and plans to include the information in its “Promising Practices” report which details innovative food stamp practices for locations around the country. Just last week, our model office concept was presented at a USDA sponsored conference of the nation’s largest cities.

Finally I want to give you an outline of a USDA grant for which we are hoping to apply which we believe will allow us to both further improve access and allow us to more efficiently process food stamp applications. For the past several weeks, we have been in discussion with a coalition of food and hunger elimination advocacy groups led by Food Change (formerly known as CFRC) to develop a proposal to substantially improve the food stamp application process. Under our planned proposal, Food Change, working at food pantries and other locations throughout the city, would assess individuals for possible food stamp eligibility. If after the assessment the individual wants to apply for food stamps, Food Change, working with the applicant, would electronically complete an application and submit it to HRA. Food Change would also electronically image any supporting documents and transmit those with the application. HRA would then electronically process the application without, as is now the case, requiring a worker to data enter all the information into the State’s computer system. An individual who would have a hardship visiting a food stamp office because they were disabled or working during all available office hours would not have to visit

a food stamp office. Rather the interview would take place by telephone either with the Food Change representative or with the applicant.

We are hopeful we will receive grant funding, which is up to one million dollars over three years, and would welcome Council support for our planned application. As you know we had previously asked USDA for funding for vans which could function as mobile food stamp offices in neighborhoods throughout the city. We were not chosen from among the many nation wide applicants for funding for that proposal but we are hopeful our new plan will be selected to receive the limited grant funding available.

We believe we have made substantial progress in the Food Stamp Program, and the steps we have taken and hope to take soon will allow us to further improve access for all New Yorkers who would like to apply for food stamps.

I will be happy to answer any questions you have.