



TESTIMONY

OF

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ADMINISTRATOR/COMMISSIONER

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

BEFORE THE

**CITY COUNCIL
GENERAL WELFARE COMMITTEE**

ON

HRA/DSS FOOD PROGRAMS

November 20, 2006

Through this Administration's implementation of initiatives to increase public awareness and simplify the application process, the number of New Yorkers enrolled in the federal Food Stamp Program surpassed one million for the first time since 1999, when the majority of those enrolled were also on public assistance. Current food stamp enrollment totals 1,081,331, an increase of 35.4% since January 2002, and the number of New Yorkers enrolled in the federal Food Stamp Program independent of public assistance or Supplemental Security Income (SSI) has increased by 119.8%.

As the number of Food Stamp recipients has increased, we have maintained and improved the quality of the program. HRA continues to make remarkable progress in reducing its food stamp payment error rate. Our overall cumulative error rate through June of the current federal fiscal year is 4.49%. This is two percentage points lower than the rest of New York State, which stands at 6.50%, and almost three percentage points lower than the eight largest counties (other than those in New York City), which have an average rate of 8.44%.

Citywide Collaboration

Our efforts to increase food stamp access and enrollment have included our partnership with the United Way and other community-based organizations to conduct outreach and pre-screening services at food pantries and soup kitchens; implementing the shortened food stamp application ahead of the State's deadline; and implementing the New York State Nutritional Improvement Project

(NYSNIP). Nevertheless, as this Committee knows, not all eligible New Yorkers have applied for or are receiving federal Food Stamp Program benefits, and further improving outreach and access to the program requires a collaborative citywide effort, which is well underway.

I want to thank the Council for its dedication to this issue. We appreciate your initiative to expand access to farmers' markets across the City for New Yorkers receiving food stamp benefits, as well as your "Food Today, Healthy Tomorrow" outreach campaign. We at HRA look forward to continuing our work with Speaker Quinn's office and other City agencies on Food Security issues. Further increasing accessibility for potential recipients, we will expand the hours of operation at our extended hour food stamp offices throughout the five boroughs to evaluate the demand for additional evening hours. As you know these offices are open now until 6 pm and Saturdays, and we will be working with the Council in an effort to ensure that your constituents are made aware of the extended hours. We have also developed a new brochure on food stamps that includes frequently asked questions, income guidelines, office locations, and necessary documents for application.

New Initiatives to Improve Access

We have been hard at work with our community partners, Food Change and the New York City Coalition Against Hunger, on the facilitated on-line application process made possible in part by a United States Department of Agriculture

(USDA) grant that we were awarded last year. The project, as you know, involves having Food Change staff located at food pantries and other locations throughout the City, assessing individuals for possible food stamp eligibility. If, after the assessment, the individual is interested in applying for food stamp benefits, Food Change staff will work with the applicant to electronically complete an application and submit it to HRA. Food Change will also electronically image any supporting documents and transmit those with the application. HRA will then electronically process the application without, as is now the case, requiring a worker to manually data-enter all the information into the State's computer system.

I am excited to announce that on December 18th, we will pilot this initiative at our Fordham Food Stamp Office and the Part of the Solution (POTS) soup kitchen in the Bronx. Staff at the Fordham location will be ready to receive applications from Food Change representatives working at POTS. With lessons learned from the initial pilot, we will continue to implement this initiative at other sites. I am also happy to announce that, as part of our effort to enhance accessibility to the Food Stamp Program, during this holiday season we are planning a large outreach campaign to promote food stamp enrollment. My staff and I are scheduled to visit high-volume food pantries and soup kitchens throughout the City, where we will make applications available and assist potential clients in completing them. We will also distribute bilingual Food Hotline postcards, as well as HRA's new food stamp brochure. To ensure maximum outreach through this

effort, we will advertise the Food Stamp Program and our Food Hotline on buses and subways during the holiday season.

Other recent outreach efforts have included a mailing to Medicaid clients who are not also enrolled in the Food Stamp Program. In August and September, more than 20,000 letters were mailed in the first two phases of this initiative, alerting Medicaid clients in 10 different zip codes of their potential eligibility for food stamp benefits, and inviting them to apply. Our preliminary report shows that 520 new food stamp cases have been opened through this effort.

We are taking the following steps to simplify the recertification process. We have had a longstanding option available to non-public assistance (NPA) food stamp clients who live alone and receive SSI, to recertify by mail rather than in person. This population represents nearly 200,000 food stamp clients. Within the past several months, HRA has implemented a pilot project to recertify NPA food stamp cases using an Interactive Voice Response System (IVRS) at two food stamp sites in Queens, and to target adults whose household circumstances are least likely to change at the time of recertification. They are generally clients who have fixed, unearned income such as disability or retirement benefits, or are aged 60 and older. I have also directed my staff to develop a new pilot plan to conduct telephone recertification interviews at one of our NPA food stamp sites. The pilot, made possible through a waiver obtained by the State from the USDA, will help us to evaluate whether food stamp clients prefer the option to recertify

by telephone, as well as to evaluate what challenges this system may present to the Agency.

We are also continuing our investment in improving the infrastructure that supports our food stamp program. A total of 11 food stamp offices have been converted to model offices, 7 of which are co-located with our Job Centers. Eighteen food stamp offices remain to be completed by December 2008. We will also be introducing the Paperless Office System (POS), now used in our job centers, into the food stamp offices. The infrastructure to do this currently exists, and once we complete the December pilot of the facilitated on-line application process, we will begin to roll POS out to all of our food stamp offices, with six completed by the end of this fiscal year and all completed by the end of calendar year 2008.

Emergency Food Assistance

In addition to administering the federal Food Stamp Program, HRA provides funding support and monitors the operations of approximately 550 food pantries and soup kitchens citywide. Organizations participating in our Emergency Food Assistance Program (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.

In FY 2006, EFAP distributed approximately 14.5 million pounds of non-perishable food. For this fiscal year, HRA's EFAP program is allocated \$7.632 million 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. Emergency food programs generally maintain a daily count of the number of people for whom they have provided a meal or meal ingredients. For FY 2006, the total of the daily counts of the number of persons provided with a meal or meal ingredients was 10,969,785.

As I have testified before, it is important to keep in mind that the food programs operated or assisted by HRA are only a portion of the overall picture of addressing hunger. In addition to the approximately \$1.242 billion in federal, state, and local expenditures for the Food Stamp Program and New York City EFAP program, approximately \$878 million, which includes the additional City Council grants, is expended citywide for food and nutrition programs that include FEMA sources, the Women, Infants and Children (WIC) program, the Department of Education food programs and Meals on Wheels.

Legislative Advocacy

Current Federal Food Stamp law will expire in September 2007, requiring the legislation to be reauthorized. HRA recognizes this as an opportunity to advocate for changes in the law that would help to improve our enrollment

efforts, and we have proposed several Food Stamp Program legislative changes that reflect our commitment. We are proposing that all Medicaid-eligible individuals be categorically eligible for the Food Stamp Program. We are advocating that the minimum food stamp benefit be raised from \$10 to \$25, to increase participation in the program and reflect the fact that individuals sometimes do not participate because the value of the minimum benefit may seem too low to assist in meeting their nutritional needs. We are proposing that the current \$50 in child support that is passed through to custodial parents on public assistance be exempted as income for determining food stamp benefits for those clients. To support increased enrollment efforts, we are proposing an increase in the federal share of administrative costs for the Food Stamp Program. Finally, we are asking that the Transitional Food Stamp Program be expanded to support those leaving state-funded assistance programs (such as New York's Safety Net Program), in addition to those leaving the TANF rolls. We hope the Council will support our efforts to advocate for these changes in the next Congressional session.

National and State Recognition for Food Stamp Access

In May, I received notice from the New York State Office of Temporary and Disability Assistance (OTDA) that New York City had been allocated \$1,719,395 of the State's federal Food Stamp Program High Performance Bonus Award, for the City's contribution to the State's overall improvement in the Negative Case Error Rate for the most recent period. The Negative Error Rate measures

whether actions on cases that were closed or denied were appropriate. The State's entire award was \$2.87 million, based on having achieved the second highest level of improvement nationally. Our allocation was based on our caseload size and benefits issued, plus an additional amount granted for the extent to which we exceeded the statewide accuracy rate.

The USDA also gives financial awards to those states that have demonstrated high or improved proficiency in administering the Food Stamp Program. I am proud to announce that the USDA recently awarded \$4.1 million -- the highest access award among all states recognized -- to New York State for ranking third nationally for most improved Food Stamp Program access. I have just received word that \$2,521,765 million of this award has been allocated to New York City, and OTDA has publicly acknowledged the accomplishments of HRA's program (comprising more than 60% of the State's food stamp caseload) toward achieving this success.

My staff and I welcome your questions.