



TESTIMONY

Robert Doar, Commissioner
Human Resources Administration/Department of Social Services

Hearing entitled: "Oversight- Fighting Hunger in New York City"

Meeting of the General Welfare Committee
New York City Council

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Good morning. I am Robert Doar, Commissioner of the Human Resources Administration and I am pleased to be here today to discuss present accomplishments and upcoming initiatives of our Agency's food assistance programs.

Joining me today is HRA Deputy Commissioner, Cecile Noel who administers our Emergency Food Assistance Program and Ben Thomases, the City's Food Policy Coordinator who has worked hard at addressing so many of the food issues facing our City. I am also glad to see that Commissioner Hansell of the State Office of Temporary and Disability Assistance (OTDA) was here today as we are key partners with the state in many of our efforts.

HRA's work on food assistance continues and expands on the successful strategies that are part of Mayor Bloomberg's goal of combating poverty. Food assistance is an often important support for families as we help them strive for self-sufficiency through employment and work supports. Today, I would like to highlight our efforts on both food stamps as well as emergency food assistance that continue to improve and make a difference in the lives of so many New York City families.

The Emergency Food Assistance Program (EFAP)

Since 1983, the Emergency Food Assistance Program (EFAP) has played a critical role in supporting the efforts of the food assistance community here in New York City. EFAP coordinates the distribution of non-perishable commodities to over 500 emergency food programs (currently, 375 food pantries and 143 soup kitchens). There are 170 member programs in Brooklyn; 81 in The Bronx; 118 in Manhattan; 129 in Queens; and 20 programs in Staten Island. Every year, these soup kitchens and food pantries provide nutritious food that helps low-income New Yorkers stretch their dollars.

Allocation of Limited Resources

The annual budget for the purchase of commodities is \$7.6 million. A contract is maintained with the Food Bank for New York City to warehouse and distribute the commodities to EFAP members. EFAP provides an average of \$300,000 in funding for administrative grants, of which \$100,000 is City Council discretionary funds, to reimburse a portion of the non-food related costs that emergency food programs incur

during the year. In addition, for the third year in a row, EFAP is administering \$500,000 in City Council funds for enhancement grants to buy refrigerators, freezers, shelving and other goods to allow expansion of the capacity of the emergency feeding programs. While we are cognizant of shortages around the City, you should know that when a program calls us about a specific need, EFAP has a process that ensures that we can respond to the reported shortage. Usually, a delivery can be arranged in a timely manner. To address the shortage in the long term, the Mayor wrote Washington urging that the federal funding for the emergency feeding programs be increased along with an annual inflationary increase.

But we here in New York City can't wait for federal support when pressing need is right in front of us. That is why, this morning Mr. Thomases and I announced Mayor Bloomberg's decision to dedicate \$1 million of the City's Food Stamp bonus money to increase city funding for food for the Emergency Food Assistance Program. This one time allocation of funds will help food pantries and soup kitchens throughout the city restore their supplies despite uncertain Federal support and rising costs.

Nutritional Standards

Over the past five years, EFAP has improved the nutritional quality of the food that is distributed: we provide low fat 1% milk instead of whole milk, offer whole grain commodities, have tuna in water, not in oil, and supply fruits in light syrup that will be in natural fruit juice in the coming year. In addition, we are compliant with the Department of Health and Mental Hygiene's trans fat initiative, and have also increased the number of low sodium products. As part of the Food Policy Task Force we are working to further improve on the nutritional quality of the EFAP commodities.

The Food Stamp and Nutrition Outreach Program

The Food Stamp and Nutrition Outreach Program specializes in educating the public about the Food Stamp Program and general nutrition. The HRA team of eight staff disseminates eligibility information and assists with the food stamp application process throughout the five boroughs of New York City. Their outreach efforts have proven so successful that we are expanding the number of staff.

Outreach is regularly conducted at soup kitchens and food pantries, hospitals, Women, Infants and Children (WIC) Program sites, senior centers and public libraries. Currently, the unit visits 65 sites monthly on a recurring basis. We also collaborate with community-based organizations and the City Council to provide training to constituents, staff, and other non-profit agencies. I am particularly proud of our staff's outreach efforts and with me here are Tara Walker and Millie Rodriguez from our Food Stamp and Nutrition Outreach Program who were instrumental in the success of one of our HRA pilots. In fact, it was recently awarded a national Hunger Champion Award by the United States Department of Agriculture, the federal agency responsible for overseeing the Food Stamp program. This pilot, at two Emergency Food Assistance Program multi-service sites: the West Side Campaign Against Hunger in Manhattan, and St. John's Bread and Life in Brooklyn, involved training program social service staff on the eligibility guidelines and the application process of the Food Stamp Program. These programs were then linked to two local Food Stamp offices. This collaborative effort improved the quality of Food Stamp applications submitted and increased participation in the program. In fact, more than 70% of individuals screened through this program received food stamps.

Based on the success of this pilot, HRA plans to expand this program. Before the end of this fiscal year, the staff will be taking applications in the field, with the help of laptops loaded with the food stamp application connected to HRA's paperless office system.

The Food Stamp Program

This leads me to the Food Stamp Program where I would like to start by mentioning some of our new initiatives and then provide you an update on some of our ongoing work.

Redesigning HRA's Food Stamp Administration

To reflect the importance of the Food Stamp Program and to ensure it receives the management attention it deserves, in July of this year we created a unified management structure to manage the Food Stamp-only offices and to be the administrative unit for the Agency's Food Stamp policy and operations. The Food Stamps program had previously been split apart between other offices and programs such as our employment and rental assistance programs. And, it did not have a single place of importance within our

management structure. The new Food Stamp division is headed by Jean Coyle, who is here today, and who has over three decades of Food Stamp and client service experience. Ms. Coyle understands the needs of our workers and what it takes to make our offices work in a client-centered way. Our revised structure will ensure the program's present and future needs are raised directly to me and to my senior administrative staff.

The Working Families Initiative

One of our current priorities is to implement for New York City the State's Working Families Initiative. We are a pilot district for Working Families and strongly endorse the program's focus on providing food assistance to working New Yorkers. While many of the details of the program are being worked out between HRA and the Office of Temporary and Disability Assistance, the program design will allow households in which one person is working at least 30 hours weekly to complete many elements of the application process without having to come to a food stamp office. Individuals will be able to submit the application and supporting documents through the mail or by fax and can then have the federally required interview over the phone, without coming to a Food Stamp office.

The Importance of Finger Imaging

While Working Families applicants will not have to apply for Food Stamp benefits at an HRA office, they will be required to come in very briefly to be finger imaged. Finger imaging is a simple process which helps ensure the integrity of our overall Food Stamp Program and has been successful in avoiding the duplication of payments to the same recipient, whether due to intentional fraud, administrative errors, or other reasons. In New York City, from 1998, when finger-imaging was first implemented for non-cash assistance food stamp clients, through 2006 there were 11,049 actions taken on cases for anomalies found through this practice. In calendar year 2006, 31 cases of fraud involving non-cash food stamp clients were detected by HRA through imaging. More important than detecting fraud and administrative errors, finger imaging is also an essential deterrent to potential fraud. Prior to the implementation of the Automated Finger Imaging System (AFIS) in New York City, multiple investigations revealed that fraud was prevalent in the benefit programs, particularly involving multiple case openings and multiple identities. That problem has been virtually eliminated by finger imaging.

To ensure applicants can be imaged as conveniently and expeditiously as possible, as part of Working Families, we are expanding both the available locations and the times during the day when these applicants can be imaged. These enhancements, at minimal cost, include allowing an individual to come into any HRA Food Stamp office in the City to be imaged. There is one office in each borough open on Saturday and at least one office in the city is open until 7 PM each evening. Further we will establish an off-hours finger imaging location by appointment at the agency's 250 Church Street office in Manhattan.

The Facilitated Application Pilot

When implemented early next year, the Working Families process will be one way for applicants to complete the most time intensive portion of the Food Stamp application without coming to our office, but it is not the only method. Since the Council's last hearing devoted to this subject one year ago, HRA with the assistance of several community partners, has implemented a facilitated application process under a federal grant. This process, now in place in at least one participating soup kitchen or pantry in every borough, allows individuals to submit applications and all the federally required supporting material electronically, prior to arrival at an HRA office. The result is more complete applications and less time spent at the Food Stamp office. More than 600 individuals have submitted applications through this process and the feedback from both applicants and the participating community organizations has been very positive. Over 80% have been determined eligible.

Paperless Food Stamp Offices

In addition to the facilitated application process, we are also making a major technological upgrade in our food stamp offices. All Food Stamp offices are implementing the Paperless Office System. This System allows for easier processing of Food Stamp applications and re-certifications, electronic storage of case records and better management reports to ensure our offices are functioning efficiently. The System is already being used in nearly half our offices and under an aggressive roll out schedule will be in place at all offices by next fall. As part of the system's implementation, all food stamp staff who handle applicants and recipients will have their own computer to

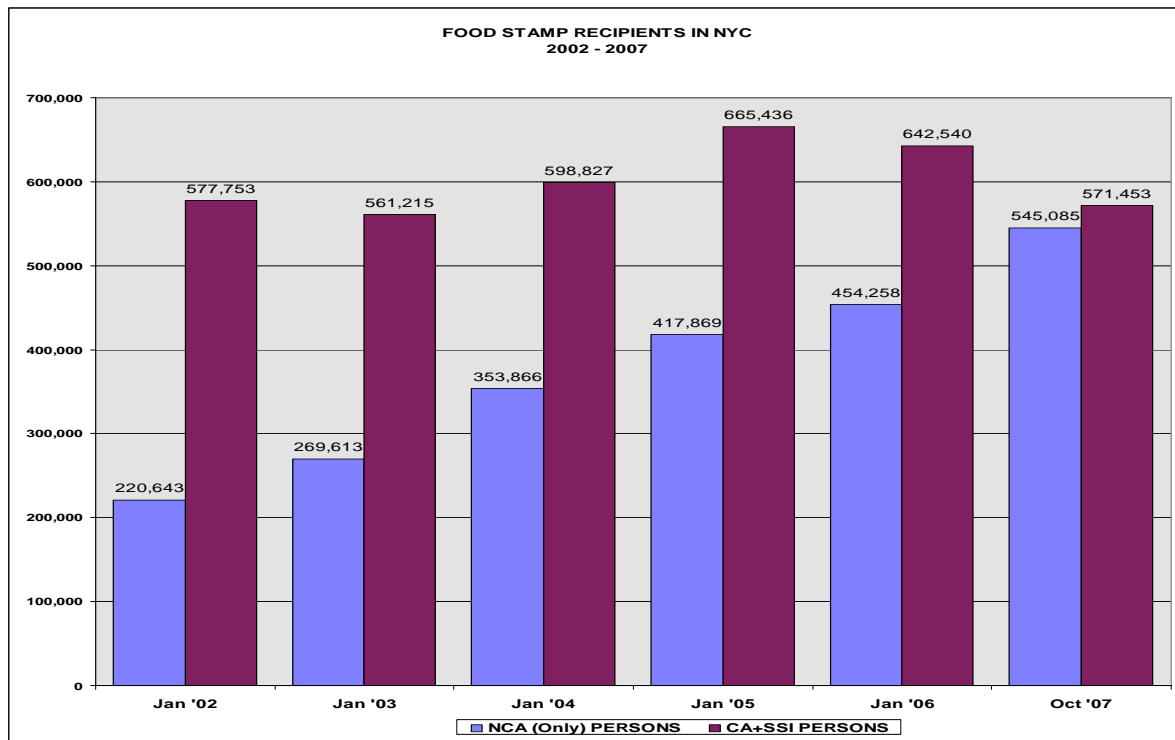
properly handle their cases. This investment in our Food Stamp offices benefits our staff as well as those we serve.

Telephone Recertification Interviews

Another approach we are taking to the traditional food stamp office based interview is conducting telephone recertification interviews. While the agency has long conducted recertification by mail for nearly 200,000 food stamp recipients, we have not previously conducted large scale telephone recertification interviews. Starting this month, nearly all recipients in two food stamp offices, the East End Center in Manhattan and the Fordham Center in the Bronx, will be able to have their traditional office based recertification interview conducted over the phone. Individuals who choose this option will talk to an HRA worker from their home, office or other convenient location. Any required documents can be mailed, faxed or dropped at the office. Telephone interviews will allow individuals to more easily comply with the federal recertification requirements and should also make the program more efficient.

Getting Food Stamps to More New Yorkers

The initiatives mentioned above are really towards one end, to ensure we are assisting those New Yorkers who need assistance to feed their families. Today more than 1.1 million New Yorkers receive Food Stamp benefits, an increase of nearly 40% since Mayor Bloomberg took office. In fact, over 300,000 more New Yorkers receive Food Stamps each month today than did in January 2002. While this growth alone shows a commitment to improving access to the Food Stamp program, the true impact of the administration's efforts can be seen in the increase in those receiving Food Stamp benefits alone, without also receiving cash assistance. These programs, where the outreach and improvement efforts have been primarily focused, have resulted in a doubling of the non-cash assistance Food Stamp program during the Bloomberg administration in the past five and a half years. The portion of the Food Stamp program serving individuals not receiving cash assistance or SSI, a group that includes working New Yorkers, has risen by nearly 150%. In the past year, from November 2006 to October 2007, the population of those receiving Food Stamps alone, without cash welfare or SSI, has increased nearly every month, growing to an increase of more than 60,000.



These substantial enrollment growths would not have been possible without a commitment to eliminate barriers and improve the Food Stamp program. These improvements have been recognized by the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA). In the recently published food stamp participation figures, New York State's rate increased significantly, rising from 54% to a 61% participation figure. While we continue to believe these figures do not include all the relevant factors, New York's substantial increase from 2004 to 2005, one of the highest growth rates in the country, clearly demonstrates the impact of our work. Further, these statistics do not go beyond 2005 and so the substantial growth we have had since then will only be reflected in future participation figures. USDA also recently awarded New York State \$10 million, of which the City received four million dollars, for improvement in Food Stamp payment accuracy.

I also want to bring to your attention the recently released Household Food Security Report by USDA which showed that in 2006 even though the national food insecurity rate increased slightly, the food insecurity rate for New York State was not only lower than the national rate of 11.3% but declined slightly from 10% to 9.8%. This rate is also a significant decline from the state food insecurity rate of 11.9% in 1998. Once again this

declining trend in the state's food insecurity rate clearly reflects New York City's efforts to enhance food and nutrition assistance programs.

The progress on Food Stamps has come as a result of initiatives such as the shortened Food Stamp application, translating application and other materials into more languages, longer office hours, an automatic Food Stamp enrollment process for individuals in receipt of SSI and an automated approach to those who have obtained employment and are moving off cash assistance. We have continued to build upon these efforts for additional strategies we can use to ensure that our program is accessible to all eligible New Yorkers who want food assistance.

The Federal Reauthorization Process

New opportunities to further simplify food assistance and make it more accessible to families may also present themselves as Congress is now debating the reauthorization of most food and nutrition programs including Food Stamps, and the Emergency Food and Nutrition Program. I understand the City Council has submitted recommendations in this debate, many of which we are in agreement. Like the Council, we support increasing the minimum benefit, restoring benefits to legal immigrants, simplifying the process, and increasing funding to The Emergency Food Assistance Program (TEFAP). However, we are very concerned about provisions that prohibit the use of non-government employees, including staff of non-profit organizations, to facilitate applications and we are concerned about possible limitations placed on the use of finger-imaging. However, I understand that final changes are not likely until next year so we will have time to do everything we can to influence the final outcome.

In closing, I would like to say that HRA is committed to ensuring that food assistance continues to be a vital, easy to access, economic support for low-income working New Yorkers.