



**Human Resources
Administration**
Department of
Social Services

TESTIMONY

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

Oversight - Feeding New Yorkers during the Financial Crisis

*New York City Council
General Welfare Committee*

November 25, 2008

Good morning Chairman deBlasio and members of the General Welfare Committee. Joining me this morning are Executive Deputy Commissioner Cecile Noel who administers both our Outreach and Emergency Food Assistance (EFAP) Programs and Assistant Deputy Commissioner Jean Coyle who is over our Food Stamp Program. The improvements and initiatives I plan on discussing here today are really a credit to their very hard work and the work of the thousands of HRA employees who work hard for the City everyday. Also, to my far left is Ben Thomases, Food Policy Coordinator for the City of New York. Ben has been a tireless and effective advocate on food policy issues not only with HRA, but throughout the City government.

As you know, food assistance is a key component in Mayor Bloomberg's aggressive and innovative strategy to assist low-income New Yorkers. To support Cash Assistance recipients to enter the workforce and to assist those already in low-wage jobs, we have made a concerted effort to improve our work support system – including Food Stamp benefits. The Earned Income Tax Credit, public health insurance, child support, and child care subsidies are also part of the assistance we offer to low wage workers.

Under Mayor Bloomberg, the City has been a leader in improving the accessibility of the Food Stamp Program for working New Yorkers. As of October 2008, more than 1.3 million New Yorkers are enrolled in the Program, an increase of 65% since 2002. It is of particular note that the biggest area of growth has been among those who rely on Food Stamp benefits to supplement their income and do not receive Cash Assistance or federal Supplemental Security Income (SSI). This population has grown by 156 percent under Mayor Bloomberg. With more than 685,000 recipients, this group now constitutes over half of all participants in the Program.

This increase in caseload is due to many factors such as increasing the use of technology, making the application and recertification process easier; combined with a broad and coordinated outreach effort. I would like to briefly explain several of these initiatives and have also included a chart at the end of the testimony that illustrates many of our efforts over the course of the year.

Use of Technology

I believe we are in agreement that the broadened use of technology is critical to the simplification and accessibility of the social service system. This is a high priority for Deputy

Mayor Gibbs and something to which I have paid close attention. I am pleased to report that all of our Food Stamp Offices have now been re-designed with a paperless office system (POS). This system has improved the efficiency of the Food Stamp Offices. Applicants no longer complete paper applications and hand them to a worker for review. Instead the application material is completed in an interactive interview. Documents the applicant needs to provide are electronically stored so they will not have to be brought in again. POS also gives managers real time data on workflow and processing in their site and allows them the capability to make necessary changes. Also, with regards to technology, we are providing up-to-date information and application materials online for recipients and community based organizations through ACCESS NYC.

The Application Process

In addition, we have taken several steps to simplify the application processes. Telephone application interviews are now available for working families, the elderly, disabled as well as those who have a travel or childcare hardship. We continue to automatically enroll federal SSI recipients into the Food Stamp Program. In addition to shortening both the application itself, and the time it takes to apply, we have several new initiatives underway with community based organizations that will also make it easier to obtain benefits.

Robin Hood Foundation Single Stop Initiative

I have previously discussed with the Committee our work with community partners to submit Food Stamp applications with the necessary supporting documentation from various soup kitchens and food pantries throughout the City. Through this enrollment initiative, we have received more than 3,000 applications and the overwhelming majority received a Food Stamp benefit.

Building off of the same concept, and working with the Robin Hood Foundation and Met Council, individuals at five "Single Stop" locations in the community are now able to submit joint Food Stamp and Medicaid applications. Met Council staff visiting each Single Stop will provide assistance in electronically completing the joint application that is then submitted to HRA. The Robin Hood Foundation has funded five sites initially, and will expand to 15 sites within the next year.

Prisoner Re-entry Initiatives

In partnership with the Department of Correction and the Center for Urban Community Services, we are also using electronic applications at Riker's Island. Through this effort and the broader effort to help formerly incarcerated people complete discharge planning, the percentage of city-sentenced individuals who receive Food Stamp benefits within 60 days of release has increased to 41 percent in the last year.

Telephone and Mail-In Re-certifications

In addition to increasing access at the front door, we have taken steps to make it more convenient to continue to receive Food Stamp benefits. Traditionally cases are subject to a 6 month recertification cycle. However, we have changed our procedures and have waived the office-based recertification interview for all recipients unless they need to be finger-imaged. The in-person recertification cycle has been increased to 12 months with a 6 month mail inquiry. The 12 month recertification interview can now be done over the phone and clients can submit all necessary documents by drop off, mail, or fax. Those receiving SSI are on an even more extended cycle, having only to recertify by mail every four years with a mail inquiry every two years to see if any relevant circumstances have changed.

In coordination with the State, we are also hopeful that we will be able to further ease the recertification process by receiving federal approval to expand a pilot that utilizes an Integrated Voice Response (IVR) system to enable recertification via touch tone telephone. IVR is targeted to populations who show little to no change from month to month in conditions that affect their eligibility and is presently available for eligible cases at our Queens Food Stamp Center.

Expanded Food Stamp Outreach

There has been a large emphasis on Food Stamp outreach over the past year that I would like to highlight, including a joint initiative with the City Council. In collaboration with Speaker Quinn's office, we identified persons receiving Medicaid but not Food Stamp benefits, as there are some similarities in the eligibility requirements of these programs. There has been a true coordination on this initiative, with the City Council timing targeted outreach as we send letters out to the select Medicaid recipients. We have completed mailings to 300,000 households in

the boroughs of Queens and The Bronx. Letters are now being sent to Manhattan while letters to Brooklyn and Staten Island will commence in January. Preliminary results for Queens and the Bronx show that over 28,500 people in these two boroughs filed applications so far and over 21,400 of them received a Food Stamp benefit.

HRA's Food Stamp and Nutrition Outreach Program has also conducted outreach services at 572 locations this year; primarily at emergency food programs, but also at Senior Centers, WIC sites, hospitals, libraries, and health and social service fairs. There has also been an increased emphasis on making sure senior citizens take advantage of the Food Stamp Program and as of October 2008 there were over 264,000 individuals 60 years or over in the Program, an increase of over 23,000 since the beginning of the year.

HRA Food Stamp Outreach Media Campaign

This year our media campaign that consists of radio, newspaper and subway and bus shelter posters and is contracted through the Food Bank of New York City, has done a great job of explaining that the Program is easier than ever to access. Drawing on this strong effort, this coming year's campaign will focus on seniors and, with input from the Department for the Aging (DFTA), will be addressing seniors' barriers to applying for and obtaining Food Stamp benefits.

New U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) Grants

Through two new USDA grants, we are working in collaboration with DFTA on easing the application process for seniors. The new "*Nutritional Enhancement for Elders through Data Sharing (NEEDS)*" program will allow us to develop a system to link DFTA's Senior Citizen Rent Increase Exemption (SCRIE) program database. HRA will be able to use the information already submitted as part of the SCRIE process to more easily enroll an individual in the Food Stamp Program. The SCRIE information can also be used to increase benefit amounts for seniors who may not have provided us with the most updated information about their rent expenses. A major component of the grant will be an outreach effort conducted by the Food Bank for New York City. The second grant entitled "*Eat Well: NYC Hispanic Seniors Food Stamp Outreach Program*" will collect Food Stamp applications at senior centers throughout the five boroughs and in communities with a high density of senior citizens, many of whom are also Latino.

New Federal and State Food Stamp Program Rules

Reauthorization of the Food Stamp Program

As you know, Congress passed a reauthorization of the Food Stamp Act this year. As part of this reauthorization, there were a series of changes to the Program, many of which were supported by Mayor Bloomberg, including raising the minimum benefit and increasing funding to the EFAP program. However, the provision that is probably most beneficial is the removal of the \$200 cap on the child and dependent care credit. As a result of this provision, every \$3 a recipient spends on childcare and child care related expenses may increase their benefit by an additional dollar.

However, equally important to the Food Stamp Program is that Congress rejected an effort to limit the role of community organizations to coordinating outreach activities. HRA played an active role and worked very closely with national organizations and members of Congress to block a provision that would have required us to pull back on many of our initiatives with organizations in the community.

State Resource Changes

Beyond federal changes, this year there was a significant change to the Food Stamp Program here in New York State. As of January, the State exempted all resources (such as a bank account or stocks and bonds) from the eligibility criteria for all non-sanctioned households whose income is at or under 130 percent of federal poverty (200 percent for the elderly and disabled). In order to notify those most likely impacted, HRA sent out more than 1,800 letters to clients who were denied benefits due to excess resources, advising them that they could re-apply. We have also included the resource information in our outreach material as we believe many low income individuals have not applied because of concerns that small bank accounts would make them ineligible for benefits.

I am also pleased to have been a key partner in a state effort to increase food assistance for residents of subsidized housing. This was recently done through a minor change to the Home Energy Assistance Program (HEAP) that triggered an average monthly increase of \$131 to over 128,000 New Yorkers, with most being residents of NYCHA housing.

Protecting Our Local Investment

In addition to federal and state funding, there is also a significant local investment in the Food Stamp Program. At HRA we are responsible for administering not only the largest Food Stamp Program in the State, but also one of the largest in the country. And, it is not well known that while benefits are paid for by the federal government, the City has the greatest share of administrative costs. Administrative expenditures encompass personnel costs associated with Food Stamp operations, fringe benefits on these salaries, and overhead costs such as office space and utilities. Last year we invested more than \$127 million in administrative funds compared to \$116 million by the federal government, and only about \$58 million from the state. This is more than two times what the State spends in Food Stamp Program administration costs. We have protected this local investment through all of the recent budget exercises and, so far, have been able to keep the Program untouched.

Maintaining Integrity While Caseloads and Benefits Increase

All of the accomplishments I have just reviewed occurred while we maintained our longstanding commitment to the integrity of the Food Stamp Program. A commitment that includes the belief that using finger imaging technology to detect and deter fraud is a simple, easy, non-threatening way to ensure that benefits go to the people truly in need and who are not defrauding the program. Our investment of \$307,000 in FY 2007 for finger imaging for non-Cash Assistance Food Stamp cases has generated a savings of \$1.6 million in potentially duplicate benefits. In addition, this year (as of mid-November) we have already seen a savings of \$2.3 million.

Prior to the implementation of finger imaging 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 while public support and confidence that our benefit programs are being used appropriately has grown.

Emergency Food and Nutrition Programs

We recognize the increasing severity of the epidemics of obesity and diet-related disease in this City, and their particularly deep impact on low-income populations. That is why we have been working closely with the Mayor's Food Policy Taskforce to make sure that our food assistance programs are consistent with the administrations' efforts to address these epidemics.

The Emergency Food Assistance Program (EFAP)

For example, the food provided through the Emergency Food Assistance Program is already in compliance with the citywide standards for food served that the Food Policy Taskforce and the New York City Department of Health released in September. Also, three weeks ago I joined the Mayor, along with Speaker Quinn and several members of the City Council in announcing additional EFAP funding as part of a targeted relief strategy to deal with the present economic situation. The City and City Council have allocated \$1.3 million to provide additional frozen food in soup kitchens and food pantries to help increase the quantity and quality of food distributed through these programs.

In addition, the dollars allocated to EFAP has increased by approximately \$611,000 making this year's allocation for EFAP \$8.2 million. This increase is in addition to approximately \$600,000 in state funding for the Hunger Prevention Nutrition Assistance Program allocated to food banks in New York City and announced last month by the Governor.

State Food Stamp Nutrition Education (FSNE) Program

In an economic climate of reduced spending, I am happy to tell you about the significant expansion in our federally-funded "*Eat Smart New York!*" nutrition education program. This year, we expanded by over 400 percent the programs with both Cornell Cooperative Extension and the Food Bank for New York City to improve the likelihood that participants will make healthy food choices within a limited budget. Cornell Cooperative Extension will now provide nutrition education to HRA Emergency Food and Assistance (EFAP) staff to make healthier choices when ordering food commodities for the EFAP network. They will also be working directly with soup kitchens and food pantry staff to teach them how to prepare healthier meals for their customers. The emergency feeding program customers will also receive nutrition education and the opportunity to participate in cooking demonstrations. As a result of the program expansion, Cornell has nearly quadrupled their budget, bringing an additional \$4 million in federal funding to city food assistance, nutrition education, and training. The Food Bank for New York City is also expanding their "*CookShop Program*" and other initiatives to ensure that students in New York City have access to nutrition education.

Health Bucks – EBT Incentive Program

In addition, in order to encourage Food Stamp recipients to consume more fruits and vegetables and provide them with additional resources in a time of rising food prices, we collaborated with

the New York City Department of Health and provided \$225,000 for the Health Bucks - EBT Incentive Program. Through this Program, Food Stamp recipients at more than 20 participating farmers' markets were given a Health Bucks coupon, worth \$2, for every \$5 they spent purchasing fruits and vegetables at the market with their EBT card. To ensure Food Stamp recipients were aware of the initiative, we sent information about Health Bucks to over 200,000 recipients living near the farmers markets.

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 New Yorkers. I look forward to your questions.





