



**Human Resources
Administration**
Department of
Social Services

TESTIMONY

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

**Oversight: New York City's Food Stamp and
Emergency Food Assistance Program**

*New York City Council
General Welfare Committee*

November 24, 2009

Good afternoon Chairman deBlasio and members of the General Welfare Committee. As you know, our Emergency Food Assistance and Food Stamp programs are in the very competent and caring hands of Executive Deputy Commissioner Cecile Noel and Assistant Deputy Commissioner Jean Coyle who are here with me today.

Since I came before you last year, there have been significant changes in the Food Stamp program. First and foremost, we are now providing benefits to more than 1.6 million people every month; 288,000 more recipients than we did in October of last year. A majority of this increase, approximately 263,000, are individuals who are not in receipt of cash assistance or federal Supplemental Security Income (SSI) benefits. This population of working family Food Stamp households makes up 75 percent of the Food Stamp rolls, which is a significant shift from the mid 1990's when 80 percent of the City's Food Stamp recipients were on cash assistance and not working. Each month the program distributes nearly \$250 million in benefits to New Yorkers, making it a key support for many low-income working families and those facing difficult times.

Without a doubt, the struggling economy played a role in bringing many of these new individuals and families to our door. But we, in the Bloomberg Administration have made significant changes to the structure and focus of the program and those changes, combined with the efforts of our hardworking staff, and our community based partners, have allowed us to serve these additional families.

MAJOR CHANGES TO THE APPLICATION AND RECERTIFICATION PROCESS:

(mail applications, phone interviews, and recertification)

Changes to the application and recertification process have reduced the amount of time a person spends in a Food Stamp Office and in many cases reduced the number of required office visits. For example, all recipients are eligible for a telephone recertification interview, eliminating the need for a trip to a Food Stamp office at recertification. In other cases, material can be mailed instead of brought to our offices. Work that does not involve face to face interactions such as checking documentation, scheduling appointments, and phone interviews has now been moved off-site to our "change centers".

Mail-In Application and Phone Interview

We have previously discussed our implementation of telephone interviews for those applying for Food Stamp benefits. In addition to these changes, this year we further improved the application process by creating a Mail Application Unit. Applications can be printed from the ACCESSNYC web page, filled out and then mailed to one central location. Once the applications are received, staff in this unit call applicants and most are given the option of interviewing over the phone. We have seen a steady growth in mail applications and we expect this to continue.

Recertification Simplification

In the past while individuals may have successfully applied for Food Stamps, they may have lost their benefit when they failed to recertify. To address this issue, we have taken steps to simplify the recertification process. In coordination with the State, we received federal approval to expand a pilot in our Queen's location that utilized an Integrated Voice Response (IVR) system to recertify recipients via touch tone telephone. It is targeted to populations who show little or no change from month-to-month in conditions that affect their eligibility and it is now available in every borough. In addition, 12 month re-certification instead of the former six month process has been in place for a full year. As is the case with the application process, the need to come into an office has been significantly reduced as recertification 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.

EXPANSION OF WORK WITH COMMUNITY PARTNERS

Moving Beyond the POS Pilot

These administrative changes have allowed us to considerably expand our work with community-based groups. In addition to our 19 Food Stamp Offices, individuals can submit applications and necessary documents at over 42 community-based organizations throughout the City. The community-based worker at the site can also make an appointment for either a phone interview, if the individual qualifies, or an in-person interview. In many cases the applicant is also able to receive other services that are regularly provided by many of the groups involved. As with all Food Stamp applicants, adults applying through this process must be finger imaged. This imaging can take place at any Food Stamp Office.

The work of these organizations has not only reduced the traffic into our offices, but also has allowed New Yorkers to apply in settings that may be more convenient as well as more familiar to them both geographically and culturally. To get the word out about these new community locations where people can apply, we have developed a marketing campaign and outreach strategy to distribute informational brochures and posters in churches, social service organizations, and in front of markets that accept Food Stamps.

Beyond the facilitated enrollment process with the community based groups, our Food Program outreach staff has a physical presence at least once a week in four community-based organizations in order to interview and electronically submit applications and we expect to expand to two additional community sites in the near future.

Working with the Formerly Incarcerated

We also have a specific focus on city-sentenced inmates on Riker's Island and/or those recently released. Since January 2007, we have worked with organizations participating in the Rikers Island Detention Enhancement (RIDE). RIDE is administered by the City Department of Corrections and engages a variety of organizations, such as the Fortune Society and the New York City Center for Employment Opportunities (CEO), to provide inmates with discharge planning, case management and assistance in obtaining benefits and services for successful reentry into their home communities. The Center for Urban Community Solutions (CUCS), which operates the Rikers Island Single Stop are part of our community-based network and are able to submit Food Stamp applications electronically prior to an inmate's release. HRA staff are also at CEO two days per week to pre-screen and electronically submit Food Stamp applications for recently released Riker's inmates and, in addition we are exploring a similar partnership with the Osborne Association that provides employment and training services to the formerly incarcerated. As of June 2009, we have seen that nearly 70 percent of city-sentenced inmates served through RIDE or the Rikers Island Single Stop are receiving Food Stamps sixty days after their discharge. This is up from 50 percent when we started this effort.

OUTREACH

Our Food Stamp Outreach staff also visit over 77 sites such as WIC Offices and libraries on a reoccurring basis to disseminate eligibility information and assist with the Food Stamp

application process. They have also conducted on-site training to over 250 of our member organizations receiving Emergency Food and Assistance Program funding over the past year.

Working with Senior Citizens

Through two U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) grants, we have also made considerable progress in reaching out to senior citizens. The first involves a joint initiative with the Department for the Aging (DFTA) and Food Bank. Under this project the two agencies identify individuals who are enrolled in the Senior Citizens Rent Increase Exemption program (SCRIE) but are not receiving Food Stamp benefits. Once individuals are identified, a letter is sent to them explaining that they are likely eligible for food stamps and telling them where they can receive assistance from Food Bank staff in completing and then electronically submitting a Food Stamp application along with the required documents. In addition to application assistance, Food Bank has access to documents submitted by the recipient as part of their SCRIE application. By using these documents already in the City's records, it is easier for these seniors to be determined eligible and receive a benefit. Since beginning in June, over 500 applications have been received under this process. The project, first piloted in Manhattan, has recently expanded to Queens and will expand throughout the City next year.

The second USDA grant also involves a partnership with DFTA to provide Food Stamp outreach to their staff and 12 city senior centers that primarily service a Hispanic population. The USDA identified Hispanic seniors as a population who are eligible for Food Stamps, but are not participating in the program. In order to encourage their participation, HRA pre-screen potential participants in the senior centers, and assist with the Food Stamp application process.

LOOKING AHEAD

Community-Based Groups and the Recertification Process

This year, HRA also competed for and won another USDA grant that we will implement in 2010. This grant will allow us to extend the successful POS electronic application pilot to the recertification process. Despite efforts to make recertification options available, some recipients fail to recertify. This results in case closures and then re-applying which places an unnecessary burden on both recipients and staff. While almost all recipients are currently eligible for a telephone recertification interview, funding from the grant will allow us to further expand so that community based groups will have the ability to assist with the submission of the recertification

application and the supporting documents. Individuals can then conduct their recertification interview over the telephone, eliminating the need to come to a Food Stamp Office for the process.

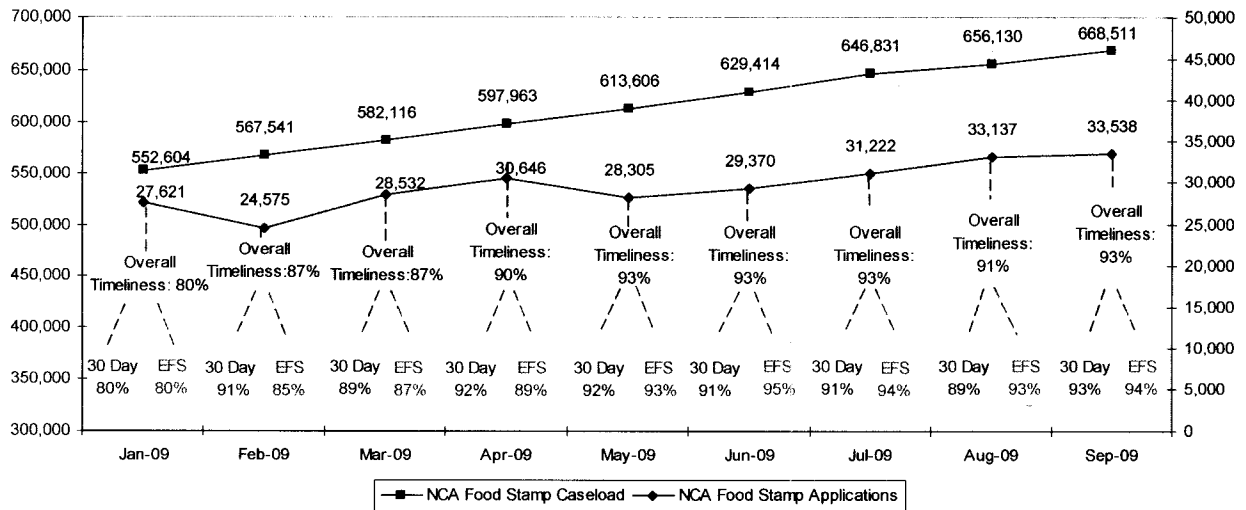
On-Line Applications

As you know, we have been in the process of moving beyond facilitated applications to allow individuals to submit applications directly over the internet. This change has involved a collaboration between programmatic and systems staff from both the City and State and we have been given assurances by the State Office of Temporary and Disability Assistance (OTDA) that we will be able to make an on-line application available to City residents by June 2010. Individuals can follow up their on-line submission by either mailing or dropping off the necessary documents and by stopping by a Food Stamp office for finger imaging.

PROGRAM INTEGRITY

All of the program access initiatives I have described have been accompanied by our continued emphasis on payment accuracy and program integrity. The most recent Food Stamp payment accuracy rate through June 2009 shows that clients receive correct benefits 93.3 percent of the time making the payment error rate 6.7 percent. At the same time, our application timeliness rate has seen significant improvement, and is now at 93 percent and these federal and state performance standards have been met in the face of unprecedented caseload growth. And, I do need to reiterate that finger imaging is a simple process that protects valuable taxpayer dollars. The City's investment of approximately \$153,000 in 2008 for finger imaging for non-cash assistance Food Stamp cases helped to identify nearly 1,000 duplicate cases, generating a savings of \$2.3 million in actual and/or potential misappropriated benefits last year. Over the past ten years, this has resulted in keeping over \$27.8 million in government dollars from being wasted. The entire finger imaging process, including waiting, should take less than an hour and can be done by going to any Food Stamp Office and at least one Office in each borough provides extended hours Monday to Friday (8:30 A.M. to 6 P.M.) and Saturday (9A.M.to 5P.M.). In addition, we have one centrally located site available, by appointment, for any applicant who indicates their non-availability during the six days of "normal" hours.

Food Stamp Non-Cash Assistance 30 day and Expedited Food Stamp Timeliness



EMERGENCY FOOD ASSISTANCE PROGRAM (EFAP)

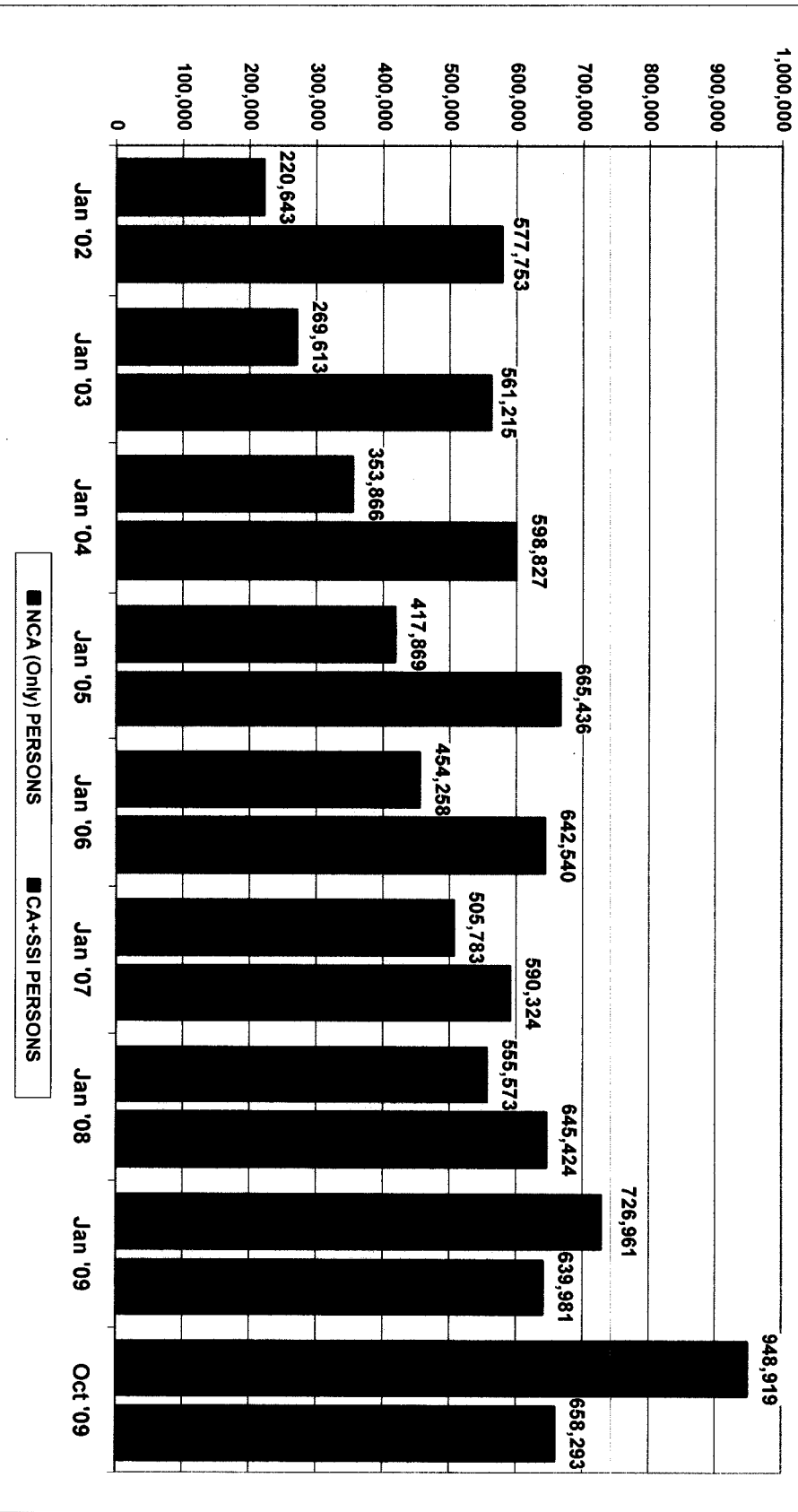
Finally, I want to provide you with an update on our Emergency Food Assistance Program. This program, focused on the nutritional status of low-income New Yorkers, purchases and distributes non-perishable food commodities to 510 emergency food programs (133 soup kitchens and 377 food pantries) throughout the City. In Fiscal Year 2009, the EFAP budget was \$8.3 million, and we distributed approximately 12 million pounds of food. In addition to this funding, administrative grants valued at \$300,000, are available to off-set a portion of non-food related costs, such as paper plates, grocery bags, and operational expenses that emergency food programs incur during the year.

This year we also began a frozen food pilot project with \$1.3 million in City Council funding that is being well-received in the community. The goal of the pilot is to improve the nutritional quality of the food available to the emergency feeding program customers.

Thank you for the opportunity to share the accomplishments of our Food Stamp Program and Emergency Food Assistance Program with you. I look forward to your questions and would also like to thank Chairman deBlasio for your leadership as Chair of this Committee. I am sure you will bring the same level of professionalism, persistence, and compassion to your new role as Public Advocate and I look forward to working with you in your new capacity.

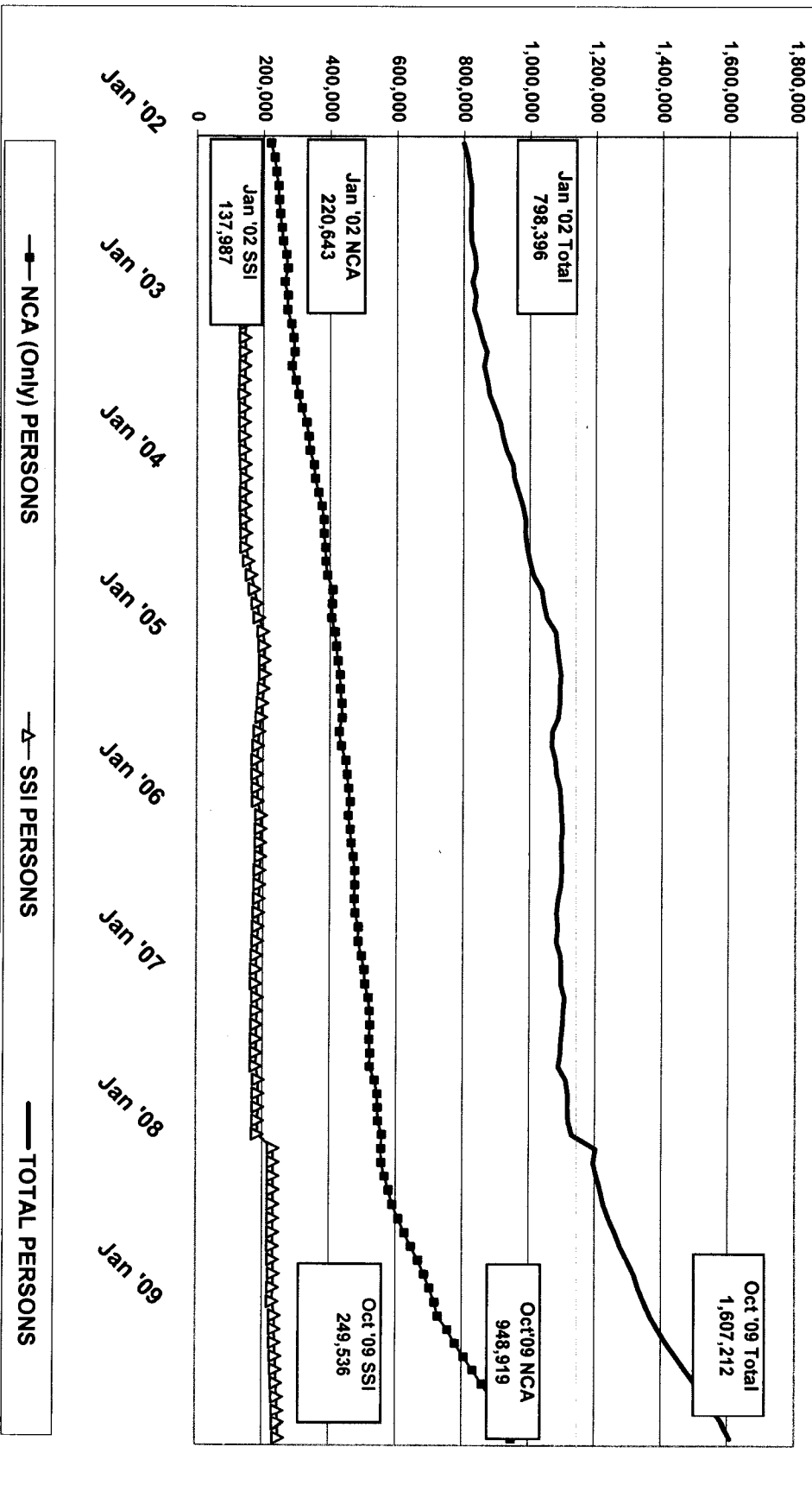
CASELOAD DATA

**HUMAN RESOURCES ADMINISTRATION
FOOD STAMP RECIPIENTS IN NYC
2002 - 2009**



Note: To conform to State and Federal practice, in January 2008 this report began including Food Stamp issuances for the Residential Treatment Services Center and Food Stamp single issuances. This change in methodology also caused some corrections in categories of recipients.

HUMAN RESOURCES ADMINISTRATION
 FOOD STAMP RECIPIENTS IN NYC*
 2002 - 2009



Note: In January 2008 this report began including Food Stamp Issuances for the Residential Treatment Services Center (Center 52) and Food Stamp Single Issuances. This change resulted in an additional increase of 84,425 persons receiving Food Stamps. HRA was not able to obtain this data prior to January 2008.