



**Human Resources
Administration**
Department of
Social Services

TESTIMONY

“Oversight: Overcrowding at HRA Food Stamp Centers & Job Centers”

New York City Council General Welfare Committee

January 31, 2012

Good morning Chairwoman Palma and members of the General Welfare Committee. My name is Patricia M. Smith, I am the First Deputy Commissioner of the Human Resources Administration (HRA). With me here today are Lisa Fitzpatrick, Deputy Commissioner of our Family Independence Administration (FIA) over operations and Gary Jenkins, Assistant Deputy Commissioner of FIA and head of the Food Stamp Program.

HRA shares your concern regarding our services for the number of people coming into our Food Stamp and Job Centers. As Commissioner Doar outlined in his testimony before the Committee in November, we have made it a top priority of the Agency to address the office adequacy issues. It is imperative that we make sure that everyone who applies and is eligible receives their benefits within required time frames. We have continually kept a close eye on our timeliness rate in issuing benefits and can report that we are meeting federal and state standards in both our Food Stamp and Cash Assistance programs. However, it is clear that the growth of our Food Stamp Program in particular, more than 700,000 people in a four year period, which now serves 1.825 million people, has been challenging to those who seek our services as well as to our staff.

Initially, we met the increased demand through automation and procedural changes that were underway prior to the caseload rise (*see appendix A*). By 2008, we had implemented a paperless office system that allowed for easier processing of applications and recertifications, as well as electronic storage of case records and better management reports for both food stamps and cash assistance. From 2005 through 2007, we also converted many of our centers into “model offices” that helped streamline both the center design and the overall process. Within our Food Stamp Program, by 2008, changes were already in place to receive applications by fax and mail and to replace in-person interviews with telephone interviews for certain populations. We also had implemented an automated telephone recertification process for those with no changes in their financial circumstance from year to year.

CHALLENGES TO OUR PROGRAMS

Effects of State Administrative Reductions

However, the economic difficulties continued longer than expected and our operational challenges were exacerbated when the state severely reduced funding for administrative support to the City. The administrative funds represent staff as well as the bricks and mortar of our work. They pay for staff who see our clients, the facilities where we provide service, and all of the necessary support operations. The City spends over 626 million dollars annually to administer the food stamp and cash assistance programs. This amount covers staff salaries, buildings, supplies, technology and all other needed supports. The City’s contribution for administering these programs has increased by more than 200 million dollars over the last six years, while the State’s contribution has been reduced from over 200 million dollars down to zero dollars. Let me repeat that: the State’s financial contribution in a program that was designed to be a state and local partnership has gone from over 200 million dollars to zero dollars. As a specific example, the 2009-2010 state budget removed support to the City for the administration of food stamps, cash assistance, and employment programs, while the City picked up costs of more than 120 million dollars annually. Making matters worse, last year it pulled back on its historic commitment to equally share in the benefit costs of the Safety Net caseload, requiring the City to pay 71 percent of the cost, an increase of 21 percent. The cost to the City of that change was over 225 million dollars yearly and is estimated at over 1.2 billion dollars over the next five years.

Headcount Reduction

As you know from our annual budget hearings, we worked hard to avoid layoffs and focused reductions on administrative and other support functions rather than direct services for as long as possible. In order to meet savings targets, HRA reduced our budgeted headcount by 1,300 positions, through eliminating vacancies while not laying off staff. During this time of caseload growth our productivity was challenged by the need to replace approximately 400 provisional Food Stamp Eligibility Specialists, Job Opportunity Specialists, and other center staff. While the newer workers have over two years of experience on the job at this point, there was a period of classroom and on-the-job training in order to come up to speed.

Although we tried to protect direct service staff from many of the personnel actions, the issue of growing demand for our services resulted in higher staff to case ratios. The Food Stamp Program, though, has historically been able to sustain higher staff to case ratios as it usually involves minimal direct client to staff contact. In fact, our average worker to case ratio prior to the economic downturn at the end of 2007 was approximately one for 549. We believed the additional increase could be absorbed by the new automation being integrated into the program, however we over-estimated the uptake in the use of technology to apply remotely. At the end of 2011, our worker to case ratio is one to 852.

Space Concerns and Consolidations

In an effort to reduce non-personnel costs, and thereby preserve staffing levels at our centers, HRA relinquished over \$7 million worth of annual rental space for a total of 359,584 gross square feet. A majority of this space was not occupied by centers, with two exceptions- the consolidation of two refugee job centers into one and the closure of the building in Harlem housing the Riverview Job Center. The latter would have required a substantial financial investment to renovate if we stayed; the City-owned property was made available for affordable housing. The clients from Riverview were accommodated in newly renovated space in Queens. The layout of our older facilities had created a set of problems as several have small waiting areas or areas that can only be accessed via limited elevator banks. It was also becoming clear that some of our space was no longer adequate to accommodate both a food stamp and job center. For example, in Brooklyn, our Euclid Job Center space was transitioned to the Food Stamp Program while an expanded Job Center was created by transferring our Food Stamp Program out of the Linden Center. In The Bronx specifically, delays in when space would become available also meant that our plan to create separate food stamp and job center space was interrupted in midstream. This delayed case transfers, placing increased demand on some centers.

RECENT AND UPCOMING CHANGES AND IMPROVEMENTS

Describing the problem doesn't solve it and we are very committed to continuing to make necessary changes and adjustments. The alleviation of crowding at our office is a high priority and recent actions we have taken are already showing results.

Staffing Additions and Adjustments

Additional staff is now on-board at our high demand food stamp centers with the 102 eligibility workers funded in last year's budget having completed training and now on the job for 3 months. We also added an additional 10 supervisory positions within our Rental Housing Assistance and Housing Court units who have seen an increased demand, particularly in the Bronx. This influx

of workers has been a great assistance and in February we are set to hire 49 additional Food Stamp eligibility workers and 50 Job Opportunity Specialists for targeted centers.

Space Redesign

We have reevaluated our space at centers experiencing problems with overcrowding and identified immediate and longer term changes. For the food stamp centers, we have been able to make some changes and adjustments to the physical layout to accommodate those seeking our services. For example, at several of the centers, notably in the Bronx and Brooklyn, additional waiting room space has been made available inside the facilities by reconfiguring layouts and using underutilized space. We also are reallocating some space that was utilized by other HRA programs in the same buildings. Additional space was also identified by asking some vendors and other community partners in particularly crowded centers to move to off site locations. As the Committee is aware, we are also in the planning stages with the Department of Citywide Administrative Services to take occupancy of brand new office space with the consolidation of the Melrose Job Center and its co-located Food Stamp Center into the Bank Note building in the Bronx and the Linden Job Center to 470 Vanderbilt Avenue in Brooklyn.

Reducing or Diverting Time Spent in a Center

As discussed by Commissioner Doar at the Committee's November hearing, HRA has also taken a series of actions that are reducing the foot traffic into the offices. After an analysis of the reasons why recipients come to our centers beyond applying for benefits, we found that a significant number of daily office visits were to request replacements of a lost NY State Common Benefit Identification Card, the card with which benefits are redeemed, and for budget letters to confirm budgets for various reasons. To avoid the need to go to their assigned center for a referral for a state card replacement, we implemented a centralized replacement card referral process for Brooklyn and Queens that is in closer proximity to the State's card center in Brooklyn. A similar process is underway and currently available for several of our Bronx centers. These two new sites have issued referrals for as many as 9,000 replacement cards each month. We also developed an automated telephone line on which cash assistance and food stamp recipients now have the ability to call a centralized number, (718) 722-8009, to request a budget letter on their case which will be generated and mailed to their residence rather than having to come to their assigned center to obtain one. Since April 2011, more than 6,800 budget letters have been requested and mailed to our clients. Now that the service is available in all five boroughs, we expect that utilization of this service will only grow.

This year, we also expect to see a large shift in the use of web-based electronic food stamp applications. The city-wide rollout of the online application process was completed early last year. Already, we have seen the percentage of our applications coming in via the web double since the first full month of operations last year; online applications now represent 22 percent of all our food stamp applications. The State Office of Temporary and Disability Assistance is also working to expand its "My Benefits" website to allow non-cash assistance food stamp participants to recertify for benefits online. They have told us that this new feature is expected to launch by early summer 2012. Food stamp participants are also now able to access the state's website to check their benefit amounts, confirm budget information, and view case details such as the names of the people on their case and the address on file. These initiatives make it easier for our clients to get the information they need without contacting the centers.

We had hoped that our collaborations with community-based organizations would have meant more food stamp applications being filed off-site. However, although we are now working with over 70 organizations, we receive an average of just over 1,300 applications a month from community organizations, much fewer than anticipated when we began the initiative.

Better Alignment of Clients to Centers

Another focus of our efforts has been to balance and properly distribute caseload and staff workload to adjust when we find a particular location experiences a consistently high volume of applications. One way that we have accomplished this is through zip code realignments. We are very cognizant of travel times for clients in this process and are making sure that any increase of travel time is minimal. In the Cash Assistance Program, the use of some specialty centers has also been very effective. We reorganized our Job Centers by modifying our process for senior citizen and child-only cases, in which the adult is not part of the CA case. After initiating an application at a local Job Center, these cases are now transferred to a specialized Senior Center or a Family Services Center. In the Food Stamp Program, the Supplemental Security Income (SSI) only cases are served through one central location, which has also allowed for specialized staff training.

As you can see, we are taking a comprehensive approach to this issue. We are taking steps to make sure that applicants and recipients are served in professional accommodations, while putting into place both short and long-term solutions that will streamline the process for both clients and workers.

At this time I look forward to the Council's questions.

APPENDIX A

