



**TESTIMONY**

**OF**

**SETH DIAMOND**

**EXECUTIVE DEPUTY COMMISSIONER  
FAMILY INDEPENDENCE ADMINISTRATION**

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

**BEFORE THE**

**CITY COUNCIL  
GENERAL WELFARE COMMITTEE**

**ON**

***MAKING WORK PAY AND  
ENSURING PEOPLE ARE PREPARED TO WORK***

**May 15, 2006**

Good afternoon. My name is Seth Diamond, Executive Deputy Commissioner for the Family Independence Administration within the Human Resources Administration. I would like to discuss with you the Agency's approach to providing employment and services to support employment for low income New Yorkers.

For the past four years of this Administration, under the leadership of Commissioner Eggleston, HRA has worked to establish programs and services to move New Yorkers of all abilities to their highest level of self-sufficiency. We serve not just the most able and best prepared; we serve all who come to our Job Centers. Whether you are a service worker whose restaurant has recently closed leaving you out of work for the first time in a decade, a new immigrant seeking a better life for your family with no ability to speak English or a middle aged man with high blood pressure who has worked only sporadically throughout his life, we provide a high quality, structured, and supervised employment program that best meets your needs.

Our success in establishing programs to serve the entire spectrum of those seeking public assistance is evidenced by the City's participation rate, the measure the federal government uses to determine how well states and cities are doing in engaging all their public assistance recipients in employment activities. New York City's participation rate is higher than the rest of New York State's and is also ahead of most other urban areas across the country. Other localities have

only focused on serving those best able to enter the labor market, a relatively small low-need sector of the public assistance population. New York City has taken a different approach; we have developed programs to meet the varied and often multiple needs of those on public assistance.

In the past two years alone these efforts have led to 170,000 job placements and the lowest public assistance caseload in over forty years. The investment made in developing successful employment programs in the past four years and the new programs we are poised to begin this year put us in a position to continue and expand our success, to reach more New Yorkers and meet Commissioner Eggleston's goal of a 60% participation rate, without the assistance of credit for previous caseload reductions.

Many of you have heard Commissioner Eggleston describe our newest program WeCARE. WeCARE is an acronym for HRA's Wellness Comprehensive Assessment Rehabilitation and Employment Program which has in its first start up year, lead to over 1,400 job placements and has placed thousands more on the path to eventual success by engaging them in specialized vocational rehabilitation, wellness and disability assistance services to address their multiple, often complex barriers to employment. This is not a cookie cutter, one size fits all program, but rather a customized approach that begins with a comprehensive assessment resulting in the development of an individualized service plan designed to help clients achieve their maximum functional capacity.

WeCARE has attracted national attention and we believe it will build on its initial success in the coming years.

For New Yorkers in need of educational services, HRA offers the BEGIN program. BEGIN is a collaborative effort of many providers that enrolls individuals in a full time program where they spend three days in a work experience assignment and two days in the classroom enrolled in an education program from Adult Basic Education or ESL up to GED. What is learned in the classroom is reinforced at the work site and the skills acquired from working are developed back in the classroom, as teachers and work site supervisors communicate frequently. BEGIN offers the best of both worlds, offering high quality education services, while placing over 1,000 of its participants into jobs last year. BEGIN's educational success is remarkable, evidenced by the GED program pass rate this year of 93.8%, one of the best rates of any GED program in New York State.

Where available, HRA also collaborates with other city agencies to offer employment services. For example HRA has a long standing agreement with the Department for the Aging (DFTA) to jointly administer a personal care assistant program. HRA provides training to public assistance recipients and DFTA offers the training to individuals enrolled in organizations with which they do business. We also work with the City's Housing Authority to train people for construction work. HRA recruited eligible candidates and referred them to the program run by

the Housing Authority's vendor. A process was developed to ensure the training program was counted by HRA for purposes of an individual's employment requirement.

In less than two months, building on the success of programs over the past four years, we will launch the Back to Work program. Under Back to Work, which will replace our existing skills assessment and employment services and placement programs, a network of contractors will work with public assistance recipients from the time they apply for public assistance through their placement into and retention of a job. There will be vendors in neighborhoods throughout the City, and to ensure continuity of services, each individual will remain with the designated vendor throughout the entire process. These vendors will be paid under contracts designed to maximize their performance in securing work for their customers. The vendors will be paid almost entirely for placement and retention in jobs, giving them a strong financial incentive to develop services that really work and that lead to long term jobs. Further, these contracts offer enhanced payments for vendors to place individuals in high wage jobs and for vendors who place customers with multiple barriers to employment.

These programs and others HRA offers provide a solid foundation to continue our success over the next four years. But we recognize that initial placement in a job is only the one crucial step in improving the lives of those we serve and developing the self-sufficiency to overcome poverty. A good employment

program must offer continuous opportunities to reward those who have worked hard to achieve initial success by assisting and providing critical support as they seek to move up the economic ladder.

To further assist those we place in jobs, our employment contracts are structured so that vendors only get full payment when an individual retains their job for three and then six months. During that period we expect our contractors to support families as they make the transition to work by providing guidance and counseling where needed. But more than that, our expectation is that our vendors will continue to assist those they place by offering them training and other opportunities to upgrade their skills and get a better job. For most people the initial job is a start, but the hope is that the initial job will lead to better paying jobs and a better future for their family, in the years to come.

Even beyond what HRA's vendors offer, the Department of Small Business Services is planning to enable individuals who will be placed by our Back to Work vendors to access job advancement through the Workforce1 Career Centers. In this model, individuals will work with a Career Center Career Advisor to execute a job advancement strategy. For example, an individual in a call center job may work with a Career Advisor to pursue a higher level customer service job, while engaging in customer service and computer skills workshops. Through this approach, Workforce1 Career Centers gain access to additional job candidates needed to fill employer job orders and help jobseekers advance to better jobs.

The City also provides valuable supports to assist with the transition to work. Perhaps the most important support the City provides is ensuring that parents who are working and making the transition off of public assistance have access to stable, reliable child care. The City's program exceeds the requirements of federal law by allowing individuals placed in jobs who leave public assistance to remain enrolled in subsidized child care not just for the statutory minimum of one year but for as long as they are financially eligible under the Administration for Children's Services' (ACS) guidelines. This seamless provision of child care will be further enhanced when HRA and ACS complete the merger under ACS's management of child care services.

Food Stamps are another transitional benefit we now provide automatically to those leaving public assistance. Beyond those leaving public assistance, HRA has reconfigured the food stamp program from a benefit which was largely received in conjunction with public assistance to a vital and widespread support for our working customers. Food Stamps are now used most commonly by individuals who are not receiving public assistance. Eleven years ago 80% of those receiving food stamps were on public assistance; today the proportion has been cut in half. Now, sixty percent of food stamp recipients are not receiving public assistance, with the fastest growing portion being able-bodied recipients, including those who are working. While the total food stamp population has increased by 37% over the past four years, the number of those who are able-

bodied and on food stamps alone has increased by more than 110%, more than doubling. There are now nearly 80,000 working New Yorkers receiving food stamps without public assistance or SSI benefits, an increase of 40% in just two years.

A variety of initiatives have contributed to this Food Stamp increase including the outreach we do with community groups under the sponsorship of the United Way, improved customer service at our model offices and eased application procedures. Going forward we are enhancing these efforts with a facilitated on-line application process. Working with FoodChange and the New York City Coalition against Hunger, we are developing a process to allow individuals in soup kitchens and food pantries to submit not just Food Stamp applications, but also the required supporting documentation electronically. This will simplify the application process and allow for easier access and more efficient processing of applications.

Public health insurance is a critical support to address health related barriers to employment and as an essential transitional benefit for former recipients whose first jobs may not provide private health insurance coverage. Today, over 2.6 million New Yorkers are covered by public health insurance programs administered by HRA. Over 80% of these people receive this medical coverage independent of public assistance. Our public health insurance program has

worked to ease the recertification process by, for example, providing mail recertification to allow those working to more easily retain that critical benefit.

We look forward to continue working to enhance our programs and to working with our sister agencies in city government to improve the lives of all New Yorkers.

I will be happy to take questions from the Committee.