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Reports

Speech at the New York City Coalition Against Hunger, citywide conference

Monday, June 16, 2003

Thank you for inviting me to talk to you today.

I want to talk about hunger in New York City and who the hungry are. I want to make a few suggestions about what we might do about it. There are effective things we can do that will help those who are hungry, even now, during this time of great fiscal crisis for our city.

Homeless and hungry. Old and hungry. Hungry schoolchildren. Disabled and homebound and hungry. Poor and hungry.

It is folly to compare one category of poor people with another but let me note that the most bereft of the poor are those we don't see, don't count in our statistics, don't know about, can't help in any way because we can't find them.

We need to make a constant effort to find and help these people. That, of course, includes providing food for them. Perhaps that's the most basic thing we can do, food, then shelter, then healthcare, then education for their children and themselves, then job training, then gainful work, then independence and a fuller integration into our civic society.

Isn't that the pyramid we imagine?

Food, at least one nutritious meal a day, is the base of the pyramid.

I'll focus on who we feed and how.

One of the most effective programs offered by the federal government—it's entirely federal, no state or city funding—is the food stamp program administered by the U.S. Department of Agriculture. It's a win-win program because it benefits, not only the poor, but America's farmers.

Last year, my office found some interesting and disturbing things about the food stamp program in New York City.

First, the food stamp program was and is grossly underutilized. In many localities and nearly every state across the country,

food stamp participation was rising as more people found themselves unemployed. This is what one expects.

Let me point out that food stamps are an entitlements program. If you are eligible, you get the food stamps. If more people are eligible, more people get food stamps. That's how it works.

In New York City, despite severe increases in unemployment following 9/11 and the simultaneous national recession, food stamp participation was declining. In fact, by two percent. New York City's unemployment rate rose to 9 percent, one of the very highest increases of any city in the country. At the same time, we had the greatest decrease in food stamp participation of any city or county in New York State.

Why was that? We found the decline was, in part, a consequence of the City's aggressive success in reducing the welfare rolls, down nine percent just between January and July, 2002. It is widely recognized that welfare participants end their participation in food stamps when they leave the welfare rolls, even if they are eligible for food stamps.

We also found that many offices of the City's Human Resources Administration were not informing former welfare recipients that they were still entitled to food stamps under a federally-funded program that extends food stamp benefits to families leaving welfare.

And we found that the City was requiring applicants to fill out a 17-page form, a daunting obstacle.

Let me give you a sense of scale. The 2000 Census found that 1.6 million people live below the federal poverty line in New York City.

Most of you know that the federal poverty line for single adults is \$ 8,980. Try living on that in our New York City.

In 2002, we had 820,000 people enrolled for food stamps. That suggests that nearly 800,000 people were eligible but not enrolled. About as many not enrolled as enrolled.

If food is the base of the pyramid of assistance and, indeed, existence, and if food stamps are paid for by the federal government, then why do we not ensure that every eligible New Yorker gets food stamps?

Everyone would benefit. Win-win-win. Hungry people get food. Grocery stores sell more food. Farmers get paid for the food they grow. And everyone in between.

What did we do?

We recommended that the City of New York use the two-page form used elsewhere in the state. They did that.

We recommended that New York City pursue and accept a federal waiver that extends food stamp benefits for single people living in counties with high unemployment rates. The City had declined the waiver despite the fact that this would

cost the City and its taxpayers nothing.

We recommended extended hours for more of the HRA food stamp offices. As of now they have not.

We recommended that the City partner with more than one nonprofit group for food stamp outreach. And we showed the City how to do that with a program we announced in February with United Way, the State Office of Temporary and Disability Assistance, and with a very generous contribution to United Way from Vivendi Universal Corporation.

The Food Stamp Access Project will enable leading community-based nonprofits to reach out to applicants at neighborhood locations and pre-screen them with laptop computers and special software. We'll help working families, seniors, and children who are eligible for food stamps but not getting them.

We expect to reach 100,000 people and bring in \$20 million in benefits and multipliers to the City's economy.

There are ways to help. There are ways for all of us to work together.

Let me mention briefly two other groups of people who need and deserve help getting better food more often in their daily lives. Seniors and schoolchildren.

New York's senior population is getting older. There are about 1.3 million of us who are 60 or older. There are more of us who are 75 and older and more who are 85 and older. More of the very elderly live alone. More of us belong to what we persist in calling minority groups. More of us are recent immigrants.

Those who go to senior centers tell us, by a ratio of two to one, that they are just getting by or are not getting by.

Where are they/we? We have about one million seniors over 65 in our city. Three of five live in Brooklyn and Queens. One of five in Manhattan. Slightly fewer in The Bronx. Fewer in Staten Island.

Looked at another way, 22 percent of the 283 thousand seniors who live in Brooklyn live below the poverty level. That's 62 thousand people. Trying to pay rent, eat, pay the out of pocket costs of health care and the outrageous costs of prescription drugs. 37 thousand seniors in poverty in Queens. 35 thousand in Manhattan. 17 thousand in The Bronx. Five thousand one hundred in Staten Island.

This does not touch the extent of poverty in our city. These are seniors over 65 we're talking about. Nearly 100 thousand of the one million seniors, or one in ten, are homebound. These are among the most vulnerable of the vulnerable.

When and where do seniors eat? Some eat in our senior centers but consider this. The City pays for 7.3 million such meals each year. Anyone over 60 may go for a senior center meal. The math works out to 6 meals per person, per year.

But we like to eat three meals a day and we like to eat every day. Can we begin to see what it means to be elderly and poor and undernourished in New York City? Were I 65 and poor, at one meal a day, I would consume my last meal of the year on February 15th, 2003.

What about schoolchildren? My office studied the School Breakfast Program last year. We provide breakfast to 151 thousand children. We know that with a sufficient breakfast schedule they get better math scores, come to school on time more often, and miss a day less often.

However, only 17 percent participate in the program though 72 percent are eligible.

We made one strong recommendation: the Department of Education should expand its universal meals program in the schools.

With better outreach, more support from teachers and administrators, more accommodating schedules, more parental awareness and support, we can provide free meals to more children who need them. By adding 100 thousand students to the program, we could receive \$22 million more in reimbursement from the federal and state governments, not counting the ripple effect of that money in our economy.

How are we really doing? We looked at 310 of our schools with universal meals programs. Those are schools where 80 percent of the students are eligible. Only seven of those schools had participation rates higher than 50 percent.

One last observation. Only when we as a government, working with others, attack the problem of outreach, of informing our citizens about our programs, with the same focused energy and marketing skills, if not the millions of dollars, that we devote to political campaigns and getting elected, will our citizens use the services they need and demand better of us.

And only then will we be doing morally and pragmatically what we were elected to do. Only then will we restore a balance that is missing in our system of politics and government. For our citizens, all of us, that balance is called justice.

Thank you.

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