



**BETSY GOTBAUM**  
PUBLIC ADVOCATE FOR THE CITY OF NEW YORK  
*Solving Problems • Protecting New Yorkers*

[HOME](#)
[SERVICES](#)
[NEWS](#)
[POLICY](#)
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## POLICY

[Policy Guide](#)
[Reports](#)
[Speeches](#)
[Legislative Initiatives](#)

## Reports

### **Food Stamps for Working New Yorkers: Follow-Up Investigation**

October 2004

#### **Background**

Eleven months after the Public Advocate's Office found it was practically impossible for working New Yorkers to sign up for food stamps, investigators visited food stamp offices to determine whether the Human Resources Administration (HRA) had made improvements. Public Advocate Betsy Gotbaum is pleased to announce that a series of visits in July 2004 found the system much improved. Almost all of the Office of the Public Advocate's recommendations are being carried out, and as a result, food stamp access for working families now appears to have reached the minimum level required by federal law. Most notably, offices no longer close earlier than they are supposed to and lock out working families who try to apply (survey instrument is provided in Appendix A).

In November 2003, the Public Advocate's office sent investigators to the City's four extended hours food stamp centers to evaluate the experience of working New Yorkers who apply for food stamps after normal business hours (results are listed in Appendix B). We found that HRA was failing to provide working New Yorkers with any of the federally- mandated alternatives to applying during traditional business hours. We also called food stamp centers to determine whether representatives were available by phone and to see if information provided was accurate. Investigators found applicants were locked out of "extended-hour" offices; refused all alternatives to applying in person, such as mail or fax, or a family member or friend dropping it off, or arranging a phone interview; and denied the possibility of meeting with a caseworker in the evening or on a Saturday.

The findings agreed with a report issued by the Public Advocate in 2002 that found New York City had the lowest food stamp participation rate among ten comparably-sized American cities and all other New York State counties .

#### **Overall Finding**

Our investigators found that the HRA carried out the Public Advocate's recommendations to significantly improve the level of access for working families and for those who apply during extended hours.

Recommendation (2003): Make Extended Hours Real  
Finding (2004): Last year, extended hours centers were locked an hour before closing time during half of our visits. This year investigators were able to access all centers up until 6 p.m. and

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found hours clearly posted. It should be noted, however, that it is fully within HRA's authority to keep food stamp offices open later than 6pm or earlier than 9 a.m. , to better accommodate working families.

Recommendation : Train Workers to Comply with federal standards regarding alternative application submission guidelines.

Finding : Unlike in 2003, investigators were uniformly told they could submit their application by mail, fax, or have a friend or family member bring it to a center on their behalf. In every case they were also given the short form of the application instead of the long form, which surveyors were given in 2003 despite the prior introduction of the short form.

Recommendation : Recognize the Food Stamp Program as a Work Support Program and Inform Eligible Workers of Various Ways to Apply for Food Stamps.

Finding : HRA could and should do more to recognize food stamps as a work support program. While the Public Advocate's Office is proud to partner with HRA on a food stamp enrollment campaign being conducted by United Way and their not-for-profit partners, the Agency still has unnecessary barriers in place that negatively affect working families.

For instance, HRA has refused to apply for a State waiver that would exempt working New Yorkers from being fingerprinted as part of their application process . The State no longer requires fingerprints to avoid fraud; each application is uniquely identified with the applicants' social security number or similar identification number. Despite the State's finding that fingerprinting is not necessary, HRA still requires applicants to take this step. If HRA requests the waiver, employed food stamp applicants will be spared the hurdle of having to miss work to be fingerprinted, and HRA will save money by fingerprinting fewer people.

In addition, HRA also refused to apply for a waiver that would allow able-bodied unemployed adults without children to receive food stamps for an extended period while they look for work. While counties across the state choose to exercise this option, New York City continuously fails to apply for the waiver.

Recommendation : Ensure that Applicants Can be Served During Extended and Weekend Office Hours, and by Phone.

Finding : Our investigators found food stamp offices better prepared to serve applicants during extended hours than before. Where no "extended hour" offices scheduled appointments after 5 p.m. in 2003, this summer all offices offered appointments up to 5 p.m. or later. Some centers informed applicants that they could come back on Saturdays to meet with a caseworker. We also found the centers much more accessible by telephone. In 2003, less than one-third of phone calls were answered. This year, callers were able to get through on a single call and information provided by phone was generally accurate.

Recommendation : Make Food Stamp Application Available on HRA's website.

Finding : HRA now provides a link on their website ([http://www.nyc.gov/html/hra/html/serv\\_foodstamps.html](http://www.nyc.gov/html/hra/html/serv_foodstamps.html)) to the food stamp application. Applicants are able to print this form and submit it either in person or by mail, fax, or proxy

representative.

### **Conclusion and Recommendations**

The Public Advocate's November 2003 report identified ways the Human Resources Administration denied working families access to the Food Stamp Program, and it is clear that these findings catalyzed change in how the Human Resources Administration administers the Food Stamp Program. Now, almost one year later, our investigators find the food stamp application process is more accommodating to workers' hours and complies with federal standards. The Public Advocate commends HRA for taking these strides toward increasing food stamp enrollment and making the program more accessible to those who work.

While these changes are significant, it is still too difficult to apply for food stamps. Employed New Yorkers should be able to sign up for food stamps without missing work. However, many applicants whom our investigators interviewed in July 2004 had to make repeat visits, and at some offices people had to wait all day to be seen. The measures below would limit the amount of time unemployed adults need to spend at shelters and soup kitchens, increase the amount of time they can search for work, and reduce the stigma associated with applying for food stamps.

HRA should apply for state and federal waivers that would make the application process easier for working New Yorkers and ensure that unemployed workers could increase their level of participation.

Limit the use of fingerprinting to remove unnecessary application barriers and save the city money by reducing the number of applicants who must be processed in person at food stamp centers.

Encourage and bolster the use of food stamps among unemployed, able-bodied adults without dependents by applying for a waiver that would allow them to receive food stamps for more than three months out of thirty-six month period, as is the current city practice.

HRA should improve service for working New Yorkers.

Limit the number of visits necessary to successfully apply for food stamps.

Ensure that the latest appointment available at extended hours centers be consistent throughout the city so that all New Yorkers have the same level of access.

Overall, the Public Advocate is pleased with the Administration's progress in administering the food stamp program over the past month and looks forward to continued improvements.

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[Back to top](#)

