



Public Advocate for the City of New York

Paper(less) Jam:

A Survey of New York City Human Resources Administration Eligibility Specialists

**A REPORT BY PUBLIC ADVOCATE BETSY GOTBAUM
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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The New York City Human Resources Administration (HRA) is the agency responsible for providing and determining eligibility of low-income New Yorkers for public benefits, such as cash assistance, Food Stamps, and public health insurance. HRA eligibility specialists determine and verify initial and continuing eligibility for Medicaid and non-cash assistance, including Food Stamps. Specialists perform a variety of tasks throughout the application and renewal or recertification process, from conducting face-to-face interviews to determining the amount of a client's benefit.

In 1997, HRA launched a pilot of the Paperless Office System (POS) to address inefficiencies and inaccuracies in its benefits application process and improve worker productivity and client service. The POS automated the application and recertification process for public benefits and eliminated paper record-keeping, allowing workers to perform this entire process electronically. A 2005 audit of the POS by the Office of the Comptroller, however, found that the system did not meet HRA's "initial business and operating requirements," and a survey of HRA employees revealed performance problems with the system.

In November 2008, the Office of the Public Advocate released *Barriers to Benefits: A Survey of Clients at New York City Human Resources Administration Job Centers*. The results of the survey indicated that clients experience excessively long wait times and problems due to workflow inefficiencies, such as misplaced documents or inoperative computers. Concerned by the problems identified by HRA clients, the Office of the Public Advocate decided to investigate whether they were related to problems with the POS previously identified in the Comptroller's report and whether eligibility specialists had the resources, specifically the technology and equipment, needed to effectively serve their clients.

The Office of the Public Advocate conducted a survey of HRA eligibility specialists from October through November 2008. The survey was distributed to eligibility specialists throughout the five boroughs. A total of 148 surveys were collected. Survey findings include:

- Seventy-three percent of respondents reported that the computer system for processing intake applications electronically was non-operational either "some of the time" (39.3 percent) or "occasionally" (33.3 percent) during working hours in the last year.
- Sixty-one percent of respondents reported that scanners, which are used to make electronic records of clients' documents, were non-operational either "some of the time" (27.9 percent) or "occasionally" (32.9 percent) in the last year.
- More than half of eligibility specialists surveyed (55 percent) said it takes between 1 and 4 days for the computer system or scanners to be repaired after they report a problem.
- Seventy-eight percent of eligibility specialists reported they were unable to retrieve or view a client's saved electronically scanned documents either "some of the time" (44.3 percent) or "occasionally" (33.6 percent) in the last year.

- “Not enough staff” was ranked as the most difficult problem, followed by “Clients do not bring the necessary documents when applying for benefits.” The third most difficult problem was “computers are not reliable.”
- Of those obstacles respondents rated “most difficult,” “not enough staff” was the most frequently cited, followed by both “computers are not reliable” and “clients do not bring the necessary documents when applying for benefits.” The third most frequently cited problem rated “most difficult” was “interpreters not available to translate for clients.”
- Seventy-five percent of eligibility specialists surveyed said HRA had not instructed them to tell clients they have a legal right to bring an attorney or other representative to assist them with their public benefits case.

The report includes the following recommendations:

- **Hire and/or reassign eligibility specialists to high-traffic centers and offices.**
- **Improve and regularly assess maintenance of all technology and equipment necessary for processing public benefit applications.**
- **Simplify materials (e.g. pamphlets, frequently asked questions) on public benefits application procedures and requirements.**
- **Develop a system for regularly obtaining feedback from staff.**
- **Ensure that interpreters and bilingual staff are available at all HRA centers and offices.**
- **Instruct staff to inform clients they have the right to bring a third party to assist them with their public benefits case.**

INTRODUCTION

The economic recession and the simultaneous rise in unemployment are likely to increase the city's poverty rate. The Center on Budget and Policy Priorities estimates that unemployment resulting from the current recession could result in increases in both the number of poor Americans and those living in "deep poverty."¹

With poverty come hardships, such as falling behind on rent or mortgage, cutting back on school supplies and clothes, being unable to fill needed prescriptions, and skipping meals.² Public benefits are available to help New Yorkers avoid such hardships. The New York City Human Resources Administration (HRA) is the agency responsible for providing and determining eligibility of low-income New Yorkers for public benefits, such as cash assistance, Food Stamps, and public health insurance, such as Medicaid. HRA eligibility specialists determine and verify initial and continuing eligibility for Medicaid and non-cash assistance, including Food Stamps.³ Specialists perform a variety of tasks throughout the application and renewal or recertification process, from conducting face-to-face interviews to determining a client's benefit amount.⁴

HRA has made attempts to improve service and reduce barriers to accessing public benefits. In 1997, HRA launched a pilot of the Paperless Office System (POS) to address inefficiencies and inaccuracies in its benefits application process and improve worker productivity and client service.⁵ The POS automated the application and recertification process for public benefits and eliminated paper record-keeping. A 2005 audit of the POS by the Office of the Comptroller, however, found that the system did not meet HRA's "initial business and operating requirements," and a survey of HRA employees revealed performance problems with the system.⁶

In November 2008, the Office of the Public Advocate released *Barriers to Benefits: A Survey of Clients at New York City Human Resources Administration Job Centers*. The results of the survey indicated that clients experience excessively long wait times and problems due to workflow inefficiencies, such as misplaced documents or inoperative computers.⁷

To determine the causes of the problems identified by HRA clients, the Office of the Public Advocate conducted a survey of eligibility specialists at HRA from October through November 2008. The Office of the Public Advocate was particularly interested in whether these problems were related to problems with the POS previously identified in the Comptroller's report and

¹ Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, "Recession Could Cause Large Increases in Poverty and Push Millions into Deep Poverty," November 24, 2008. See: <http://www.cbpp.org/11-24-08pov.htm>.

² Community Service Society, "The Unheard Third 2008: Financial Development and Economic Insecurity," September 19, 2008. See: http://cssny.org/research/unheard_third/survey_findings/.

³ Conversation between Daliz Pérez-Cabezas, The Public Advocate's Senior Policy Analyst and DC37's Local 1549, 11/21/08.

⁴ Local 1549, "Eligibility Specialist Job Specifications." See: http://www.local1549.com/Elig_Spec_Job_Specs.htm.

⁵ New York City Office of the Comptroller, "Audit Report on the Development and Implementation of the Paperless Office System by the Human Resources Administration," May 2, 2005. See: www.comptroller.nyc.gov/bureaus/audit/PDF_FILES/7A04_099.pdf.

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ Office of the Public Advocate, "Barriers to Benefits: A Survey of Clients at New York City Human Resources Administration Job Centers," November 2008. See: <http://pubadvocate.nyc.gov/>.

whether eligibility specialists had the resources, specifically the technology and equipment, needed to effectively serve their clients.

This report is based on the findings of that survey. It also includes a discussion of the potential impact of the economic recession on the demand for public benefits, an explanation of the role of eligibility specialists, a review of the POS, a summary of the Office of the Public Advocate's report, *Barriers to Benefits*, an explanation of survey methodology and findings, and recommendations for HRA.

BACKGROUND

The Potential Impact of the Recession on the Demand for Public Benefits

Roughly one in five New Yorkers (18.9 percent)⁸ and more than one quarter of children in the city (27.8 percent) lived below the poverty line between 2005 and 2007.⁹ These percentages are likely to increase as a result of the economic recession and simultaneous rise in unemployment. Using the Goldman Sachs projection that the unemployment rate will increase to 9 percent by the fourth quarter of 2009, the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities estimates that the “number of poor Americans will rise by 7.5-10.3 million, the number of poor children will rise by 2.6-3.3 million, and the number of children in deep poverty will climb by 1.5-2.0 million.”¹⁰

In New York City, job losses and unemployment benefit claims have already dramatically increased. According to the State Department of Labor, New York City has lost almost 50,000 jobs since the end of 2007.¹¹ First-time unemployment filings increased by 41.9 percent between August and late November compared to last year.¹² Job losses in the city are expected to grow. The New York City Comptroller's Office estimates that the city will lose 170,000 jobs through 2010.¹³

The current economic recession and rise in unemployment could result in an increase in the demand for public benefits. While first-time unemployment filings have increased, the Fiscal Policy Institute found that less than one-third of New York City's unemployed were receiving unemployment insurance in October 2008.¹⁴ Due to the rise in New York State's unemployment rate, the New York State Department of Labor expects to offer an additional 13 weeks of federally funded emergency unemployment compensation starting February 22, 2009.¹⁵

⁸ The new poverty measure developed by the New York City Center for Economic Opportunity (CEO) estimates the 2006 poverty rate for New York City was 23.0 percent, which is higher than the official poverty rate of 18.9 percent for that same year. CEO, “The CEO Poverty Measure: A Working Paper by The New York City Center for Economic Opportunity,” August 2008, See: http://www.nyc.gov/html/ceo/downloads/pdf/final_poverty_report.pdf.

⁹ U.S. Census Bureau, *2005-2007 American Community Survey 3-Year Estimates*, See: <http://factfinder.census.gov/>.

¹⁰ *Supra* note 1, pg. 1.

¹¹ McGeehan, P., “City Unemployment Rate Jumps to 7.2 Percent,” posted on City Room, a *New York Times* blog, January 22, 2009. See: <http://cityroom.blogs.nytimes.com/2009/01/22/city-unemployment-rate-jumps-to-72-percent/>.

¹² Fiscal Policy Institute, “New York City Unemployment in 2009—The Emerging Crisis,” December 11, 2008. See: <http://www.fiscalpolicy.org/>.

¹³ Office of the New York City Comptroller, “Thompson Releases Excerpt from “The State of New York City's Economy and Finances” Report,” December 11, 2008 (press release). See: http://www.comptroller.nyc.gov/press/2008_releases/pr08-12-178.shtm.

¹⁴ *Supra* note 12.

¹⁵ NYS Department of Labor, “Extended Benefits,” See: <http://www.labor.state.ny.us/ui/claimantinfo/ExtendedBenefits.shtm>.

More New Yorkers are already facing hardships. The Community Service Society's *The Unheard Third* report for 2008 found that 79 percent of low-income working families faced hardships, such as falling behind on their rent or mortgage, cutting back on school supplies and clothes, being unable to fill needed prescriptions because they lack money or insurance, and skipping meals because they did not have enough money.¹⁶ The Food Bank for New York City's updated 2008 *NYC Hunger Experience Report Series* found that 48 percent or approximately 4 million New Yorkers experienced difficulty affording food in 2008, up 26 percent from 2007, and approximately double the number in 2003.¹⁷ In addition, approximately 3.5 million New Yorkers said they were concerned that they would need food assistance, such as food pantries, soup kitchens, or Food Stamps, within the next year.¹⁸ Of these 3.5 million New Yorkers, 59 percent said they would be accessing food assistance for the first time.¹⁹ In 2007, the New York City Coalition Against Hunger estimated that there were more than 500,000 New Yorkers who qualify for Food Stamps but are not enrolled in the program.²⁰ This number is likely to increase as a result of the recession.²¹

In addition, the number of homeless families with children entering the New York City shelter system has increased 40 percent since last year.²² The city experienced a record high of 9,720 homeless families living in the shelter system at the end of November 2008.²³ According to the Coalition for the Homeless, this is the highest number since the Department of Homeless Services started tracking this information more than twenty-five years ago.²⁴ Both city officials and the Coalition for the Homeless attribute this increase to the economic recession.²⁵

Eligibility Specialists and the Public Benefits Application Process

HRA has 15,000 employees and provides assistance to more than 3 million New Yorkers.²⁶ The agency employs 2,327 eligibility specialists.²⁷ These specialists are represented by DC37's Local 1549. Eligibility specialists are tasked with determining and verifying initial and continuing eligibility for Medicaid and non-cash assistance, including Food Stamps.²⁸ According to Local 1549, there are approximately 1,600 certified eligibility specialists on the waiting list to be called by HRA when a position becomes available.²⁹

¹⁶ *Supra* note 2.

¹⁷ Food Bank for New York City, "NYC Hunger Experience 2008 Update: Food Poverty Soars As Recession Hits Home," 2008. See: <http://www.foodbanknyc.org/>.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ New York City Coalition Against Hunger, "Rising Food Lines, Sinking Economy," Annual Hunger Survey, November 2007. See: <http://www.nyccah.org/>.

²¹ Eckholm, E., "As Jobs Vanish and Prices Rise, Food Stamp Use Nears Record," *The New York Times*, March 31, 2008. See: <http://www.nytimes.com/2008/03/31/us/31foodstamps.html>.

²² Lee, T., "Families With Children in City Shelters Soar to Record Level," *The New York Times*, December 23, 2008. See: www.nytimes.com/2008/12/23/nyregion/23homeless.html?ref=nyregion.

²³ *Ibid.*

²⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁶ HRA, "About HRA/DSS," See: http://www.nyc.gov/html/hra/html/about/about_hra_dss.shtml.

²⁷ Email correspondence between Daliz Pérez-Cabezas, The Public Advocate's Senior Policy Analyst and DC37's Local 1549, 12/19/08.

²⁸ *Supra* note 3.

²⁹ *Ibid.*

The application process for public benefits varies by program. In general, applicants must complete an application, provide required documents to prove eligibility, and be interviewed by HRA staff.³⁰ To confirm that they are still eligible to receive benefits, clients must periodically renew or recertify for Food Stamps and public health insurance. Public health insurance recipients, for example, are required to renew their coverage annually.³¹ Throughout this process, applicants or recipients of public benefits have the right to bring an attorney or other representative to assist them with their case.³²

Eligibility specialists perform a variety of tasks throughout the application and recertification process, such as determining a client's benefit amount, conducting face-to-face interviews, answering calls to the HRA information helpline, and maintaining a caseload of both applicants and recipients.³³ In some cases, eligibility specialists may conduct over-the-phone interviews with working families applying or recertifying for Food Stamps.³⁴ Their job responsibilities and the level of supervision they receive vary by title. (See Appendix I for a detailed list of job specifications and qualifications.) Eligibility specialists also use computerized systems and equipment during the application and recertification process for a variety of purposes, including in-putting and reviewing case information.³⁵

Paperless Office System (POS)

The POS was designed to address inefficiencies and inaccuracies in its benefits application process.³⁶ It was first piloted in 1997 at the Melrose Income Support Center.³⁷ According to the city Office of the Comptroller, the "POS" specific objectives were to electronically verify applicant eligibility data; significantly reduce the number of fraudulent claims and fair hearing losses; improve eligibility worker productivity and client service; and promote accountability and responsive case management."³⁸ The POS automated the application and recertification process for public benefits and eliminated paper record-keeping, allowing workers to perform this entire process electronically.³⁹ Features of this system also include document imaging, which allows workers to save clients' documents electronically, and automatic checks to ensure that all necessary information has been collected before eligibility is determined. According to DC37's

³⁰ HRA, "Information on How to Apply." See: http://www.nyc.gov/html/hra/html/directory/info_howtoapply.shtml and HRA, "Eligibility, Application & Renewal." See:

http://www.nyc.gov/html/hra/html/programs/medical_assistance_program_eligibility.shtml.

³¹ *Ibid.*

³² According to New York State law, applicants or recipients of public benefits are allowed "to appear with an attorney or other representative at any interview or conference with a representative of a social services district, when such interview or conference relates to questions of eligibility for public assistance and care, or the amount to which person interviewed is or was entitled." See: 18 N.Y.C.R.R. § 351.1(d).

³³ *Supra* note 4.

³⁴ New York State's Working Families Food Stamp Initiative allows working households with one adult that works 30 hours or two adults who each work at least 20 hours a week to apply for Food Stamps by mail and be interviewed over the phone. In addition, working families can renew or recertify for Food Stamps over the phone. New York State Office of Temporary and Disability Assistance (OTDA), "Food Stamps." See: <http://www.otda.state.ny.us/main/foodstamps/#recert>.

³⁵ *Supra* note 4.

³⁶ *Supra* note 5.

³⁷ *Ibid.*

³⁸ *Supra* note 5, pg. 3.

³⁹ Fecci, Dennis, Deputy Administrator, Management Information Systems, HRA, "Creating the 'Paperless Office'," *TECH NEWS*, 2001. See: http://www.uwnyc.org/technews/v4_n4_a4.html and *Supra* note 5.

Local 1549, the POS requires an eligibility specialist to spend approximately an hour and a half with an applicant to complete the entire intake or interview process.⁴⁰

Citywide implementation was originally set for April 1998, but in 2005, an audit of the POS by the Office of the Comptroller found that, although more than \$47 million had been spent, the system was still not complete. The audit also found that the system did not meet HRA's "initial business and operating requirements," and a survey of HRA employees revealed performance problems with the system.⁴¹ Seventy-six percent of employees surveyed reported they would like to see changes made to the POS. In addition, respondents reported experiencing problems, such as "response time prevents transaction completion" (80 percent), the "system contains errors or duplications" (55 percent), "inadequate response time" (45 percent), and "insufficient reporting features" (42 percent).⁴²

In two consecutive letters to the Public Advocate, received in November and December 2007, HRA Commissioner Robert Doar reported that the agency had not encountered any significant problems during the roll-out of the POS in Food Stamp Offices or Job Centers. When asked specifically about the POS at Job Centers, he said "[a]s with any complex computer system, issues occasionally do arise that need to be resolved but the system has been extremely reliable and is heavily relied on by our staff."⁴³ When asked if there were any problems with the electronic scanning and storage features of the POS at Job Centers, the Commissioner stated, "No, the electronic scanning and storage features of the system is [sic] working well and allows us to better service clients. Documents are more easily retrieved by workers, reducing the chance that an individual will be asked to bring in the same document again."⁴⁴ According to the Commissioner, the POS is "the main eligibility system used by our Job Center staff."⁴⁵ According to HRA, all Food Stamp offices are currently equipped with the POS and its staff has received POS training.⁴⁶

Barriers to Benefits

The Office of the Public Advocate's 2008 report, *Barriers to Benefits: A Survey of Clients at New York City Human Resources Administration Job Centers*, found that long wait times were the problem most frequently cited by clients visiting HRA Job Centers.⁴⁷ On average, clients spent 20.3 hours per year in Job Centers. Seventy-three percent of respondents returned to a Job Center two or more times in the past year because of problems with their benefits case. In addition, more than half of clients (52 percent) surveyed experienced problems due to workflow inefficiencies, such as misplaced documents or inoperative computers. The report also found that 45 percent of respondents were not aware they have the right to bring an attorney or other representative to assist them.

⁴⁰ *Supra* note 3.

⁴¹ *Supra* note 5.

⁴² *Ibid.*

⁴³ Letter from Robert Doar, Administrator/Commissioner, HRA, to the Office of the Public Advocate, December 26, 2007.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

⁴⁶ Email from Kathryn Dyjak, Deputy Commissioner, Office of Legislative Affairs, HRA, "Paperless Office System," to Office of the Public Advocate, February 12, 2009.

⁴⁷ There are Food Stamp offices located in four of the five randomly selected HRA Job Centers included in the *Barriers to Benefits* report.

The report included four recommendations for HRA. First, HRA should evaluate and streamline its current intake and appointment process to reduce wait times. HRA should consider hiring additional staff or reassigning staff to Job Centers that have a high volume of clients. (See Appendix II for a detailed description of the each of the report's recommendations.)

Second, HRA should provide clients with proof of program compliance to avoid erroneous sanctioning of benefits due to computer or record-keeping mistakes.⁴⁸ HRA should give clients a receipt when they make a required visit or submit documents, so they have proof and can have their benefits quickly reinstated should they be terminated or reduced because of problems with HRA's computer or record-keeping systems. The report also recommends that HRA update the POS to include a system for preventing the incorrect termination or reduction of benefits and contact clients before sanctions are finalized in the computer system.

Third, HRA should develop clear and concise materials (e.g. pamphlets, frequently asked questions) on public benefits application procedures and compliance requirements. Currently, clients applying for benefits receive five brochures, an application, and approximately 50 pages of handouts that are not user-friendly or written in laymen's terms. The brochure titled "What You Should Know About Your Rights and Responsibilities (When Applying For or Receiving Public Benefits)" is 32 pages in itself, printed in small typeface, and difficult to understand. HRA should take a variety of steps to address this problem, such as giving clients a separate, easy-to-understand pamphlet explaining what application and recertification documents clients need to provide and how to obtain to them.

Fourth, HRA should improve customer service by ensuring that agency staff is regularly updated on changes to rules and regulations and able to clearly and concisely communicate with clients, including those with limited English proficiency (LEP).

METHODOLOGY

The Office of the Public Advocate conducted a survey of HRA eligibility specialists at Job Centers, Food Stamp and Medicaid Offices. The survey was designed to measure whether eligibility specialists had the resources they needed to effectively carry out their responsibilities, such as computers and scanners, and what problems, if any, they encountered. From October through November 2008, the fifteen-question survey was distributed by DC37's Local 1549 to its members throughout the five boroughs. A total of 148 surveys were collected. (See Appendix III for the survey questions).

⁴⁸ In a meeting between the Public Advocate and HRA Commissioner Doar on December 23, 2008, HRA indicated that it is considering implementation of this recommendation.

FINDINGS

The majority of eligibility specialists report that HRA’s electronic equipment is non-operational during working hours “some of the time” or “occasionally.”

- Seventy-three percent of respondents reported that the computer system for processing intake applications electronically was non-operational either “some of the time” (39.3 percent) or “occasionally” (33.3 percent) during working hours in the last year.⁴⁹
- Sixty-one percent of respondents reported that scanners, which are used to make electronic records of clients’ documents, were non-operational either “some of the time” (27.9 percent) or “occasionally” (32.9 percent) in the last year.⁵⁰

“We have very limited supplies and the scanner process is very slow! If a case is in transit to be scanned, we have to wait [sic]! It’s a drag!”

-Eligibility Specialist

The majority of eligibility specialists report long repair response times for non-operational electronic equipment.

- More than half of eligibility specialists surveyed (55 percent) said it takes between 1 and 4 days for the computer system or scanners to be repaired after they report a problem (see Table I).⁵¹
- Eighteen percent of respondents reported that it takes 5 days or more for the computer system or scanners to be repaired.

Table I. Repair Response Time for Computer System or Scanners

Response Time	%
0 -3 hours	16.1%
4 - 6 hours	10.2%
1 day	25.5%
2 - 4 days	29.9%
5 days or more	18.2%

The majority of eligibility specialists report difficulty viewing or retrieving electronically scanned documents.

- Seventy-eight percent of eligibility specialists reported they were unable to retrieve or view a client’s saved electronically scanned documents either “some of the time” (44.3 percent) or “occasionally” (33.6 percent) in the last year.⁵²
- When the computer system or scanners are not functioning, 82 percent of eligibility specialist surveyed said they complete forms manually and then submit them for data entry/photocopy.⁵³

⁴⁹ The Public Advocate’s Office received 135 responses to this question. Thirteen respondents skipped this question.

⁵⁰ The Public Advocate’s Office received 140 responses to this question. Eight respondents skipped this question.

⁵¹ The Public Advocate’s Office received 137 responses to this question. Eleven respondents skipped this question.

⁵² The Public Advocate’s Office received 140 responses to this question. Eight respondents skipped this question.

⁵³ The Public Advocate’s Office received 135 responses to this question. Thirteen respondents skipped this question.

Eligibility specialists rank “Not enough staff,” “Clients do not bring necessary documents when applying for benefits,” and “Computers are not reliable” as the most difficult problems they face.

- “Not enough staff” was ranked as the most difficult problem, followed by “Clients do not bring the necessary documents when applying for benefits.” The third most difficult problem was “computers are not reliable” (see Table II).⁵⁴
- Of those obstacles respondents rated “most difficult,” “not enough staff” was the most frequently cited, followed by both “computers are not reliable” and “clients do not bring the necessary documents when applying for benefits.” The third most frequently cited problem rated “most difficult” was “interpreters not available to translate for clients.”⁵⁵

“The stress of the spiraling economy has put a great stress on the Food Stamp staff. We are also desperately in need of bilingual staff – as [the] whole district of Corona was assigned to F54 [Jamaica Food Stamp Center].”
 -Eligibility Specialist

Table II. Most Difficult Obstacles

Types of Problems	Average Rating
1 Not enough staff	3.88
2 Clients do not bring the necessary documents when applying for benefits	4.08
3 Computers are not reliable	4.17
4 Scanners are not reliable/not available	4.72
5 Unable to retrieve client's scanned electronic documents	5.05
6 Interpreters not available to translate for clients	5.06
7 Clients do not understand the application process	5.13
8 Required to see more clients than I can process per day	5.33
9 Not enough time provided to return client phone calls or conduct other follow up	5.53
10 Other	7.15
11 None*	N/A

*Only one respondent marked "none."

Note: Eligibility specialists were asked to rate each category from the "most difficult" (1) to the "least difficult" (10). For each response the Office of the Public Advocate calculated the average rating. The lower the average rating, the more difficult the problem, the higher the rating, the less difficult.

⁵⁴ The Public Advocate’s Office received 93 responses to this question. Fifty-five respondents skipped this question or provided an unusable answer.

⁵⁵ Of the 93 responses the Office of the Public Advocate received to the question on obstacles, 75 respondents rated at least one obstacle as “most difficult.” Eighteen respondents did not rate any obstacle as “most difficult.”

The majority of eligibility specialists report that HRA had not instructed them to tell clients they could bring another person or an attorney to assist them with their public benefits case.

- Seventy-five percent of eligibility specialists said HRA had not instructed them to tell clients they have a legal right to bring another person or an attorney to assist them with their public benefit case.⁵⁶

Additional Findings:

- The majority (60 percent) of eligibility specialists surveyed said they primarily communicate with clients in person rather than over the phone (18 percent).⁵⁷
- On average, respondents have worked at HRA for eleven years.⁵⁸
- Seventy-two percent of respondents said they spend between 30 and 45 minutes with each client.⁵⁹
- Half of respondents reported processing more than 7 clients per day.⁶⁰ On average, these eligibility specialists process 12 clients per day.
- Ninety percent of eligibility specialists surveyed have a networked computer at work.⁶¹
- Eighty percent of eligibility specialists surveyed currently use a scanner to save client documents electronically.⁶²
- Half of eligibility specialists surveyed rate their HRA staff training as “good,” and 31 percent rated it “adequate.”⁶³
- Thirty-four percent of respondents reported receiving training on changes to HRA policies or public benefits requirements “all of the time” and 26 percent of eligibility specialists surveyed reported receiving training “many times.”⁶⁴

CONCLUSION

HRA’s efforts to improve access to public benefits are laudable; however, it appears the agency’s unreliable office technology and equipment is standing in the way of meeting its goal and may be causing unnecessary delays in processing clients’ benefit applications. The results of the Office of the Public Advocate’s survey indicate that eligibility specialists experience problems with the computer systems and scanners needed to electronically determine eligibility for public benefits. In addition, eligibility specialists reported that staff shortages, clients being unaware of what documents to bring with them, unreliable computers/scanners, and lack of interpreters prevent them from effectively serving their clients. Eligibility specialists may already be feeling the impact of the economic downturn. “The stress of the spiraling economy has put great stress on the Food Stamp staff,” wrote one respondent. With the demand for HRA’s services likely to grow as a result of the downturn in the economy, the agency needs to ensure that eligibility specialists have all the resources they need to efficiently and effectively serve their clients.

⁵⁶ The Public Advocate’s Office received 130 responses to this question. Eighteen respondents skipped this question.

⁵⁷ The Public Advocate’s Office received 141 responses to this question. Seven respondents skipped this question.

⁵⁸ The Public Advocate’s Office received 136 responses to this question. Twelve respondents skipped this question.

⁵⁹ The Public Advocate’s Office received 131 responses to this question. Seventeen respondents skipped this question.

⁶⁰ The Public Advocate’s Office received 125 responses to this question. Twenty-three respondents skipped this question.

⁶¹ The Public Advocate’s Office received 134 responses to this question. Fourteen respondents skipped this question.

⁶² The Public Advocate’s Office received 144 responses to this question. Four respondents skipped this question.

⁶³ The Public Advocate’s Office received 144 responses to this question. Four respondents skipped this question.

⁶⁴ The Public Advocate’s Office received 139 responses to this question. Nine respondents skipped this question.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The New York City Human Resources Administration should:

Hire and/or reassign eligibility specialists to high-traffic centers and offices. Eligibility specialists report that the lack of sufficient staff at centers/offices is the most difficult obstacle to effectively serving their clients. While DC37's Local 1549 indicates that the POS requires an eligibility specialist to spend approximately an hour and a half with an applicant to complete the entire intake or interview process, nearly three-quarters of survey respondents said they spend only 30 to 45 minutes with each client. Eligibility specialists' inability to spend adequate time with clients may explain, in part, why the majority of clients surveyed for the Office of the Public Advocate's *Barriers to Benefits* report (73 percent) returned to a Job Center two or more times in the past year because of problems with their benefits case.

HRA should consider hiring additional eligibility specialists or transferring eligibility specialists to centers/offices that have a high volume of clients applying or recertifying for benefits. While the Office of the Public Advocate recognizes the city is facing a budget shortfall, it is precisely during these difficult economic times, when the need for public benefits is on the rise, that the city must take action to support low-income New Yorkers. Making the Food Stamp process less burdensome for clients and specialists would increase enrollment in the program and bring additional federal revenue and economic activity to the city.

Improve and regularly assess maintenance of all technology and equipment necessary for processing public benefit applications. The POS was intended, in part, to improve productivity of eligibility specialists; however, findings of the Office of the Public Advocate's survey indicate that non-operational equipment is an obstacle to productivity. HRA should take the following steps:

- Conduct a survey of technology and equipment, including the computer system and scanners, used to process applications electronically at all centers/offices to ensure that it is operational and up-to-date. This survey should also assess whether centers/offices have sufficient equipment to meet demand. HRA should repair any problems identified through this survey.
- Improve repair response time for any technology and/or equipment that is unavailable or non-operational. The agency should survey repair personnel to determine why repair times are so lengthy and which centers/offices have the most frequent repair requests. The agency should ensure that centers/offices that suffer from frequent repair problems have on-site repair personnel and provide these centers/offices with new technology or equipment as needed.

Simplify materials (e.g. pamphlets, frequently asked questions) on public benefits application procedures and requirements. Eligibility specialists identified clients' failure to bring necessary documents as one of the most difficult obstacles to effective service. An important strategy for reducing client confusion about the application process and the required documents for enrollment is to provide clear and concise program materials. As the Office of the Public

Advocate recommended in its November 2008 report, *Barriers to Benefits*, HRA should take the following steps:

- Give clients a separate, easy-to-understand pamphlet explaining what application and recertification documents they need to provide and how to obtain them at the reception desk of centers/offices. The “What You Should Know About Your Rights and Responsibilities (When Applying For or Receiving Benefits)” brochure only lists examples of the documents clients need to bring and does not explain how to obtain them.
- Develop a reference sheet or checklist to be used by clients and HRA staff that clearly explains the rules and regulations for applying for various public benefits. This would help staff explain the rules for participation in benefit programs and ensure that clients understand compliance requirements.

Develop a system for regularly obtaining feedback from staff. One respondent suggested, “What we need is to be able to communicate with our director and managers because we sometimes have ideas that may help the Center run smoother and just need to address concerns and problems, and, as of yet, we have not had [a] meeting with either of them.” To improve agency policies and procedures, HRA should develop a systematic and non-punitive system of collecting staff feedback from all centers/offices. This would allow HRA to quickly identify problems and develop solutions based on the experiences of employees. In addition, an analysis of HRA staff experiences would allow the agency to determine what office processes are creating problems or confusion for clients and staff.

Ensure that interpreters and bilingual staff are available at all HRA centers and offices. HRA should guarantee that agency staff is able to communicate with LEP clients and comply with Executive Order 120 requiring citywide language access. As the Office of the Public Advocate recommended in *Barriers to Benefits*, the agency should expand and update current staff language capabilities by training and/or hiring certified interpreters that speak at a minimum one of the city’s six most commonly spoken languages. As a model, HRA should examine the New York State court system’s method for hiring certified court interpreters.

Instruct staff to inform clients they have the right to bring a third party to assist them with their public benefits case. The Office of the Public Advocate’s survey indicates that HRA does not instruct all eligibility specialists to inform clients they have the right to bring another person or an attorney with them. The Public Advocate’s previous report, *Barriers to Benefits*, found that almost half of clients surveyed were unaware they had this right. Clients should not be expected to hunt through the approximately 50 pages of handouts HRA currently distributes in order to find this information. In addition to simplifying its materials, HRA should ensure that all eligibility specialists are instructed to inform clients of this right and that the information is clearly and prominently displayed in its written materials and throughout its centers/offices.

APPENDIX I

Eligibility Specialist Job Description⁶⁵

C-XI

OFFICE WORKER OCCUPATIONAL
OCCUPATIONAL GROUP {131}

CODE NO. 10104

ELIGIBILITY SPECIALIST

General Statement of Duties and Responsibilities

For use in Human Resources Administration/Department of Social Services only.

Under varying degrees of supervision and of latitude for independent judgment, and in accordance with agency policies/procedures and federal/state laws and regulations, determines and substantiates the initial and continuing eligibility of persons for public assistance programs administered by the Human Resources Administration/Department of Social Services. All personnel utilize computerized systems and equipment in performance of their duties. There are three Assignment Levels within this class of positions. All personnel perform related work.

Assignment Level I

Under direct supervision, determines and recertifies the eligibility of persons for public assistance based on documents and computer files; performs tasks such as the following:

Examples of Typical Tasks

Establishes initial eligibility and/or continuing eligibility for assistance of homebound, aged or disables persons and for child only cases, by reviewing applications, documents required for recertification and other documents mailed in by applicants or recipients, and by accessing the agency's computer and paper files.

Obtains financial and other information required to establish the amount of the applicant's/recipient's entitlement; performs calculations to establish need and level of financial assistance and other public benefits.

Recommends changes in benefits, and/or amount of financial assistance, based on new information received from recipients or other sources.

Submits proposed case actions to the supervisor for review and approval, along with substantiating records, documentation and forms required for processing.

Inputs case information into the computer network; processes paperwork.

⁶⁵ *Supra* Note 4.

Prepares activity and other reports.

May answer inquiries from the public.

May conduct face to face interviews.

Assignment Level II

Under supervision, with some latitude for independent judgment and decision, performs the duties described under Assignment Level I above in face to face interviews or responds to calls on the Human Resources Administration/Department of Social Services information help line. In addition, performs tasks such as the following:

Examples of Typical Tasks

Conducts face to face interviews with applicants and/or recipients of public assistance benefits such as food stamps and medical assistance; establishes initial and/or continuing eligibility for assistance.

Working in Human Resources Administration/Department of Social Services information help lines, responds to telephone inquiries from the general public, community organizations, applicants and recipients of public assistance. Answers questions concerning issues, such as, income support benefits, medical assistance, food stamps, heat/utility/housing emergencies and domestic violence programs; elicits information to make an expeditious assessment of callers' financial eligibility for benefits; refers callers to appropriate local center for further assistance; answers questions concerning status of applications and/or status of active cases; works to resolve caller complaints/queries by accessing agency's computer system for needed information and/or contacting appropriate program areas; tracks recertification data to ensure recipients receive necessary paper work on time.

Assignment Level III

Under supervision, with latitude for independent judgment and decision, maintains a caseload; working directly with public assistance applicants and recipients performs the duties described under Assignment Levels I and II above. In addition perform tasks such as the following:

Examples of Typical Tasks

Initiates and/or processes housing referrals and actions to maintain suitable housing for applicants/recipients; processes housing actions, such as rent increases, changes of address, rent advances and relocations.

Qualification Requirements

1. Completion of 60 semester credits at an accredited college; or

2. A four year high school diploma or its educational equivalent and two years of full-time satisfactory experience in one or more of the following areas; performing the work described below:

a. Interviewing, gathering information and/or preparing necessary documentation for the purpose of making decisions concerning eligibility for public assistance or unemployment, health benefits, social security, casualty, property or liability insurance, or other similar benefits; or

b. Performing bookkeeping, bank teller duties, housing office teller duties, purchasing agent, assistant store manager, sales representative responsible for accounts, or customer service representative responsible for making determinations; or

c. Dealing with social service agencies or aiding individuals in solving housing, social, financial or health problems as a community organization representative; or

3. A satisfactory combination of education and/or experience equivalent to "1" or "2" above. College education may be substituted for the experience in "2" above on the basis that 30 semester credits from an accredited college may be substituted for each year of required experience. However, all candidates must have at least a four year high school diploma or its educational equivalent.

Special Note

Work experience which provides only incidental opportunities to perform the job duties as described in "2a", "2b" and "2c" above are not acceptable for meeting the minimum qualification requirements. Examples of unacceptable work experience include, but are not limited to, experience as a token clerk, check-out clerk, sales clerk, teacher's aide, cashier, receptionist or secretary.

Direct Lines of Promotion

From: None To: Principal Administrative Associate
(10124)

R 01.18.2005

APPENDIX II

Barriers to Benefits:

A Survey of Clients at New York City Human Resources Administration Job Centers

REPORT RECOMMENDATIONS

The New York City Human Resources Administration should:

Evaluate and streamline its current intake and appointment process to reduce wait times. HRA should review its current interview and appointment process to determine why clients experience excessively long wait times and require repeat visits. HRA should also consider the following steps to improve the process:

- Hire additional eligibility and job opportunity specialists or reassign eligibility and job opportunity specialists to Job Centers that have a high volume of clients applying or recertifying for benefits.
- Honor scheduled appointment times. Clients should not be penalized because they cannot wait, on average, more than four hours past a scheduled appointment time. Seventy-eight percent of the clients we surveyed had children. It is important that parents are not penalized because they are unable to wait for long periods with a small child in tow or one waiting at home.
- Consider developing, as part of the POS initiative, an online public benefits system that would allow clients to access information about their case, such as how much funds they have available, when they have to reapply for benefits, and why they have been sanctioned. Clients would be able to monitor their benefits on the internet and seek assistance from HRA or community-based organizations (CBOs) when they do not understand why they have been sanctioned.
- Expand the pilot program that allows CBOs to electronically submit applications and supporting documents to HRA on behalf of their clients through the Paperless Office System. This would help reduce wait times and client confusion over what documents they need to bring and how to obtain them.

Provide clients with proof of program compliance to avoid erroneous sanctioning of benefits due to computer or record-keeping mistakes. Clients should not have their benefits terminated or reduced because of problems with HRA's computer or record-keeping systems. HRA should take the following steps:

- Give clients a receipt when they have made a required visit or submitted documents, so they have proof and can have their benefits quickly reinstated should they be sanctioned due to agency error. At Model Centers, the Customer Service and Information Center could provide these receipts to clients after their visits.
- Update the POS and Model Office Initiative to include a system for preventing the incorrect termination or reduction of benefits. For example, supervisors could be required to review sanctioned cases before benefits are terminated or reduced.
- Contact clients before sanctions are finalized in the computer system.

Develop clear and concise materials (e.g. pamphlets, frequently asked questions) on public benefits application procedures and compliance requirements. An important strategy for reducing wait times and confusion about public benefits rules and regulations among clients and eligibility and job opportunity specialists is to provide clear and concise program materials. Currently, clients applying for benefits receive five brochures, an application, and approximately 50 pages of handouts that are not user-friendly or written in laymen’s terms. The brochure titled “What You Should Know About Your Rights and Responsibilities (*When Applying For or Receiving Public Benefits*)” is 32 pages in itself, printed in small typeface, and difficult to understand. HRA should take the following steps:

- Give clients a separate, easy-to-understand pamphlet explaining what application and recertification documents clients need to provide and how to obtain them at the Front Door Reception Information System of Model Centers or at the reception desk of non-Model Centers. The “What You Should Know About Your Rights and Responsibilities (*When Applying For or Receiving Benefits*)” brochure only lists examples of the documents you need to bring and does not explain how to obtain them.
- Give clients a list of nonprofits or CBOs that can assist them in obtaining necessary documents or with their public benefits case.
- Develop a reference sheet or checklist to be used by clients and eligibility and job opportunity specialists that clearly explains the rules and regulations for applying for various public benefits. This would help eligibility and job opportunity specialists explain the rules for participation in public benefits program and ensure that clients understand compliance requirements so they are not sanctioned.
- Give clients a list of benefits they may be entitled to receive when they meet with their eligibility or job opportunity specialist to ensure they apply for all public benefits at one time and do not have to make frequent visits.

Improve customer service. The Model Office Initiative was intended, in part, to improve customer service; however, findings of the Office of the Public Advocate’s survey indicate that HRA still has work to do in this area. HRA should take the following steps:

- Regularly update eligibility and job opportunity specialists on changes to the rules and regulations of public benefits programs and ensure that they are able to clearly and concisely explain this information to clients.
- Ensure that agency staff is able to communicate with LEP clients and comply with Executive Order 120 requiring citywide language access. The agency should expand and update current staff language capabilities through training and/or hire certified interpreters that speak at a minimum one of the city’s six most commonly spoken languages.

The New York City Council should:

Enact the Ready Access to Assistance Act (REAACT). This bill, introduced in 2006 by Public Advocate Betsy Gotbaum and co-sponsored by Councilmembers Bill de Blasio and Eric Gioia, would allow non-profit advocates to set up help desks in New York City public benefits offices. In its report, *Improving New York City’s Public Benefits System: A Key Role for Help Desks*, the

Brennan Center Strategic Fund, Inc. argues that allowing advocates to run help desks inside government offices would improve the public benefits system. Help desks would provide clients with valuable information that can help minimize confusion about the rules and requirements of applying and recertifying for public benefits and provide LEP individuals with translation/interpretation assistance. Advocates were allowed in public benefit offices until 1992 when Mayor Giuliani barred them from entering centers unless accompanied by a client.

APPENDIX III



Public Advocate for the City of New York



October 2008

Survey for DC37 Human Resources Administration (HRA) Eligibility Specialists

This survey is confidential and your responses will remain anonymous. Please circle only one of the options below, unless otherwise directed.

1. What is your primary method of contact or communication with clients seeking public benefits?

In Person Over the Phone Other (please specify) _____

2. How long have you worked at HRA? _____ (Please indicate the number of months or years.)

3. On average, how many clients do you process per day?

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 (write in, if more than 7) _____

4. On average, how much time do you spend with each client? (please check one of the options below)

- Less than 15 mins
- 15 mins
- 30 mins
- 45 mins
- 60 mins
- 75 mins
- 90 mins
- More than 90 mins

5. What obstacles most frequently impair your ability to effectively serve your clients? (Please rank these obstacles from the most difficult [1] to the least difficult [10].)

- ___ Interpreters not available to translate for clients
- ___ Computers are not reliable
- ___ Scanners are not reliable / not available
- ___ Unable to retrieve client's scanned electronic documents
- ___ Clients do not bring the necessary documents when applying for benefits
- ___ Clients do not understand the application process
- ___ Required to see more clients than I can process per day (please specify how many _____)
- ___ Not enough staff
- ___ Not enough time provided to return client phone calls or conduct other follow up
- ___ Other (please specify) _____
- ___ None

6. Do you have a networked computer at work (i.e. can you process intake applications electronically)?

Yes No (*please specify how you process applications* _____)

7. How often has the computer system for processing intake applications electronically been unavailable or non-operational during working hours in the last year?

[All of the time] [Most of the Time] [Some of the Time] [Occasionally] [Never] [Not Applicable]

8. Do you currently use a scanner to save client documents electronically?

Yes No Not Applicable

9. How often have the scanners been unavailable or non-operational during working hours in the last year?

[All of the time] [Most of the Time] [Some of the Time] [Occasionally] [Never] [Not Applicable]

10. In the last year, how often were you unable to retrieve or view client's saved electronically scanned documents?

[All of the time] [Most of the Time] [Some of the Time] [Occasionally] [Never] [Not Applicable]

11. How do you store client information when the computer system or scanners are not operating during working hours? (*please check one of the options below*)

- Complete forms manually on paper and submit for data entry/photocopy documents
- Ask clients to return when the computers are operational
- Other (*please explain*) _____

12. How quickly after you report a problem with the computer system or scanners is the problem fixed?

0 – 3 hours 4 – 6 hours 1 day 2 - 4 days 5 days or more

13. How would you rate the adequacy of the staff training you receive from HRA?

Very Good Good Adequate Bad Very Bad

14. How often do you receive training from HRA on changes to HRA policies or public benefits requirements?

All of the time Many times A few times One time Never

15. Have you been instructed by HRA to tell clients they can bring another person or an attorney to assist them with their public benefits case?

Yes No

COMMENTS _____

THANK YOU!