



Public Advocate for the City of New York

BARRIERS TO BENEFITS:

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

**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. New Yorkers can apply for most public benefits at HRA Job Centers and food stamp offices.

A 2008 report by Brennan Center Strategic Fund, Inc., *Improving New York City's Public Benefits System: A Key Role for Help Desks*, shows that clients face a range of obstacles at HRA Job Centers. According to the report, both caseworkers (officially known as eligibility or job opportunity specialists) and clients are confused about the rules and regulations associated with public benefits; clients are unaware of what documents to bring with them or how to acquire them; clients with limited English proficiency face language barriers; and benefits can be incorrectly terminated or reduced due to errors in recording-keeping, computer problems, or miscommunication about benefit program requirements.

Clients seeking to apply for or maintain food stamps face an additional set of barriers. A 2007 Urban Justice Center report, found that “61 percent of clients lost their benefits within 20 months of being pre-screened as eligible for food stamps, and the vast majority (81 percent) were cut off for reasons like missing a recertification interview, burdensome documentation requirements, or HRA error.” Three years earlier, a class action lawsuit was brought by the New York Legal Assistance Group, the National Center for Law and Economic Justice, and the Urban Justice Center against New York City for failing to process food stamp benefits within the timeframes required by state and federal law.

Concerned by the findings of the Brennan Center report, the Office of the Public Advocate undertook a survey of clients at HRA Job Centers from August 14 through September 12, 2008. Representatives from the Office of the Public Advocate surveyed clients standing outside or exiting one randomly selected HRA Job Center in each borough—Bay Ridge in Brooklyn, Queens in Queens, Melrose in the Bronx, Richmond in Staten Island, and Waverly in Manhattan. Public Advocate staff interviewed clients who indicated they were currently receiving public benefits and had visited an HRA Job Center more than once in the past year. Surveyors collected a total of 100 surveys, twenty from each HRA Job Center. Survey findings include:

- **Long wait times were the problem most frequently cited by clients visiting HRA Job Centers; 82 percent of respondents said long waits were a problem when dealing with public benefit offices. On average, clients spent 20.3 hours per year in Job Centers.**
- **The majority of respondents (73 percent) returned to a Job Center two or more times in the past year because of problems with their benefits case.**
- **More than half of clients (52 percent) experienced workflow problems, including no record of a prior visit, HRA misplacing their documents, or computers not working at HRA Job Centers, and 24 percent reported that their eligibility or job**

opportunity specialist did not clearly explain the rules and requirements for receiving public benefits.

- **Despite HRA’s efforts to improve wait times through the Model Office Initiative, clients at Model Centers, on average, spent 7.8 more hours per year in these centers than clients at non-Model Centers.**
- **For respondents at both Model and non-Model Centers, miscommunication with the eligibility or job opportunity specialist was the second most frequently cited problem, after long waits. The third most frequently cited problem was HRA misplacing their documents.**
- **Clients at the Richmond Model Job Center in Staten Island reported making the most visits and spending the most time per visit. They spent, on average, 20 more hours in the Job Center per year than Manhattan respondents and 18 more hours than Brooklyn respondents.**
- **Nearly half of all respondents (46 percent) rated their experience at HRA Job Centers as “bad” or “very bad.” Forty-eight percent of respondents at Model Centers rated their experience as “bad” or “very bad” compared to 43 percent at non-Model Centers.**

The report includes the following recommendations:

- **Evaluate and revise the current intake and appointment process to reduce wait times.**
- **Provide clients with proof of program compliance to avoid erroneous sanctioning of benefits due to computer or record-keeping mistakes.**
- **Develop clear and concise materials (e.g. pamphlets, frequently asked questions) on public benefits application procedures and compliance requirements.**
- **Improve customer service.**
- **Enact the Ready Access to Assistance Act (REAACT), which would allow non-profit advocates to set up help desks in New York City public benefits offices.**

INTRODUCTION

New York State is one of five states in which the gap between rich and poor is greater than the national estimate of income inequality.¹ In New York City, the top fifth held more than 56 percent of the income in 2007, while the bottom fifth accounted for 2.4 percent of the city's income.² Roughly one in five New Yorkers (18.5 percent)³ and more than one quarter of children in the city (27.3 percent) lived below the poverty line.⁴

With poverty comes hardship. The Community Service Society's *The Unheard Third* report for 2007 found that 67 percent of the working poor faced hardships, such as falling behind on rent or mortgage, going hungry, postponing medical care, and having their phone or utilities turned off.⁵ In addition, between 2003 and 2007, there was a 55 percent increase in New York City residents who had trouble affording food in New York City—from two million in 2003 to 3.1 million in 2007—according to the Food Bank for New York City.⁶ Public benefits are available, however, 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, like Medicaid. New Yorkers can apply for most public benefits at HRA Job Centers and food stamp offices. In fiscal year 2008, there were 341,300 New Yorkers receiving cash assistance, 1,241,600 receiving food stamps, and 2,563,800 public health insurance enrollees.⁷

While HRA has made attempts to improve service and reduce barriers to accessing public benefits, a 2008 report by Brennan Center Strategic Fund, Inc., *Improving New York City's Public Benefits System: A Key Role for Help Desks*, indicates that clients continue to face a range of obstacles at HRA Job Centers.⁸ According to the report, both clients and eligibility and job

¹ U.S. Census Bureau, Income, "Income, Earnings, and Poverty Data from the 2007 American Community Survey," see <http://www.census.gov/prod/2008pubs/acs-09.pdf>.

² U.S. Census Bureau, *American Community Survey, 1 Year Estimates, 2007*, See: <http://factfinder.census.gov/>.

³ 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%, which is higher than the official poverty rate of 18.9% 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.

⁴ According to the U.S. Census, in 2007 the average poverty threshold for a family of three was \$16,530, See: *Supra* note 2.

⁵ Community Service Society, "The Unheard Third 2007," June 2008. See: http://www.cssny.org/pdfs/UnheardThird_booklet_2007.pdf.

⁶ Food Bank for New York City, "NYC Hunger Experience 2008," 2008. See: <http://www.foodbanknyc.org/download.cfm?downloadfile=9DCE8877-3048-651A-20FC60E017A13338&typename=dmFile&fieldname=filename>.

⁷ The City of New York, Mayor's Office of Operations, *Fiscal 2008 Mayor's Management Report, Human Resources Administration*, See: <http://www.nyc.gov/html/ops/html/mmr/mmr.shtml>.

⁸ Brennan Center Strategic Fund, Inc., "Improving New York City's Public Benefits System: A Key Role for Help Desks," 2008. See: http://www.brennancenter.org/content/resource/improving_new_york_citys_public_benefits_system_a_key_role_for_help_desks/.

opportunity specialists⁹ are confused about the rules and regulations associated with public benefits; clients are unaware of what documents to bring with them or how to acquire them; clients with limited proficiency in English face language barriers; and benefits can be incorrectly terminated or reduced due to errors in recording-keeping, computer problems, or miscommunication about benefit program requirements.¹⁰

Concerned by the findings of the Brennan Center report, the Office of the Public Advocate undertook a survey of clients at HRA Job Centers. This report is based on the findings of that survey. It also includes a review of HRA's efforts to improve Job Centers, an explanation of survey methodology and findings, and recommendations for improving HRA Job Centers.

BACKGROUND

HRA Job Centers

In the late 1990s, a series of state and federal welfare reform laws created a new model for public assistance emphasizing work and personal responsibility and introduced five-year time limits on cash assistance.¹¹ In March 1998, as part of the new emphasis on "work first," HRA converted city welfare offices into Job Centers.¹² Since this change, individuals receiving financial assistance must participate in employment activities, unless they have a medical condition or another qualifying work exemption. Job Centers provide both cash and non-cash assistance. Job Center staff help clients find employment and apply or recertify for public benefits, such as emergency assistance, food stamps, and Medicaid.¹³

Paperless Office System

In 1993, HRA began developing the Paperless Office System (POS) to address inefficiencies and inaccuracies in its benefits application process.¹⁴ 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."¹⁵ The POS automated the application and recertification process for public benefits and eliminated paper record-keeping, allowing workers to perform this entire process electronically.¹⁶ Features of this system also include document imaging, which allows workers to save clients' documents

⁹ Eligibility and job opportunity specialists are also known as "caseworkers." Eligibility specialists handle Medicaid and non-cash assistance cases, such as Food Stamps. Job opportunity specialists handle cash assistance cases.

¹⁰ *Supra* note 8.

¹¹ New York City Human Resources Agency (HRA), "Agency Information," See: http://www.nyc.gov/html/hra/html/about_hra/agency_information.shtml.

¹² HRA, "Job Placement, Education and Training." See: http://home2.nyc.gov/html/hra/html/family_independence/serv_job_placement_training.shtml.

¹³ HRA, "Job Centers," See: http://www.nyc.gov/html/hra/html/family_independence/job_center_sites.shtml.

¹⁴ 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

¹⁵ *Ibid*, pg.3.

¹⁶ 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 14.

electronically, and automatic checks to ensure that all necessary information has been collected before eligibility is determined. A pilot program at some benefits offices provides community groups access to the POS, allowing them to electronically submit applications and supporting documents to HRA on behalf of their clients.¹⁷ Once this information is submitted, clients have to visit an HRA office only for a prescheduled, face-to-face interview with their eligibility specialist, who reviews the information and determines eligibility.

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.¹⁸

Model Office Initiative

In 2003, HRA established its Model Office Initiative in order to reorganize its Job Centers and non-cash food stamp offices.¹⁹ According to Seth Diamond, the Executive Deputy Commissioner of HRA's Family Independence Administration, "HRA developed the Model Office concept to streamline workflow, reduce wait time for applicants and recipients, and create greater, more efficient access to services in our centers."²⁰ Features of Model Centers include the Front Door Reception Information System, the Customer Service and Information Center, and Automated Customer Information Stations.²¹ In the Front Door Reception Information System, or main reception area, workers assess the purpose of each client's visit and direct them to the appropriate service area using a color-coded and numbered ticket.²² The color of the ticket directs the client to the appropriate floor, and the number corresponds to his or her place in line. The Customer Service and Information Center, or "quick service" area, serves clients visiting for reasons other than interviews, such as pick-up or drop-off of documents.²³ Automated Customer Information Stations or kiosks allow clients to access forms, information on public benefits, and frequently asked questions using touch screens.²⁴ Currently, 13 of the 27 HRA Job Centers are Model Job Centers.²⁵ In addition, food stamps are provided at 27 HRA offices, including 11 Model Offices.²⁶

¹⁷ Letter from Robert Doar, Administrator/Commissioner, HRA, to Betsy Gotbaum, Public Advocate, November 2007 and Testimony by Robert Doar, Administrator/Commissioner, HRA/DSS, New York City Council General Welfare Committee, New York, NY, March 15, 2007.

¹⁸ *Supra* note 14.

¹⁹ Email from Kathryn Dyjak, Deputy Commissioner Office of Legislative Affairs, HRA, "Request for Information," to Office of the Public Advocate, September 22, 2008.

²⁰ Testimony by Seth Diamond, Executive Deputy Commissioner, Family Independence Administration, HRA/DSS, New York City Council General Welfare Committee, New York, NY, December 18, 2006. See: http://nyc.gov/html/hra/downloads/pdf/public_benefits_testimony.pdf.

²¹ *Supra* note 19 and HRA, "Commissioner's Special Report," April 2005. See: http://home2.nyc.gov/html/hra/downloads/pdf/commissioners_special_report.pdf

²² *Ibid.*

²³ *Ibid.*

²⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁵ *Supra* note 19 and *Supra* note 7.

²⁶ *Ibid.*

Barriers to Accessing Public Benefits

A 2008 report by Brennan Center Strategic Fund, Inc., *Improving New York City's Public Benefits System: A Key Role for Help Desks*, highlights many of the obstacles clients face at HRA Job Centers.²⁷ Interviews with advocates and clients revealed that “confusion among caseworkers²⁸ and clients about the procedures, deadlines, and timelines associated with public benefit programs” is a major problem.²⁹ Miscommunication between eligibility and job opportunity specialists and clients about the rules for participating in public benefits can result in the termination or reduction of client’s benefits, particularly, advocates noted, when clients are unaware that they failed to comply with an HRA requirement.³⁰

Another problem highlighted in the report is that clients often do not know what documents they need to bring or how to obtain them, which makes it difficult to obtain benefits in a timely and efficient manner.³¹ Occasionally, a client’s public benefits are incorrectly reduced or terminated by HRA because of errors in agency record-keeping or computer problems.³² For example, advocates report that clients are often sanctioned—meaning their benefits are reduced or terminated—because the agency misplaced their documents or because a computer generated appointment notice was sent to the wrong mailing address. The Brennan Center report also identifies long wait times as a problem that can be particularly challenging for families with young children. Clients waiting all day at Job Centers are often forced to leave to attend to childcare duties and are then unfairly sanctioned for missing an appointment.³³

Immigrants face additional challenges to accessing public benefits. Research has found that immigrants participate in public benefits programs far less than citizens.³⁴ For example, according to a recent Urban Justice Center report, HRA estimates that in 2006 there were about 83,000 non-citizens eligible for food stamps but not enrolled.³⁵ There are a variety of reasons for these lower participation rates, including fear among immigrants that receiving public benefits will put their immigration status at risk or negatively affect their immigration application process, as well as language barriers at HRA Job Centers.³⁶ Although HRA is mandated by law to provide language services, a study by Legal Services for New York City found that 66 percent of HRA Job Centers could not provide applications in the city’s six most commonly spoken languages.³⁷ In July of 2008, Mayor Michael Bloomberg signed Executive Order 120 requiring

²⁷ *Supra* note 8.

²⁸ Caseworkers are officially known as eligibility or job opportunity specialists.

²⁹ *Supra* note 8, pg. 8.

³⁰ *Ibid.*

³¹ *Ibid.*

³² *Ibid.*

³³ *Ibid.*

³⁴ *Ibid.*

³⁵ Urban Justice Center, “Nourishing NYC: Increasing Food Stamps Access in Immigrant Communities,” July 2008. See: http://www.urbanjustice.org/pdf/publications/NOURISH_NYC_FINAL_WEB.pdf.

³⁶ *Ibid.*

³⁷ Legal Services NYC, “Translation Woes: Language Barriers at New York City’s Human Resources Administration,” 2007. See: <http://www.legalservicesnyc.org/storage/lsny/PDFs/translation%20woes.pdf>.

city agencies to provide language assistance in six languages—Spanish, Chinese, Russian, Korean, Italian, and French Creole.³⁸

Clients seeking to apply for or maintain food stamps face a unique set of barriers. A 2007 Urban Justice Center report, found that “61 percent of clients lost their benefits within 20 months of being pre-screened as eligible for food stamps, and the vast majority (81 percent) were cut off for reasons like missing a recertification interview, burdensome documentation requirements, or HRA error.”³⁹ In addition, clients faced delays in the processing of food stamp applications. A 2004 class action lawsuit was brought by the New York Legal Assistance Group, the National Center for Law and Economic Justice, and the Urban Justice Center against New York City for failing to process food stamp benefits within the timeframes required by state and federal law.⁴⁰ The *Williston v. Eggleston* lawsuit was settled in April 2008. As part of the settlement, the city must comply with state and federal law by processing food stamps applications within 30 days and applications for expedited food stamp benefits within five days.⁴¹

METHODOLOGY

The Office of the Public Advocate assigned each of the 27 HRA Job Centers, listed in alphabetical order, a number and then used a random number generator to randomly select one Job Center from each of the five boroughs.⁴² Street addresses for each Job Center were obtained from the HRA website. From August 14 through September 12, 2008, the Office of the Public Advocate sent representatives to the five selected HRA Job Centers—Bay Ridge in Brooklyn, Queens in Queens, Melrose in the Bronx, Richmond in Staten Island, and Waverly in Manhattan—to survey HRA clients.

The twelve-question survey was administered primarily in person, but respondents could also return it by mail. Representatives surveyed HRA clients standing outside or exiting each Job Center. Only clients who indicated they were currently receiving public benefits and had visited an HRA job center more than once in the past year were invited to fill out the survey. Respondents remained anonymous. The survey was available in English, Spanish, and Chinese. The Office of the Public Advocate collected a total of 100 surveys, twenty from each HRA Job Center. (See Appendix I for the survey questions.)

An additional survey was created for clients who were visiting HRA Job Centers for the first time; however, surveyors could not identify a sufficient number of first-time visitors to establish a valid sample population for inclusion in this report. (See Appendix II for the survey questions.)

³⁸ Santos, F., “Mayor Orders New York to Expand Language Help,” *The New York Times*, July 23, 2008 and City of New York, “Mayor Bloomberg Signs Executive Order 120 Requiring Citywide Language Access,” July 22, 2008 (press release).

³⁹ Letter from Rebecca Widom, Director, Homeless Outreach and Prevention Project, to Betsy Gotbaum, Public Advocate, September 7, 2007.

⁴⁰ National Center for Law and Economic Justice (NCLEJ), “Federal Court Settlement to End Massive Delays in Processing NYC Food Stamps,” April 16, 2008 (press release). See:

<http://www.nclej.org/WillistonvEgglestonPressReleaseApril162008.pdf.pdf>

⁴¹ *Ibid.*

⁴² Random Number Generator available online at www.random.org.

FINDINGS

Overall, clients were enrolled in the following public benefits programs: food stamps (86 percent), public assistance (61 percent), and/or Medicaid (56 percent).

- Respondents also reported receiving homeless diversion aid (14 percent), assistance with rent arrears (14 percent), and childcare subsidies (12 percent).

Clients at HRA Job Centers made frequent visits and returned repeatedly because of problems.

- On average, clients made 4.4 visits per year.⁴³
- Twenty-five percent of respondents visited an HRA Job Center eight or more times in the past year.
- The majority of respondents (73 percent) returned to a Job Center two or more times in the past year because of problems with their benefits or case.
- Twenty-five percent of respondents returned five or more times in the past year because of problems with their benefits or case.

Long wait times were the problem most frequently cited by clients visiting HRA Job Centers.

- Eighty-two percent of respondents said long waits were a problem when dealing with public benefit offices.
- On average, clients spent 20.3 hours per year in Job Centers.
- Clients waited an average of 4.6 hours per visit.⁴⁴

Clients experienced workflow problems when dealing with their public benefits case at HRA Job Centers.

- More than half (52 percent) of respondents reported having to deal with one or more of the following problems: no record of a prior visit, HRA misplacing their documents, computers not working at HRA Job Centers.

Almost half of clients surveyed were uninformed about their rights and about the rules and requirements for receiving public benefits.

- Forty-five percent of respondents were not aware they have the right to bring another person or an attorney to assist them.
- Nearly one quarter of respondents (24 percent) reported that their eligibility or job opportunity specialist did not clearly explain the rules and requirements for receiving public benefits.

Clients believe that HRA needs to hire more employees, improve customer service, and enhance communication about rules and requirements.

- Of the 56 clients that responded to an open-ended question asking whether they had any suggestions for improving services at HRA, 38 percent suggested HRA improve its customer service.

⁴³ Respondents were given the option of selecting “eight or more” visits (see survey question 2 listed in Appendix I); however, for the purposes of calculating the average number of visits, eight was considered the maximum number of visits.

⁴⁴ Respondents were given the option of selecting “eight or more” hours (see survey question 3 listed in Appendix I); however, for the purposes of calculating the average wait time per visit in HRA Job Centers, eight was considered the maximum number of hours.

- Twenty percent said staff should clearly explain public benefits programs.
- Fourteen percent said more workers were needed at HRA offices. One respondent suggested, “More workers, less waiting time.”

Clients at Model Centers waited longer and spent more time per visit, on average, than clients at non-Model Centers.

- Despite HRA’s efforts to improve wait times through the Model Office Initiative, clients at Model Centers, on average, spent 7.8 more hours per year in these centers than clients at non-Model Centers (see Table 1).
- Model center clients waited, on average, an hour more per visit than clients of non-Model Centers.

Table 1. Model vs. Non-Model Centers

Visits & Wait Times	Model Centers	Non-Model Centers
Average Number of Visits in Past Year*	4.7	4.0
Average Time Spent Per Visit (in hours)	5.0	3.9
Average Number of Hours Spent in Job Centers Per Year**	23.6	15.8

*Average number of visits per person per year

**Hours spent at HRA Job Centers per person per year

Note: There were 60 respondents from Model Centers and 40 from non-Model Centers.

Clients at Model Centers reported dealing with the same types of problems as clients at non-Model Centers, despite the fact that the Model Office Initiative was intended to streamline workflow and improve customer service.

- Miscommunication with the eligibility or job opportunity specialists was cited as the second most frequent type of problem, after long waits, for clients of both model and non-Model Centers. The third most common problem was HRA misplacing documents (see Table 2).

Table 2. Model vs. Non-Model Centers

Types of Problems	Model Centers	Non-Model Centers
Long waits	82%	83%
Eligibility or job opportunity specialists did not clearly explain requirements	23%	25%
HRA misplaced documents	20%	20%
No record of prior visit	17%	15%
Computers at HRA office not working	15%	18%

Note: There were 60 respondents from Model Centers and 40 from non-Model Centers.

Respondents from the three Job Centers in the Bronx, Queens, and Staten Island spent more than 20 hours in HRA Job Centers per year.

- Clients at the Richmond Model Job Center in Staten Island reported making the most visits, on average, and spending the most time per visit, on average (see Table 3). They

spent, on average, 20 more hours in the Job Center than Manhattan respondents and 18 more hours than Brooklyn respondents per year.

- Clients at the Waverly Job Center in Manhattan visited least frequently and spent the least amount of time in the center. They spent, on average, 8.8 hours in the center per year.

Table 3. Results by New York City Borough

Borough/Center	Average Time Spent Per Visit (in hours)	Average Number of Visits in Past Year*	Average Number of Hours Spent in Job Center Per Year**
Brooklyn/Bay Ridge	3.3	3.5	11.4
Bronx/Melrose	4.6	4.6	20.9
Manhattan/Waverly [^]	3.3	2.7	8.8
Queens/Queens [^]	4.5	5.0	22.3
Staten Island/Richmond [^]	5.7	5.2	29.4

*Average number of visits per person per year

**Hours spent at HRA Job Centers per person per year

[^]Indicates a Model Center

Note: There were 20 respondents per Center.

Nearly half of all respondents rated their experience at HRA Job Centers as “bad” or “very bad.”

- Forty-eight percent of respondents at Model Centers rated their experience as “bad” or “very bad” compared to 43 percent at non-Model Centers.

Table 4. Overall Experience at HRA Job Centers

Rating	All Job Centers*	Model Centers**	Non-Model Centers**
Good or Very Good	12%	8%	18%
Average	38%	40%	35%
Bad or Very Bad	46%	48%	43%
No Opinion	4%	3%	5%

*There were 100 respondents from all Job Centers surveyed.

**There were 60 respondents from Model Centers and 40 from non-Model Centers.

CONCLUSION

Despite HRA’s efforts to reduce wait times and improve efficiency and customer service, clients still face significant barriers when accessing public benefits. The results of the Office of the Public Advocate’s survey indicate that clients continue to experience excessively long wait times and problems due to workflow inefficiencies, such as misplaced documents or inoperative computers. In addition, clients at Model Centers waited longer and spent more hours per visit than clients at non-Model Centers. With the demand for its services likely to grow as a result of

the downturn in the economy, HRA needs to address the barriers to accessing public benefits experienced by its clients. HRA must improve its public benefits delivery system so that it is prepared to meet the needs of low-income New Yorkers struggling to support themselves and their families in a city where the basic cost of living continues to increase.⁴⁵

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.

⁴⁵ According to a Food Bank for New York City report, "Child Hunger: The Unhealthy Return on Missed Investments," the following basic living costs having increased from 2003 to 2007: "food by 15 percent, fuel and utility by 37 percent, housing by 18 percent, medical care by 17 percent and transportation by 14 percent." See: <http://www.foodbanknyc.org/index.cfm?objectid=D42B3E4D-3048-651A-20BA8E06F5EF6544>.

- 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 I

Survey on Multiple Visits to NYC Human Resources Administration (HRA) Centers

This survey may be completed anonymously. If you have any questions, please call the NYC Public Advocate's Office at (212) 669-7200.

HRA Center Name _____ Date _____ Time _____

1. How many times have you visited a HRA public benefits office in the last year (*please circle one of the options below*)?

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 or more visits

2. On average, how many hours did your past visits to HRA public benefits offices take (*please circle one of the options below*)?

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 or more hours

3. How would you rate your overall experience with HRA public benefits offices (*please circle one of the options below*)?

Very Good Good Average Bad Very Bad No Opinion

4. What public benefits are you currently enrolled in (*check all that apply*)?

- | | |
|---|--|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Public Assistance | <input type="checkbox"/> Medicaid |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Food Stamps | <input type="checkbox"/> Rent Arrears |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Childcare Subsidy | <input type="checkbox"/> WeCare |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Homeless Diversion | <input type="checkbox"/> Other (<i>please explain</i>) _____ |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Moving Expenses or Furniture Grant | |

5. What types of problems have you had while dealing with public benefits offices (*check all that apply*)?

- | | |
|--|--|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Long waits | <input type="checkbox"/> Computers at public benefits offices were not working |
| <input type="checkbox"/> There was no record of your prior visit | <input type="checkbox"/> None |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Caseworker did not clearly explain the rules and requirements for receiving public benefits | <input type="checkbox"/> Other (Please specify) _____ |
| <input type="checkbox"/> HRA misplaced your documents | |



6. Over the last year, how many times have you had to return to an HRA public benefits office because of problems with your benefits or case (*circle one*)?

0 1 2 3 4 5 or more

7. Are you comfortable speaking to a caseworker about your public benefits case in English?

Yes No **(If yes, skip to question 9)**

8. Are you aware that you have the right to an interpreter in public benefits offices?

Yes No

8a. Have you ever requested an interpreter to help you at a public benefits office?

Yes No

8b. If **yes**, did the HRA center provide you with an interpreter?

Yes No

8c. If **no**, why not? _____

8d. What language would you prefer to use when speaking to a caseworker? _____

9. Are you aware you have the right to bring another person or an attorney to assist you with your public benefits case?

Yes No

9a. If yes, were you allowed to bring another person or attorney to assist you with your public benefits case?

Yes No Not Applicable

10. Do you have children?

Yes No

10a. If yes, has your caseworker explained options for receiving child care subsidies?

Yes No

11. Do you have any suggestions for improving services at HRA (*continue on the next page if needed*)? _____



12. Would you be willing to speak publicly about the issues discussed in this survey?

Yes No

(If yes, please be sure to provide name and contact information below.)

First Name _____ Last Name _____ Phone # _____

THANK YOU!

APPENDIX II

Survey on First Time Visit to NYC Human Resources Administration (HRA) Centers

This survey may be completed anonymously. If you have any questions, please call the NYC Public Advocate's Office at (212) 669-7200.

HRA Center Name _____ Date _____ Time _____

1. How did you know to go to an HRA public benefits office (*check all that apply*)?

- HRA Website
- Community Based Organization or Nonprofit
- 311
- Department of Homeless Services HomeBase Prevention Program
- Other (*please explain*) _____

2. What public benefits are you planning to sign up for (*check all that apply*)?

- Public Assistance
- Food Stamps
- Childcare Subsidy
- Homeless Diversion
- Moving Expenses or Furniture Grant
- Medicaid
- Rent Arrears
- WeCare
- Other (*please explain*) _____

3. Do you know what documents you need to bring with you to sign up for the public benefits you are seeking?

Yes No Not Sure

3a. If yes, how did you find out what documents you needed to bring with you?

- HRA Website
- HRA Employee
- Community Based Organization or Nonprofit
- 311
- Other (*please explain*) _____

4. Are you comfortable speaking to a caseworker about your public benefits case in English?

Yes No **(If yes, skip to question 6)**

4a. If not, what language would you prefer to use when speaking to a caseworker?

5. Are you aware that you have the right to an interpreter in public benefits offices?

Yes No



6. Are you aware you have the right to bring another person or an attorney to assist you with your public benefits case?

Yes No

7. Do you have any suggestions for improving services at HRA (*please write in the space provided*

below)? _____

8. Would you be willing to speak publicly about the issues discussed in this survey?

Yes No

(If yes, please be sure to provide name and contact information below.)

First Name _____ Last Name _____ Phone # _____

THANK YOU!