

**Testimony of Lisa Fitzpatrick, Chief Program Officer, New York City Human Resources
Administration**

**Oversight: Hunger and Food Insecurity Hearing New York City Council's Committees on General
Welfare and Aging**

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Good morning. Thank you Chairpersons Levin and Chin and members of the City Council's General Welfare and Aging Committees for giving us this opportunity to testify and respond to committee questions today.

My name is Lisa Fitzpatrick and I am the Chief Program Officer for the New York City Human Resources Administration (HRA). I am pleased to be here today to discuss many of the initiatives and programs that the de Blasio administration is undertaking to address hunger and food insecurity. I will focus on HRA's role in ensuring that food assistance continues to be a vital, easily accessible support for low-income individuals and families. Additionally, I will provide updates on programs within the Department for the Aging (DFTA), the Department of Health and Mental Hygiene (DOHMH) and the New York City Housing Authority (NYCHA) that address hunger and food insecurity. I am joined today by Barbara Turk, Director of Food Policy for the Mayor's Office, Marie Philip, Deputy Commissioner HRA Emergency Intervention Services and Caryn Resnick, Deputy Commissioner from the Department for the Aging (DFTA).

In one of the most expensive cities in the world, HRA works to ensure that no New Yorker is in the position of having to choose between paying for expenses such as rent or purchasing nutritious food. HRA accomplishes this by providing a wide range of supports, including eviction prevention and rental assistance, among other benefits and services. However, despite our efforts, and a comprehensive outreach strategy, hunger and food insecurity continue to be a persistent problem in New York City. According to the City's 2016 Food Metrics Report, 1.37 million New Yorkers or 16.4 percent of New York's population, were food insecure at some point during 2014, including nearly one in five children.

As we have testified in the past and as advocates and the Council are aware, food insecurity is one result of unemployment, underemployment, declining wages, and the increasing costs of rent, food, and other commodities - all of which culminate in income inequality. Chronic food insecurity has devastating effects on individuals, children, and families. Adults who experience food insecurity have higher rates of cardiovascular disease, other chronic diseases, and maternal depression. Children are more likely to display poor academic performance, declining social skills, and are more likely to be clinically obese when dealing with food insecurity. And seniors facing

food insecurity are often unable to meet their nutritional needs, which accelerates the onset and severity of conditions such as cardiovascular disease, vision problems, diabetes, and increases the rate of falls. In response to these devastating effects, the de Blasio Administration supported the campaign to raise the minimum wage and continues to expand and preserve not only our stock of affordable housing but also supportive housing – both necessary tools to address and reduce homelessness. And finally, it is why HRA expanded its rental assistance, emergency grants, and anti-eviction legal services programs.

At HRA we address income inequality and poverty by providing essential services and supports not only through increased access to benefits and programs to reduce hunger and food insecurity, but also work to disrupt their social and economic determinants. According to a report by the Association for Neighborhood and Housing Development, almost 60% of New Yorkers do not have enough savings to cover a minimum of three months' worth of household expenses, meaning these households are only one paycheck away from the threat of eviction and entry into shelter. We believe having higher wage jobs not only greatly improves food security but minimizes homelessness by moving families towards financial and ultimately housing stability. As an example of HRA's commitment to housing stability, in December 2016 HRA awarded contracts to 11 organizations to provide 550 units of supportive housing. Additionally, HRA continued efforts to expand and improve Employment Services, with new RFP awards announced this past November. Evidence-based research supports these approaches. When clients are able to secure living wage jobs and move up the career ladder, families have the resources and the means to avoid homelessness and permanently move off the caseload and out of poverty.

SNAP is the nation's most important anti-hunger program, assisting more than 45 million low-income Americans, 70 percent of whom are families with children and more than 1 in 4 are households with seniors or individuals with disabilities. Currently, nearly 1.7 million New Yorkers receive SNAP, including more than 650,000 children. Compared to one year ago, the SNAP caseload increased by 8,371 cases (0.9%) and 11,192 recipients (0.7%). Of these nearly 1.7 million New Yorkers, more than 410,000 of them also receive Cash Assistance (CA), an important safety net for children and adults. Many SNAP recipients are employed, but their incomes are so low that they still qualify for SNAP benefits. This is why the increase in the minimum wage is essential to lifting New Yorkers out of poverty and thereby minimizing the risk of its collateral consequences: hunger, poor health and homelessness. From the very beginning of the de Blasio Administration, we worked to implement both immediate and long-term measures to combat social and economic inequality and to ensure that each New Yorker has access to, as well as, the resources they need to succeed.

Over the past three years, HRA has reformed, streamlined, and eliminated bureaucratic barriers to enrollment and recertification not only for SNAP, formerly known as food stamps, but for other programs administered by the Agency. Furthermore, in recognizing that perceived stigma can act

as a barrier for some in applying for and utilizing benefits, HRA continues our outreach to SNAP-eligible families and individuals, especially vulnerable populations that are particularly susceptible to food insecurity. We are implementing reforms so that eligible New Yorkers can more easily apply, enroll, and recertify for SNAP benefits. And we continue to work to optimize our systems, allowing clients to apply and recertify for certain benefits and programs in a more efficient and accessible means online. It is our goal to ensure that every New Yorker who is eligible for SNAP has unencumbered access to this crucial work support.

Now I would like to discuss in more detail the benefits reengineering, technology improvements, and other efforts aimed at reducing barriers to access.

Continued Improvements to Enroll In and Stay on SNAP

Additional Staffing

615 positions, which were slated for elimination in the out budget years, have been restored for FY17. By restoring the headcount reduction instituted under the prior Administration, we are able to improve service in HRA SNAP centers and significantly improve the SNAP error rate to its lowest point in years. In fact, New York State recently received a commendation from the United States Department of Agriculture, praising its system of quality control and having the most improved payment error rate in the country for Federal FY15 (October 1 – September 30). Our error rate in New York City is one of the lowest nationwide.

New and Improved Technology

The goal of our reforms is to remove real barriers to access thereby making it easier for clients not only to apply for benefits, but to recertify for benefits, which we know from national studies is a point where some eligible clients across the country often lose their benefits.

- **Enhancements to ACCESS NYC:** ACCESS NYC is a website that screens eligibility for over 30 City, State and federal benefit programs. As we've previously testified, this website allows city residents to not only apply for SNAP online, but to submit SNAP recertification applications.

We continue to make enhancements to the system, which now allows clients to access more information. Two new features, *My Cases* and *My Documents* were recently added. *My Cases* displays a 12-month case history, EBT balance, case status, case members, recent payments, appointments, eligibility documents needed to be submitted to HRA, and an online budget letter request, among other case information. *My Documents* also records when eligibility documents a client submitted are added to the client's electronic file.

As of January 4, 2017 there are 126,363 HRA online accounts for SNAP and CA households. ACCESS NYC is accessible in English and the six Local Law 73 languages (Arabic, Chinese, Haitian Creole, Korean, Russian and Spanish).

- **Launching the HRA mobile app** which allows clients to upload relevant documents instead of visiting a SNAP Center or a partnering community-based organization, or faxing or sending documents by postal mail. The expansion to Cash Assistance (CA) cases for mobile document upload occurred in July 2016. Since the launch of the app in November 2015, more than 103,000 SNAP and CA households have used it to submit documents. The expansion to Cash Assistance cases for mobile document upload occurred in July 2016.

This year, HRA plans to build out a full HRA mobile app with additional features that provide SNAP and CA clients access to their HRA cases online. Rather than using a computer, this will give clients the ability to use their smartphones or tablets to view case status and benefits issued, read electronic notices, see upcoming appointments and receive text messages or email alerts about their case. Clients who need to submit documents will be able to see which have been requested from them, take pictures and upload the documents, and then view when they are added to their case file.

- **Expanding self-service document scanning areas** at SNAP centers and community-based organizations. There are currently 15 SNAP centers and 92 community-based organizations where clients can quickly and easily submit documents electronically. Clients are also able to use the self-service areas to submit documentation in support of case changes such as the addition or removal of a family member, change in rent or address. 12 Job Centers now have scanners and 10 Job centers have self-service kiosks. This expansion again means that clients are able to submit documents at locations convenient to them, not only our SNAP centers.
- **Providing self-service PC terminals** at all but one of HRA's SNAP Centers. These terminals allow clients to use the ACCESS NYC portal to complete and submit SNAP applications and recertifications. The last SNAP center is scheduled to be outfitted with this technology by the end of the year.
- **Implementing On-demand interviews citywide.** We also rolled-out On-demand interviews citywide, which allow clients to conduct their recertification applications at their convenience, rather than wait for a call during a four hour window, or come into a center and wait for an interview. The clearest success of On-Demand has been the shift from interviews taking place in-person at centers, to interviews held over the telephone at the clients' convenience. In October 2015, before the introduction of On-Demand, only 52% of completed SNAP recertification interviews were held by telephone. However, by October 2016, 76% were held by telephone – a 24% increase. As an additional enhancement, we plan to introduce on-demand telephone interviews for new SNAP applicants by this Spring.

Each of these technological improvements alone represents a significant barrier being lessened or eliminated for SNAP clients. Together they represent a wholesale change to the ways in which clients apply for and recertify for benefits – ultimately reducing the number of clients who do not receive this vital benefit because it is too hard or the investment of their time is too great. By mitigating the barriers to access we can ensure clients maintain their benefits and reduce the churn of clients at recertification, which can tax resources across the system.

New York City SNAP Participation Rate

Economic improvement generally correlates to a SNAP participation rate reduction. Not surprisingly, as the local economy improved in 2014 and 2015, the SNAP participation rate in New York City declined from 77% in 2013 to 74% in 2014 and 73% in 2015. We believe HRA's SNAP participation rates should not be compared to the state and national participation rates released by USDA which this committee is familiar with. The best metric for comparisons across geographic areas is the Program Access Index (PAI), calculated by dividing the SNAP caseload by the number of people below 125 percent of the poverty line. Based on the PAI metric, SNAP coverage is higher in NYC than it is in the country and in the rest of New York State. Specifically, the NYC PAI is 80% (for both 2014 and 2015), compared to 74% in the US and 79% in NYS overall.

As I just summarized, over the past year, we took significant steps to address and improve the processes we control to handle issues unrelated to the economy that have an impact as to whether or not clients are applying for and recertifying for a benefit. And recent data show positive trends. The caseload is increasing, rejections are down, and successful recertifications are up. We cannot see the impact of these efforts as reported through the participation rate yet because there is a lag in when this can be analyzed. The estimate of the SNAP-eligible population, necessary to determine the participation rate, relies on Census Bureau data that are not released until the following year. We will look at the 2016 participation rate at the end of this year and look forward to sharing with the Committees the progress on our engagement efforts.

SNAP Outreach

HRA's Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program Support Services (SNAP Support Services) seeks to educate the public about SNAP benefits and eligibility guidelines. In addition, this unit prescreens clients to determine eligibility, and assists applicants with the application process. In FY16, the unit provided outreach services at more than 1,676 individual community events.

Among its many responsibilities, this group is charged with ensuring that immigrants with legal status and/or qualified family members are enrolled in the SNAP program and receive SNAP benefits. This Administration significantly expanded our outreach services to immigrants as well as New Yorkers with low literacy and limited English proficiency by partnering with over 100 community-based, human services, and government organizations with proven track records of

providing services to these groups. In addition, the unit manages out-stationed HRA staff at three community-based “Paperless Office System” sites that provide on-line access to benefits with an 88% approval rate. SNAP Support Services also provides technical assistance to 103 community-based organizations that provide SNAP facilitated enrollment and recertification services. Over the past year, the SNAP Support Services prescreened more than 9,526 potentially eligible applicants.

Since the inception of the SNAP Helps campaign in April 2015, FoodHelp.nyc has seen approximately 117,000 lifetime users with roughly 75% being new users. The SNAP Helps campaign encourages New Yorkers struggling to afford food to seek help, targeting low-income seniors and immigrants. Additionally, there were approximately 53,000 click-throughs from FoodHelp.nyc to ACCESS NYC, representing 45% of site visitors, up from 25% last year.

FoodHelp.nyc redirects potential clients to ACCESS NYC where they are able to determine if they qualify for more than 30 different City, State, and federal benefits. In addition to the FoodHelp.nyc website, various marketing materials are routinely distributed to community partners by the Mayor’s Office of Immigrant Affairs (MOIA), the Department for the Aging (DFTA), and the Mayor’s Office to Combat Domestic Violence (OCDV). Multi-lingual marketing material is also distributed by HRA’s Community Affairs and Emergency Intervention Services/SNAP support teams, the Mayor’s Community Affairs Unit (CAU), and at Senior Citizen Rent Increase Exemption (SCRIE) sign-up events and Deferred Action citizenship events.

Partnering with the New York City Housing Authority (NYCHA)

The Mayor’s Action Plan (MAP) for Neighborhood Safety is a collaborative effort among NYCHA, eleven City agencies, community groups, and non-profits aimed at making New York City’s neighborhoods and housing developments safer and stronger.

As part of the Mayor’s Action Plan for Neighborhood Safety, HRA launched an outreach initiative to assist NYCHA residents with information about benefits eligibility and how to access benefits for which they may be eligible. In the spring of 2016, the HRA MAP Outreach Team partnered with New York City Housing Authority (NYCHA) and the Benefits Data Trust (BDT) on a targeted SNAP outreach campaign to target residents in the 15 MAP developments who may be eligible for SNAP but weren’t receiving the benefit.

Emergency Food Assistance Program (EFAP)

The City supports the wide-range of services provided by food pantries and soup kitchens through HRA. In FY17, HRA’s Emergency Food Assistance Program’s (EFAP) total funding for food and administrative expenses is \$17.2 million and includes a baseline of \$11.4 million, a one-year \$4.9 million food add, and \$775,000 added from the New York City Council budget.

While food distribution to those in need remains paramount, EFAP has also focused on setting a higher nutritional standard for all foods that are provided to and distributed by the emergency food network. Since 2008, EFAP has required all foods purchased with City funding to be compliant with the NYC Food Standards requirements and meet nutritional standards, including, but not limited to standards for sodium, sugar, and trans-fat. We aim to ensure that every New Yorker has a hot and healthy meal while also working to reduce the prevalence of obesity, diabetes and cardiovascular disease. In addition, HRA requires that all 499 emergency food programs funded by EFAP provide SNAP outreach services. These services include SNAP eligibility prescreening, assistance with the SNAP application process, and guidance on making healthy food choices.

In 2015, HRA, the Helmsley Charitable Trust, Redstone Strategy Group, New York State HPNAP, the Director of Food Policy in the Mayor's Office, and key NYC emergency food distributors formed the NYC Food Assistance Collaborative. Over two years, the collaborative came together to enhance coordination among emergency food suppliers and bring new resources to support the important work of over 1,000 community-based food providers, and distribution of \$130 million of food annually.

This Collaborative is working to build capacity and increase food supply to the City's neighborhoods most underserved by emergency food providers. This includes inventory management, client choice, and program capacity through infrastructure improvements like on-site storage and refrigeration/cooling systems and mobile food delivery. Through collaboration, coordinated site visits, training, and technical assistance this Collaborative seeks to improve data sharing and food distribution throughout the entire emergency food network.

We are thankful to the Council for the joint effort with the Mayor's Office to fund an additional \$4.9 million to provide additional food and other resources to community-based groups. The Helmsley Charitable Trust's investment of \$9.8 million for infrastructure improvements and supports includes the development of a new shared data and mobile app system. And finally the receipt of \$4.5 million pooled support from the United Way of NYC and City Harvest in food resources has further increased the investment.

Through this combined effort, 10 million pounds of new food will be distributed to over 44 local food programs in 12 underserved neighborhoods in FY17. New data and new technology will help food providers better serve clients and address unmet needs through a more efficient and resourced system.

ABAWD Waiver

In May 2014, New York City accepted a waiver which allowed single able-bodied adults, also known as Able Bodied Adults Without Dependents (ABAWDs), who are unemployed or underemployed to receive SNAP when they could not find more than 80 hours of work per month.

Such waivers are permitted for areas with high unemployment, and as such New York State had been covered. However, the improved economy means some areas no longer qualify. At last year's hunger hearing, we reported that the borough of Manhattan below West 110th Street and below East 96th Street was the only part of the City impacted by ABAWD requirements because it did not meet the federal standard for a waiver. And we are pleased to report that through the coordinated efforts at HRA, in partnership with the State and FNS, we were able to defer any impact to our SNAP clients in 2016.

For 2017, we are working with the State to address potential ABAWD waiver issues beyond these areas of Manhattan due to improving economic conditions. We expect to provide additional information about the extent of the ABAWD waiver that we will have in 2017 when we appear before the Council at our preliminary budget hearing.

I will now discuss efforts from our partners at the Department of Health and Mental Hygiene (DOHMH) and the Department for the Aging (DFTA) and their work contributing to the Administration's efforts to address food insecurity and hunger.

Partnering with DOHMH

In an effort to help clients close the gap in their food budgets, the New York City Department of Health and Mental Hygiene distributes Health Bucks coupons which can be used to purchase fresh fruits and vegetables at all NYC farmers markets. Health Bucks are distributed several ways, including as a SNAP incentive where for every five dollars customers spend using their EBT card at the market, they receive a two-dollar Health Buck—representing a 40% increase in their purchasing power. This initiative allows SNAP recipients to buy high quality nutritious produce while supporting regional and local farms. In 2015, more than 423,400 Health Bucks were distributed at farmer's markets through the SNAP incentive and by community-based organizations as part of their nutrition and health programming. NYC DOHMH recently expanded this innovative program from a five-month season to a 12-month program so that SNAP participants can stretch their purchasing power year-round.

Outreach to Older New Yorkers

Through a partnership, started in September 2014, HRA, the Robin Hood Foundation, Benefits Data Trust (BDT) and DFTA committed to reaching and enrolling eligible seniors in the SNAP program. In 2015, about 68% of seniors who are eligible for SNAP participate in the program. While higher than the national average, we believe that the City's participation rate could be even higher among seniors were it not for several barriers, including limited mobility, lack of knowledge, and perceived stigma associated with accepting government assistance.

Employing BDT's proven model of targeted outreach and application assistance, using enrollment data for the five boroughs and working with HRA to complement our outreach, the New York

Benefits Center implemented a phone and direct mail campaign for seniors who are not receiving SNAP. When seniors respond to this targeted outreach, highly-trained staff from the New York Benefits Center guide them through the process from beginning to end, offering application assistance, document support, and follow-up services.

Since its inception, this program has successfully:

- Mailed 214,668 outreach letters;
- Conducted robo-calls with a recorded message from Commissioner Banks to 130,448 households in conjunction with the mailing;
- Screened via telephone 46,628 households for SNAP;
- Began SNAP applications for 19,352 households; and
- Submitted 17,186 SNAP applications on ACCESS NYC.

In early 2017, The Robin Hood Foundation and the City are planning to roll out a joint campaign to increase participation in targeted benefit programs including SNAP, WIC, and the Earned Income Tax Credit – all proven anti-poverty programs. A major component of this two-year campaign will be an expansion of the collaborative and targeted outreach among HRA, BDT, and the Robin Hood Foundation. The campaign will include mass media and grassroots outreach and service delivery for potentially eligible individuals.

DFTA Initiatives to Address Hunger and Food Insecurity

According to the City's 2016 Food Metrics Report, one in ten senior citizens lives in a household with insufficient food, in addition, one in four recipients of emergency food in New York City is 65 years of age or older, twice their percentage of the overall population. Many seniors who are living on fixed incomes are forced to make the decision between paying for housing, medications or food – resulting in housing insecurity, increased health risk and hunger.

The New York City Department for the Aging (DFTA) offers several programs to address hunger and nutritional needs among older New Yorkers.

Home-Delivered Meals

Each weekday DFTA's home delivered meals program provides nutritious meals to about 18,000 older New Yorkers who have difficulty regularly leaving their homes, lack formal or informal supports that can regularly provide meals, or are unable to prepare meals themselves. Clients who call the local case management agency are assessed by telephone to determine eligibility for meals as well as their nutrition risk. Clients with a high nutrition risk are immediately referred for in-home nutrition counseling. An in-home assessment follows, and those capable of reheating meals are given the choice and flexibility of choosing between twice weekly delivery of frozen meals, and

daily delivery of a hot meal each weekday. The selection of frozen meal delivery provides the senior with the option of deciding when they want to eat, and which meal they prefer.

At the time of the in-home assessment, clients are screened for eligibility for public benefits including SNAP; those eligible are assisted in applying.

The number of meals delivered to homes each year has been steadily increasing, from 4.36 million in FY15, to 4.46 million in FY16, and a projected 4.54 million in FY17, an increase of 180,000 meals or 4% over two years.

In addition to these weekday meals, DFTA works in partnership with Citymeals on Wheels, which coordinates with the non-profit network to deliver weekend, holiday and emergency meals to these recipients. In FY16, they delivered 1.55 million additional meals.

Congregate Meals

DFTA funds 250 senior centers that provide hot, nutritious meals to nearly 30,000 older adults each day. The centers are located in all 59 Community Districts in the City and they welcome all individuals age 60 and over. Each center offers at least one daily meal with some offering more, at no charge to the senior (although voluntary contributions are accepted). Senior center programs offer an array of services, such as information, assistance, and health and wellness programming; a 2016 Fordham University study of DFTA-funded centers found that meals, health and wellness programming, and the opportunity to socialize with others were among the most frequently cited reasons to attend a center. Working in concert, these centers help to promote seniors' health and well-being overall. Meals are provided according to City, State, and Federal nutrition guidelines, and menus are created reflecting the cultural diversity in the communities they serve. In FY16 a total of 7.44 million congregate meals were served.

Grand Total Meals Served, FY16: 11.90 Million DFTA + 1.55 Million Citymeals = 13.45 Million Meals

Special Initiative: Food Forums

The Aging in New York Fund (ANYF), the not-for-profit arm of DFTA, hosts a series of educational forums to increase communities' awareness of food insecurity among seniors and to generate ideas for helping to meet the nutritional needs of older New Yorkers. Events have been held in three neighborhoods identified through data analysis to be of especially great need: Harlem, Bedford Stuyvesant, and the South Bronx. Additional forums are planned, with the next to take place in a Queens neighborhood of high need, to be determined shortly.

In these forums, leaders representing a cross section of a particular community brief those in attendance. This includes community leaders, interfaith lay leaders, academics and students, and seniors who are community ambassadors for change in their neighborhoods. The forums

culminate in an open networking hour with resource tables to further develop new initiatives to address this crisis.

Conclusion

SNAP and the Emergency Food Assistance Program, as well as other initiatives detailed in this testimony, will continue to provide necessary nutrition assistance to New Yorkers in need. But more remains to be done to ensure that every New Yorker has the resources they need to purchase healthy food for themselves and their families.

The Administration will continue to work to expand access and remove barriers to these essential benefits and services. We are also working to protect against any proposed federal cuts to the SNAP program or the nation's safety net programs, as well as policies that may harm our immigrant communities across the City.

This Administration is laser-focused on addressing hunger, homelessness, and income inequality – which is why we are implementing our plan to create or preserve 200,000 units of affordable housing and 15,000 units of supportive housing, why we reinstated the City's rental assistance programs and expanded the City's eviction prevention initiatives, and why we called on Albany to raise the State's minimum wage.

We look forward to continued collaboration with the Council and advocates. I welcome your questions.

Thank you