



Photo credit: DSS

Expanding Access to Public Benefits

Agencies: **Department of Social Services (DSS)/Human Resources Administration (HRA)**

Context

When this Administration started, individuals seeking public benefits such as food stamps/SNAP and Cash Assistance (CA) from the Human Resources Administration (HRA) had to visit various brick-and-mortar centers to obtain services and support. Clients often had to make multiple visits for the same service, miss work or other appointments to attend interviews, and wait in an office for a long time for in-person appointments. HRA had almost no capacity to conduct client transactions through online and telephonic means; even those few clients who were permitted to conduct eligibility interviews via telephone had to wait for agency staff to call them, leading to high rates of missed interviews and loss or denial of essential benefits. The approach to benefit administration often relied on punitive duplicative and inefficient policies; imposed unnecessary financial penalties

and sanctions; and ran ineffective employment programs that did not alleviate poverty or fight income inequality. The Agency received over 100,000 State Administrative Fair Hearing requests in the first quarter of FY14, most of which were unnecessary and created a disruptive, churning cycle for clients and staff – and also subjected New York City to a potential \$10 million annual State penalty because the hearings typically found that the agency had denied, reduced or terminated benefits improperly.

Response

DSS/HRA increased access to public benefits and assistance by ending this one-size-fits-all approach to service delivery. DSS implemented technology initiatives to streamline administrative processes, developing ACCESS HRA (AHRA), which allows clients to access services online so that eligibility determinations and other transactions for benefit programs can be done remotely. The Agency eliminated counterproductive punitive case sanctions by instituting a new conciliation process, allowing clients who comply to immediately reengage with program requirements instead of losing benefits for a specified period of time, thus avoiding benefit interruptions and reducing the sanction/sanction process rate by half as of FY19 (pre-COVID). Overall, HRA reduced fair hearing requests by more than half and closed the “Intensive Services” Center, which served a punitive function, by requiring clients pending sanctions to attend unnecessary appointments, often resulting in the loss of assistance for those in need.

DSS eliminated the unpaid Work Experience Program (WEP), which required clients to work for no compensation in jobs that provided no valuable work experience. Instead, DSS implemented new employment programs that emphasize education and training, provide individualized assessments, and emphasize career pathways, including an option to count four-year college participation.

Results

- Reforms implemented prior to the COVID-19 pandemic include development of the national-award-winning ACCESS HRA platform that moved SNAP applications/recertifications online, created mobile document up-load capability and implemented client initiated telephone benefits interviews.
- During the pandemic, DSS/HRA was able to pivot quickly and serve an unprecedented applicant pool due to the groundwork that had already been laid by the development of AHRA functionality. HRA quickly enabled remote/mobile Cash Assistance (CA) transactions, bringing HRA’s major public benefits online and making it easier for clients to access and stay connected to them. New Yorkers can visit AHRA at www.nyc.gov/ACCESSHRA to apply for SNAP, CA, rent grants and discounted Metrocards (through the Fair Fares NYC program); or call 311 to find their local pantry or kitchen.
- ACCESS HRA receives over 5.5 million visits per month; in September 2021 two-thirds of visits were via mobile device, 59,000 new AHRA accounts were created; 27,000 people updated their contact information and there were 61,000 new downloads of the AHRA mobile app.

- AHRA received over 270,500 CA applications, 375,000 SNAP applications, and over 303,500 Fair Fares NYC applications for discount metrocards in FY21. 95% of SNAP applications were filed online, 99% of application interviews were conducted via phone and over 85% of CA applications were submitted on-line; prior to April of 2020, CA applications were not online per New York State pre-pandemic rules that DSS had repeatedly requested the State to change to provide CA clients with the same benefits access as SNAP clients had.
- In February of 2020 (before COVID required suspension of most of HRA's Career Services programming), nearly 1,000 more participants were engaged in education and training compared to February 2014 at the beginning of the Administration. Additionally, over 1,300 additional CA clients were involved in vocational rehabilitation or community service.

Beneficiary Stories

Shamique Dawson (34) is a college student with a 3-year-old child and a domestic violence survivor. Ms. Dawson had a Cash Assistance case, which was previously closed for failure to recertify. Ms. Dawson was again experiencing difficulty submitting documents for her recertification. With the assistance of an HRA worker, she was able to successfully upload all the required documents using ACCESS HRA, complete a telephone interview, and avoid a trip to an HRA Center. ACCESS HRA document submission and the telephone interview process greatly improved her client experience. As Ms. Dawson is a parent and attends college these remote access options have enabled her to spend more time with her child and her studies.

Next Steps

HRA continues to improve client, public and staff experience through the development and enhancement of AHRA and its wider technology portfolio.

In FY22 the Agency will roll out:

- CURRENT NYC, a landlord and provider agency portal that will allow streamlined on-line submission of rental assistance applications on behalf of clients; and will allow landlords to enroll in electronic funds transfer, submit documents electronically, notify DSS of changes and view rental payment history.
- ANGIE, a system that eliminates location-based work-distribution and distributes tasks by priority and due date to HRA SNAP staff, allowing operations to run more efficiently and remotely when necessary.
- New functions to AHRA, adding Child Support, the Home Energy Assistance Program (HEAP) benefits, and Medicaid components that are administered by HRA.
- The HRA One Number, which consolidates HRA's 34+ hotlines into one single point of contact for New Yorkers seeking assistance. The One Number will reduce wait times to reach customer service agents, streamline the process for callers to access discrete program and service information and increase self-service options in the Interactive Voice Response System (also known as IVRS) component of the Agency telephonic system.

In FY22, the Agency will begin development of:

- Cash Assistance On-Demand, moving CA interviews to a cloud-based call center environment, allowing clients to call at their convenience for required interviews, increasing the rate of kept appointments, decreasing manual scheduling, and saving multiple in-person trips – a change made possible by a new State law for which DSS advocated that makes DSS’s pandemic waiver permitting telephone interviews permanent.
- An expanded Information Verification Service (IVS), a real-time electronic retrieval of third party data sources required for eligibility determination into an easily consumable consolidated portal, adding data sources and expanding Agency users from SNAP to include CA and Homelessness Prevention staff.
- Fair Fares NYC integration with the NYC Transit OMNY fare system that will allow Fair Fares clients to use contactless payment methods to access Fair Fares discounts on subways and eligible buses or access-a-ride trips.

Additional Metrics

- In FY21, 95% of SNAP applications were filed online and 99% of application interviews were conducted via phone.
- In FY21, over 85% of CA applications were submitted online.
- In calendar year 2021 through September, there were an average of 128,000 documents submitted via mobile upload each month.

Relevant Publications

- [Human Resources Administration Fact Sheets](#)
- [Agency Audit](#) required by Local Law 169 of 2019 requiring the Department to conduct an audit that will focus on operations, policies, and procedures at the Department of Social Services/New York City Human Resources Administration ("DSS/HRA") Job Centers and Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) Centers, with the goal of increasing operational efficiency at such Centers. Implementation Report found [here](#).
- Local Law 171 of 2019 Report on Comments, Questions, and Complaints by Client found [here](#).
- Link to Career Services [here](#)