

Testimony of Grace Bonilla, Administrator
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Oversight: Hunger and Food Insecurity Hearing New York City Council's Committee on General Welfare

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Good afternoon. Thank you Chairperson Levin and members of the City Council's General Welfare Committee for inviting us to testify and respond to committee questions today. My name is Grace Bonilla and I am the Administrator of the New York City Human Resources Administration (HRA). Before beginning my testimony, I would like to take a moment to welcome the new members of the Council as well as those members new to this committee. I look forward to our partnership as we work together to improve the lives of low-income and vulnerable New Yorkers.

This committee's Annual Hunger Hearing is a welcome opportunity to discuss many of the initiatives and programs that this Administration has undertaken to address hunger, food insecurity, and access to nutritious food. HRA plays a pivotal role in minimizing hunger and ensuring that food assistance remains a vital, readily available support for low-income individuals and families. However, our work is not done in isolation and today I am joined by Barbara Turk from the Mayor's Office of Food Policy as well as my HRA colleagues Lisa Fitzpatrick, Chief Program Officer, and Marie Philip, Deputy Commissioner for Emergency Intervention Services.

It is an unfortunate truth that we live in a time of declining wages coupled with the rising cost of rent, food, transportation, and other commodities which contribute to food insecurity and hunger. These factors are exacerbated by under and unemployment which culminate in persistent income inequality. Food insecurity isn't only about hunger; hunger impacts health, including a higher prevalence of preventable illnesses. And as is so often the case, our youngest and oldest neighbors are the most vulnerable when it comes to food insecurity. There are negative impacts on school attendance, academic outcomes, and behavior challenges for children. And seniors who are unable to meet their nutritional needs, face an accelerated deterioration in health and quality of life from conditions such as cardiovascular disease, stroke, and increases of slips and falls.

At HRA, we provide essential programs and supports to low-income New Yorkers that reduce hunger and decrease the threat of food insecurity, but also work to eliminate their root causes.

Every day in all five boroughs HRA works to ensure that our services and benefits provide low-income New Yorkers the assistance they need, through a wide range of supports, including Cash Assistance and employment services, Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP/food stamps), eviction prevention, and rental assistance to name a few. However, despite our efforts, as we testify each year, hunger, food insecurity, and lack of access to nutritional food options continue to be serious problems in

New York City. The reality remains: too many of our fellow New Yorkers find themselves in the position of having to choose between paying for vital expenses such as rent or purchasing nutritious food. These food insecure households routinely report the food they buy does not last long enough, or they cannot afford a balanced diet and/or are forced to skip meals or eat less despite still feeling hungry. According to the latest available data, 1.25 million New Yorkers or 14.9 percent of New York's population were food insecure at some point during 2015. And while this shows a decline from the year before, there are still far too many New Yorkers who don't know where their next meal will come from.

Thanks to the launch of the Poverty Tracker in 2012, an initiative of Robin Hood in partnership with Columbia University's Population Research Center, data was collected across the five boroughs through quarterly surveys of over 6,000 City residents over the past two years. This allowed for the collection of telling information from a representative sample of New York City residents. From this data we learned:

- Roughly 16% of NYC households experience persistent (ongoing) food hardship.
- Race predicts higher food insecurity, regardless of income and other factors.
- Food insecurity is significantly higher for non-White populations.
- Food hardship is tied to poverty and to other material hardships (i.e., trouble paying bills, or housing hardship).
- Having children and being a single-parent household are each separately significant drivers of food insecurity and being a female head of household increases chances of food security.
- Having lower levels of education is tied to higher rates of food hardship

In an effort to address the devastating effects of food insecurity, increasing access to and retaining benefits have been a cornerstone of HRA's mandate as part of the de Blasio Administration. Our goal over the previous four years has been to make it easier for those New Yorkers seeking benefits for which they are eligible to both gain access to them and avoid losing them as a result of bureaucratic red tape.

SNAP/food stamps is the nation's most important anti-hunger program; the program assists 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 1.64 million New Yorkers receive SNAP, including 569,000 children and approximately 424,000 seniors. Of these nearly 1.64 million New Yorkers, 398,749 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 benefits. And in addition to the direct support SNAP provides families and individuals, it also injects approximately \$5.4 billion into the local economy with most of these transactions occurring at small businesses across the city.

But hunger is not only about food. Between 2000 and 2014, the median New York City household income increased by just 4.8 percent in real dollars, while the median rent increased by 18.3 percent in real dollars¹. Meanwhile, between 1994 and 2012, the city suffered a net loss of about 150,000 rent-stabilized units. Combined, these and other trends meant that by 2015 the city had only half the housing it needs for about three million low-income New Yorkers. As such, New Yorkers sacrifice a great deal to stay in their homes and maintain their connections to their communities. Some 360,000 New York City households pay

¹ Turning the Tide on Homelessness in New York City, pg 4. Retrieved from http://www1.nyc.gov/assets/hra/downloads/pdf/news/publications/Turning_the_Tide_on_Homelessness.pdf

more than 50 percent of their income on rent and utilities. Another 140,000 households pay more than the 30 percent. This means a total of a half a million New York City households are paying an unaffordable amount of their income for housing. Additionally, according to a report by the Association for Neighborhood and Housing Development, nearly 60% of New Yorkers do not have enough savings to cover a minimum of three months' worth of household expenses – which in stark terms means these households are a missed paycheck away from the threat of housing instability, including eviction and homelessness.

To address these drivers of hunger, HRA has expanded rental assistance and emergency grants, and, in partnership with the Council, has implemented the nation's first Universal Access to Counsel program, an unprecedented investment in legal services to help New Yorkers stay in their homes. Last month we announced residential evictions by marshals had declined by 27 percent since 2013 while we have been putting these prevention programs in place. During this time, there were also two consecutive years of Rent Guidelines Board rent freezes.

All of this is part of a broader effort to address income inequality and food insecurity – because when we are able to intervene to keep families and individuals stably housed we are also addressing hunger.

We also know that higher wage jobs and access to training and educational opportunities greatly improve food security and can prevent homelessness by helping families and individuals to achieve financial and housing stability. As we have reported previously, in April 2017, HRA expanded and improved its Employment Services by implementing new programs that emphasize helping clients to proceed on a career pathway off the public assistance caseload. Evidence-based research supports these approaches. When clients are able to secure living wage jobs and move up the career ladder, families are more likely to be able to secure the resources and the means to avoid homelessness and permanently move off the caseload and out of poverty.

And to address the root causes of and close the gap created by income inequality, this Administration has been laser focused on additional anti-poverty initiatives. We would be remiss not to highlight among them: Pre K for All, increasing affordable housing development, and raising the minimum wage. This Administration has also expanded paid sick leave and resolved expired municipal labor contracts.

Each of these investments is essential to lifting New Yorkers out of poverty and thereby minimizing the risk of its collateral consequences: hunger, poor health and homelessness.

HRA: Reforming the Client Experience

Throughout the Administration's first term HRA reformed, streamlined, and eliminated bureaucratic and linguistic barriers to enrollment and recertification not only for SNAP, but also for other programs and vital services administered by the Agency. However, addressing access is only one part of the equation, we are also addressing stigma with respect to asking for and receiving help, whether real or perceived, through our outreach and advocacy. HRA, in partnership with CBOs across the city, continues to conduct outreach to SNAP- eligible families and individuals, with a focus on vulnerable populations that are particularly susceptible to food insecurity. And to ensure that clients who are receiving our benefits continue to get the support they need, we have implemented a number of reforms aimed at enhancing the client experience. We've implemented a series of reforms to provide reasonable accommodations for clients with disabilities

to improve access to benefits. We have conducted agency-wide Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Questioning and Intersex (LGBTQI) cultural competency training in addition to our longstanding customer service training. And HRA has trained over 7,000 public-facing staff on a Full Day training entitled *Introduction to Disabilities: An overview of disability awareness, etiquette and culture*. And in 2017, HRA used telephonic interpretation services an average of 1,000 times per day. In total, HRA spent \$3.6M on language services in 2017. We have also implemented, through various waivers, a range of technology initiatives that have resulted in reduced wait times, decreased visits to our centers, and immediate access to case information.

I will now spend a few minutes discussing the benefits reengineering, technology improvements, and other efforts that impact our clients' experience.

Continued Improvements to Enroll in and Stay on SNAP

The goal of our reforms is to remove real barriers to access by creating a self-directed service model that allows applicants and clients to transact with the Agency without the burden of having to physically come to an HRA location.

- **Launched ACCESS HRA:** ACCESS HRA is an innovative internet-based tool that allows New York City residents to retrieve benefit information and or apply and recertify for SNAP and other benefits. This portal allows clients to create an ACCESS HRA account to gain access to over 100 case-specific points of information in real-time, including application and case statuses, upcoming appointments, account balances, and documents requested for eligibility determinations. Additionally, clients can make changes to contact information, view eligibility notices electronically, and opt into text message and email alerts. We continue to improve this tool to add new functionality and now clients can submit their SNAP Periodic Report online using ACCESS HRA. This new feature allows clients to report changes in household composition, income and other circumstances. As of December 2017 there were more than 1 million ACCESS HRA online accounts for SNAP households, and we receive over 24,000 online applications and 2,500 Periodic Reports each month. The change to on-line transactions has transformed the way HRA interacts with our clients. Because clients can do so many things from a PC outside of the centers and can easily call us for their interviews, SNAP in-center foot traffic has declined 32% since 2014.
- **Fortifying our partnerships with community-based organizations:** The ACCESS HRA Provider Portal is an online tool designed specifically for community-based organizations to connect with the clients that they serve. Through the ACCESS HRA Provider Portal, organizations can view real-time benefit information for their clients. Since the launch of the Provider Portal tool in September of last year, 185 organizations have signed up to utilize this tool.
- **Implementing On-demand interviews** allows clients to conduct their SNAP Eligibility interviews on an On-demand basis at their convenience, rather than wait for a call during a four-hour window under the old system, or come into a center and wait for an in-person interview. The clearest success indicator for On-Demand has been the channel shift of interviews taking place in-person at centers, to interviews being held over the phone at the clients' convenience. In October 2015,

before the implementation of the On-Demand call center, only 52% of the completed SNAP recertification interviews were completed via telephone. We now have 76% of the interviews held by phone – a 24% increase. On demand interviews for SNAP recertification have been fully in place for more than a year. On demand interviews for new SNAP applicants began to be phased in during the Fall of 2017.

- **Rolled out the HRA Mobile App**, a self-service mobile app to give clients the ability to use their mobile device to better manage their cases. Since the application's launch, clients have downloaded the mobile app 118,000 times, and uploaded over 2 million images.
- **Provided on-site self-services:** For clients who prefer to access our service inside one of our centers, we have a suite of self-service tools. These tools include self-service check-in kiosks and PC Banks to utilize ACCESS HRA and self-service scanning.

There are currently 15 SNAP centers and 185 community-based organizations across the City where clients can quickly and easily scan and submit documents electronically. In addition, 12 Job Centers have scanners and 12 Job centers have self-service kiosks.

I would like to pause now to provide a demo on ACCESS HRA and the provider portal.

Each of these singular technological improvements represents a reduction or elimination of a significant barrier. Together they represent a comprehensive 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 SNAP benefit because it is too hard to apply and recertify 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, i.e., reapplication within a short period of time after case closure which is a national problem.

Now I would like to discuss other initiatives and reforms that are helping to reduce hunger and tackle poverty in New York City.

New York City SNAP Participation Rate

Economic improvement generally correlates to a SNAP participation rate reduction. Not surprisingly, as the local economy continues to improve the SNAP participation rate in New York City declines; and it declined from 77% in 2013 to 72% in 2016. In line with our prior testimony, 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 federal 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 84% (for 2016), compared to 75% in the US and 82% in NYS overall.

As I just summarized, under this Administration, we have taken significant steps to ensure that all eligible New Yorkers have unencumbered access to HRA benefits and services. And recent data show positive

trends. Today we are pleased to report that application rejections are down, and successful case recertifications are up.

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 FY17, HRA's SNAP Support Services provided services at 1841 individual events at 373 individual community sites/locations and provided services at 175 sites on a recurring basis. These are sites where services are consistently scheduled at various frequencies throughout the year. HRA also partnered with 154 community-based organizations to provide SNAP outreach throughout NYC.

Among its many responsibilities, this group is charged with ensuring that eligible immigrants 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 agency organizations with proven track records of providing services to these groups.

Our most significant outreach effort is the SNAP Helps campaign that utilizes a special website called FoodHelp.nyc. Since the inception of the SNAP Helps campaign in April 2015, FoodHelp.nyc has seen approximately 230,500 lifetime users with roughly 85% 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 71,000 click-throughs from FoodHelp.nyc to ACCESS NYC.

Emergency Food Assistance Program (EFAP)

In FY18, HRA's Emergency Food Assistance Program's (EFAP) total funding for food and administrative expenses is \$18.7 million and includes a baseline of \$11.5 million, with \$7.2 million in funding added by the Administration at the time of adoption for FY18. The total EFAP budget in FY18 is \$19.5 million including the \$800,000 included by the Council. This funding is being used to provide additional food and increases for warehousing and transportation to build the capacity of the food distribution system to distribute more food to New Yorkers in need.

Food distribution to those in need remains our most important objective. In FY17, EFAP distributed more than 12.2 million pounds of food, including over 632,000 pounds of frozen food. In the same period, EFAP programs reported serving more than 14.8 million people (this is a self-reported, duplicated statistic). The actual purchase of these items is based on an analysis of the needs and trends of the emergency food network.

EFAP provides over 40 food items and purchases the most nutritious food items that also meet the dietary and cooking needs of special populations, such as homeless New Yorkers; those with HIV/AIDS, and those that need a Kosher or Halal diet. Overall these items tend to cost more. In addition, many of these food

items are packaged differently (i.e pop-tops; or pouches), which increases the cost. More expensive and lighter packaged food can also result in fewer pounds distributed.

While working to ensure that New Yorkers have a hot, healthy meal, we are also working to reduce the prevalence of obesity, diabetes and cardiovascular disease. 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.

In addition, HRA requires that all 528 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.

As in previous testimonies, the Administration continues to recognize the work of the NYC Food Assistance Collaborative which formed in 2015 with an investment from the Helmsley Charitable Trust, in 2015 and the Director of Food Policy in the Mayor's Office, HRA, New York State HPNAP, and key NYC emergency food distributors formed the NYC Food Assistance Collaborative. The Collaborative came together to further the goal of enhancing coordination among emergency food suppliers and bringing new resources to support the important work of over 900 community-based food providers.

The Collaborative's work is focused on building capacity and increasing the food supply to the City's most underserved neighborhoods. By establishing a common metric (the Supply Gap) and information-sharing system to better match supply with need the Collaborative was able to:

- Identify priority neighborhoods for additional investment;
- Increase food supply from public and private sources;
- Strengthen pantry capacity to distribute safe, nutritious food, including
 - Starting new pantries where there were none;
 - Upgrading storage, especially for fresh food; and
 - Adding more distribution hours; and using alternative distribution methods (e.g., mobile vehicles) for hard-to-reach areas.

The Collaborative also leveraged technology to enhance pantries' ability to better serve clients. This included:

- Enhancing FeedNYC.org to share crucial information like detailed information about food supply
- Building an app called Plentiful, a simple mobile technology that enables better customer service at pantries. Plentiful allows pantry clients to reserve their place in line and allows pantries to understand their service statistics. Pantries have loved Plentiful, and we see rapid adoption. We have 100 registered pantries and over 32,000 households served already.

The Food Assistance Collaborative set a goal to distribute 10 million more pounds of food in its priority communities. The Helmsley Charitable Trust's investment of \$9.8 million funds infrastructure improvements and supports to current and new pantries. Their investment also includes the development of a new shared data and mobile app system. In order to supply food to meet this new capacity, this year's Adopted Budget included an increase of \$7.2 million and \$800,000 from the Council which provided

additional food and other resources to pantries. An additional support of \$4.5 million from City Harvest and United Way has helped us achieve this goal.

As you know, the Preliminary Budget was released while the federal budget was still being negotiated and the current federal continuing resolution runs until March 23, 2018, and before the conclusion of the state budget agreement that is due on April 1. Prior to the release of the Executive Budget, we will evaluate the impact of the federal and state budgets as well as the results of the NYC Food Assistance Collaborative initiative, and I am sure we will be working collaboratively as we approach the Executive Budget.

ABAWD

In May 2014, New York City accepted the State's ABAWD 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 at least 80 hours of work per month.

Such waivers are permitted for areas with high unemployment, and as such New York State had been covered due to the effects of the Great Recession of 2008. However, the improved economy since then means some areas no longer qualify for a waiver. At the 2017 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 the federal government determined that it did not meet the federal standard for a waiver. And last year we provided an update to the Council at the preliminary budget hearing that Queens, with the exception of Community District 12, was no longer eligible for the ABAWD waiver due to improving economic conditions. Given this change for New York City, HRA proactively reached out to all ABAWDs to alert them of this important change and the impact on their benefits. HRA sent multiple letters and conducted robo calls instructing clients to report that they met or were exempt from the work requirement or how we could provide employment services to maintain their SNAP benefits. As a result, 1,312 came into the HRA employment provider to report changes to their status or to connect with employment services to meet the ABAWD work requirement. 609 clients reported a change in status and 508 met their work requirement through work with employment providers or through their own employment. 2,700 lost their benefit after not meeting the federal ABAWD requirement.

I will now discuss efforts from our partners at the Department of Health and Mental Hygiene (DOHMH) 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, DOHMH distributes Health Bucks coupons which can be used to purchase fresh fruits and vegetables at all NYC farmers markets. Health Bucks represents a 40% increase for the customers' purchasing power. This benefits SNAP recipients enabling them to buy high quality nutritious produce and allowing them to support regional and local farms - which is an important link as Congress continues to try to decouple SNAP from the Farm Bill. In 2017, more than 500,000 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 and by elected officials and organizations that purchased Health Bucks to hand out through their programs. 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. The result is exciting and we are pleased to report customers spent \$1,100,278 in SNAP benefits at GrowNYC farmer markets in 2018. We continue to report that EBT cards are now accepted at more than 125 farmers markets across the City.

Outreach to Older New Yorkers

Since 2014, HRA has employed Benefits Data Trust's (BDT) proven model of targeted outreach and application assistance, using enrollment data for the five boroughs and working with HRA to complement our own 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.

In 2017, BDT began conducting outreach to seniors for whom it submitted the original application, to assist with recertification, and leverage the automated interactive voice response system (IVRS) process that many seniors are eligible for.

Last year, The Robin Hood Foundation and the City rolled out a joint campaign to increase participation in targeted benefit programs including SNAP, Women Infants, and Children (WIC), and the Earned Income Tax Credit – all proven anti-poverty programs. The campaign includes a mass media campaign which ran in Spring 2017, and community-based outreach and service delivery for potentially eligible individuals.

A major component of this two-year campaign is an expansion of the collaborative and targeted outreach among HRA, BDT, and the Robin Hood Foundation with the launch of two new SNAP initiatives. Informed by behavioral economics, the "Guardrails Strategy" sends data-driven robo-texts and robo-dials reminding clients to complete the necessary steps in the SNAP application and recertification process, and offers phone assistance to those that need it most. The Medicaid SNAP Connect (MSC) pilot, launched in November 2017, works to connect Medicaid recipients of all ages to SNAP.

Preventing Hunger in Schools

We know that it is difficult for students to thrive on empty stomachs, which is why this Administration has been focused on ensuring that every student is provided with high quality and nutritious food for breakfast, lunch, and in many cases dinner. The following initiatives are helping to ensure that the most vulnerable New Yorkers, our children, are able to have a nutritious meal regardless of the time of day or year. To accomplish this we:

- launched Free School Lunch for All beginning this school year;
- will launch breakfast in the Classroom in all elementary schools in FY18;
- made Summer Meals available for all;
- are procuring local, fresh, and sustainably produced school food;
- spent \$26 million on regional food in FY17;
- piloted Meatless Monday in 15 Brooklyn public schools;
- launched "New York Thursdays" – a locally sourced menu in partnership with NYS Ag & Markets; and

- were awarded a Farm to School grant for our Garden to Café program which supports the use of edible school gardens in cafeterias and in classrooms.

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 no New Yorker wakes up or goes to sleep hungry as a result of an inability to afford and purchase food.

We are proud of our work to expand access and remove barriers to these essential benefits and services. For clients, it has resulted in shorter wait times to complete their transactions, and a better client experience for our low-touch population as well as for our clients in need of a more in depth worker intervention. Our workers are spending time helping clients when needed, rather than completing the scanning tasks, routing clients manually, and data entry.

We are also working to protect against any proposed federal cut that threatens the SNAP program or the nation's other safety net programs, as well as policies that may harm our immigrant community. Not only would cuts to SNAP be devastating to those New Yorkers who rely on this crucial benefit, they would also harm the local economy.

We look forward to continued collaboration as we work with this Council and advocates to protect the enormous gains we have made in recent years under the de Blasio Administration and to fight back against any proposed budget cuts or policies and regulations that harm low-income New Yorkers. I welcome your questions.

Thank you