

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

New York City Council Committee on General Welfare, Hunger Hearing

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Good morning. I thank Chairperson Levin and the members of the City Council's General Welfare Committee for giving us this opportunity to testify 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 food insecurity. Additionally, 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. I am joined today by Barbara Turk, the Director of Food Policy in the Office of the Mayor, and LaMaunda Maharaj, the Director of HRA's Emergency Food and Nutrition Assistance Program.

Hunger is a serious problem in New York City. According to the City's 2015 Food Metrics Report, 1.36 million New Yorkers, 16.5 percent of New York's population, were food insecure at some point during 2013, including nearly one in five children. Nationally, an estimated 15.8 percent (49 million Americans) were food insecure as a rolling average between 2013 and 2015.

Food insecurity is a result of unemployment, underemployment and low wages, and a consequence of growing income inequality. Chronic food insecurity has devastating effects for families and children. Children in food insecure homes are more likely to have poor academic performance, declining social skills, and are more likely to be overweight. Adults facing food insecurity have higher rates of cardiovascular disease, higher risk factors for other chronic diseases, and higher rates of maternal depression. The de Blasio Administration is addressing food insecurity head-on, including the ongoing work to fight inequality through efforts such as raising the minimum wage and increasing the supply of affordable housing.

At HRA we are expanding and improving our employment and training opportunities so as to ensure that more clients gain economic security by obtaining long-term employment with a living wage and thereby moving off HRA's caseload and out of poverty. Additionally, through HRA's reforms to streamline enrollment and vastly increase outreach for the federal Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, or SNAP, formerly known as food stamps, we are connecting more New Yorkers to critical safety net supports. Our goal is to ensure that every New Yorker who is eligible for SNAP can receive this crucial benefit.

Currently, more than 1.7 million New Yorkers receive SNAP, including more than 650,000 children. Of these 1.7 million New Yorkers, more than 350,000 of them also receive Cash Assistance, a safety net for children and adults. Many SNAP recipients are employed, but their incomes are so low that they still qualify for SNAP. This is why the Mayor's call for an increase in the State minimum wage is essential to moving New Yorkers out of poverty and thereby minimizing the risk and collateral consequences of hunger and homelessness.

In FY15 SNAP recipients purchased more than \$3 billion in food, generating about \$5.4 billion of economic activity in New York City, largely within small businesses. For these low-income individuals and families, benefits, such as SNAP, help with overall household budgeting and minimize the chances that these vulnerable New Yorkers will have to choose between buying food and keeping a roof over their heads.

SNAP benefits are a central component of what's required to solve the problem of hunger. However, Congress's decision to decrease the amount of SNAP benefits, coupled with increased food and living costs in New York City, has placed a strain on many of our clients' already stretched grocery budgets. We hear from many clients that they run out of SNAP benefits before the end of the month. This can be especially concerning during these cold winter days, when clients are often forced to choose between things like heat and food.

This is why the de Blasio Administration has been working for two years to implement both immediate and long-term measures to lift New Yorkers out of poverty.

Among such efforts, HRA has taken concrete steps to ensure that those New Yorkers who qualify for SNAP receive the benefit. We continue to reduce bureaucratic barriers to access so that eligible New Yorkers can more easily apply for and obtain, as well as recertify for SNAP benefits. We continue to work to optimize our systems, allowing clients to apply for certain benefits and programs online using ACCESS NYC, and late last year we rolled-out a new application to enable SNAP clients to upload eligibility documents from a mobile device. And finally, we have engaged in an outreach campaign with expanded efforts targeted towards seniors and immigrant communities.

Making it Easier to Enroll In and Stay on SNAP

To summarize, HRA has undertaken a major effort to reduce barriers to access. These initiatives include:

Additional Staffing

By restoring the headcount reduction the prior Administration instituted, we are able to improve service in HRA SNAP centers. The restoration includes 515 additional positions in 2015 and 361 by 2017.

New and Improved Technology

In 2015, we expanded our ability to allow low-income City residents to obtain and retain SNAP. Improvements include:

- Launching an enhanced ACCESS NYC website. ACCESS NYC screens eligibility for over 30 City, State and federal benefit programs. We upgraded the system to make it possible, not only to apply for SNAP online, but to also submit a recertification for SNAP benefits. This new and improved website is accessible in English and the six Local Law 73 languages (Arabic, Chinese, Haitian Creole, Korean, Russian and Spanish).
- Expanding self-service areas to eight additional SNAP centers. This means there are now 13 SNAP centers and 10 community-based organizations where clients can quickly and easily submit requested documents electronically. Clients can also 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.
- Providing PC terminals located at all but one of HRA's SNAP Centers, allowing clients to use the ACCESS NYC portal to complete and submit SNAP applications and recertifications. The last center is scheduled to have this technology later this year.
- Releasing the Mobile Document Upload Application that allows clients to upload images of SNAP eligibility documents using a mobile device. HRA was awarded a \$1.5 million USDA grant for this initiative and since the application's launch, clients have uploaded more than 25,000 images. We firmly believe that mobile uploads and new internal systems will ensure documents are not lost upon submission by clients.
- Introducing, just this month, the On-Demand Telephone Interview Option for SNAP recertification benefits. This new technology allows clients to complete their telephone recertification interviews at their own convenience.

Continuing Outreach Efforts

HRA's Office of Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program Outreach Services (SNAP-OS) seeks to educate the general public about SNAP benefit/food stamps eligibility guidelines, prescreen clients to determine potential eligibility, and assists applicants with the application process. In Fiscal Year 2015, this unit provided outreach services at more than 1,584 individual community events.

Understanding from day one that immigrants with legal status are one of the largest groups who qualify for, but are not enrolled in SNAP benefits, under this administration, we have exponentially expanded our outreach services to immigrants and New Yorkers with limited English proficiency by partnering with 54 community-based, human services and government organizations that have a proven track record of providing services to these groups. In addition, the unit manages outstationed HRA staff at three community-based "Paperless Office System" sites that provide on-line access to benefits and technical assistance to 101 community-based organizations that

provide SNAP facilitated enrollment and recertification services. Over the past year, the Office of SNAP Outreach Services prescreened more than 10,200 potentially eligible applicants.

In April 2015, HRA launched an advertising campaign to encourage New Yorkers struggling to afford food to seek help, especially targeting low-income seniors and immigrants. Through FoodHelp.nyc, potential clients can find out if they qualify for more than 30 different City, State, and federal benefits. In addition to the website, the campaign consists of print advertisements in English and the six Local Law 73 languages throughout the City in locations such as subways, buses, in check-cashing facilities, bodegas, etc. The campaign also includes digital advertisements and video testimonials of past and current SNAP clients. The various marketing materials have been 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 was also distributed by HRA's own Community Affairs and Emergency Intervention Services/SNAP outreach teams, the Community Affairs Unit (CAU) in the Mayor's Office, at Senior Citizen Rent Increase Exemption (SCRIE) sign-up events and at Deferred Action citizenship events sponsored by MOIA. Within two months of launch, the campaign website tracked an average of 128,062 unique visitors per day. And since its launch in April 2015, the website has received 177,642 page views.

HRA SNAP-Ed

The SNAP-Ed program is a federal program that provides nutrition education for SNAP participants and eligible individuals. While the SNAP program addresses food insecurity for low-income individuals, the goal of the SNAP-Ed program is to improve the likelihood that persons eligible for SNAP will make healthy food choices within a limited budget and choose more physically active lifestyles. Starting in FY15, New York State's Office of Temporary and Disability Assistance (OTDA) administers SNAP-Ed funding for numerous SNAP-Ed programs and activities of the Cornell Cooperative Extension. SNAP-Ed served 2,114,947 participants during FY 2014, including 251,737 through direct education and 1,863,210 indirectly through social media contacts and outreach events.

Senior Citizen Outreach

Through a partnership started in September 2014, HRA, the Robin Hood Foundation, the Benefits Data Trust (BDT) and the New York City Department for the Aging (DFTA) have committed to reaching and enrolling eligible seniors. Only 50% of seniors who are eligible for SNAP actually participate in the program. The lower participation rate among seniors is due to several barriers including limited mobility, lack of knowledge and supposed 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 guides them through the process from start to finish, offering application assistance, document support and follow-up services.

Since the start of the program in September 2014, this program has successfully:

- Mailed 141,500 outreach letters;
- Conducted robo-calls with a recorded message from Commissioner Banks to 98,669 households in conjunction with the mailing;
- Screened via telephone 27,855 households for SNAP ;
- Began SNAP applications for 12,596 households; and
- Submitted 11,076 SNAP applications on ACCESS NYC.

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. HRA now has outreach staff in all 15 NYCHA developments that are targeted as part of this program. Whether providing general information on HRA programs and services, assisting community residents with completing online applications for SNAP and Public Health Insurance, facilitating referrals to program offices, or troubleshooting case concerns, our goal is the same: to provide support to New Yorkers in need.

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 has developed and distributed Health Bucks which can be used to purchase fresh fruits and vegetables at all farmers markets. For every five dollars customers spend with their EBT card, they receive a two-dollar Health Buck—representing a 40% increase in their purchasing power. This initiative allows SNAP recipients to buy nutritious and affordable produce while supporting regional and local farms.

Emergency Food Assistance Program (EFAP)

The City supports the wide-range of services provided by food pantries and soup kitchens through HRA. In Fiscal Year 2016, HRA's Emergency Food Assistance Program's (EFAP) total funding for food and administrative expenses is \$14.1 million, with a baseline of \$11.5 million. In addition to

this \$11.5 million, there was a one-time, addition of \$1.8 million in FY 16 from the Administration to increase EFAP funds. An additional \$800,000 was 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 requires all foods purchased with City funding be nutritious and meet sodium, sugar and trans-fat standards. 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 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.

HRA has worked with the Helmsley Charitable Trust, Redstone Strategy Group, the Director of Food Policy in the Mayor's Office, and key NYC emergency food distributors to form the NYC Food Assistance Collaborative. The Collaborative aims to build capacity and increase food supply to some of the City's neighborhoods with the highest need for, and the least access to, emergency food. This group also seeks to improve data sharing and food distribution throughout the entire emergency food network.

Finally, HRA continues to work with NYC Service's *Reducing Hunger Service Initiative* to assess and meet the skill-based volunteer needs of the emergency food network (soup kitchens and food pantries). This initiative includes engaging the network in expanded SNAP outreach services with the assistance of volunteers.

Conclusion

SNAP and the Emergency Food Assistance Program, as well as other initiatives detailed in this testimony have and will continue to provide necessary assistance to low-income New Yorkers. But more remains to be done to ensure that every New Yorker has access to nutritious and healthy food. In May 2014, we accepted a waiver which allowed single able-bodied adults, also known as Able Bodied Adult Without Dependents (ABAWDs), who are unemployed or underemployed to receive SNAP when they could not find more than 80 hours of work per month. Waivers are allowed for areas with high unemployment. New York State had been covered by a waiver, but the improved economy means not all areas still qualify. We are working with the federal Department of Agriculture and the State Office of Temporary and Disability Assistance to extend the waiver in New York City even though New York State no longer has a statewide waiver because the unemployment rate has decreased.

This Administration continues to work to expand access to these essential benefits. And while the long-term solutions are clear, we must also continue to implement near term solutions to ensure

that fewer low-income New Yorkers and their families are impacted by food insecurity. When New Yorkers can earn a living wage and find affordable housing they will have the ability to obtain the food they need to prevent hunger.

We must not lose sight of the bigger goals needed to fundamentally address hunger and income inequality – which is why this administration is implementing a plan to create or preserve 200,000 units of affordable housing and setting an example for the State and other localities by raising the minimum wage for 50,000 City workers.

Thank you and I look forward to your questions.