



Human Resources
Administration
Department of
Homeless Services

Department of
Social Services

**Testimony of Gary Jenkins, Administrator
New York City Human Resources Administration**

**Oversight Hearing: The Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic on
Food Insecurity in New York State**

**New York State Assembly Social Services Committee, Agriculture Committee and Task Force on Food,
Farm and Nutrition Policy**

September 9, 2020

Good Morning Chairperson Hevesi, Lupardo, and Solages and members of the New York State Assembly Social Services and Agriculture Committees and Task Force on Food, Farm and Nutrition Policy. Thank you for this opportunity to testify and offer updates on our efforts to address food insecurity and hunger during these unprecedented times. My name is Gary Jenkins, Administrator at the New York City Department of Social Services (DSS)/Human Resources Administration (HRA).

Every day and particularly during these unprecedented times, HRA provides critical programs and supports to low-income New Yorkers, including initiatives focused on reducing hunger and tackling underlying socioeconomic factors that lead to food insecurity. Each year we testify about this work at the New York City Council's annual hunger hearing, you can find that testimony on our website. Today however, I will focus my testimony on the work of DSS/HRA to respond to meet the very real impacts COVID-19 has had on food insecurity.

New Yorkers in Need Seeking DSS Services – Applications Volume Up

From the start of COVID (March 2020) through May **the agency received 113,617 more applications than in the same period last year, a 140% increase.** In April 2020 alone, the agency received 56,755 more applications than April 2019, a 207.0% increase – the single largest increase in applications in modern time. Because of our longstanding work to ensure clients can access benefits from anywhere using ACCESSHRA, **99% of applications were submitted electronically outside of centers in May 2020** compared to 76% in Feb 2020. Conversely, with social isolation directives in place, in-center client traffic declined drastically since mid-March, with a daily average of 247 at SNAP centers in April 2020, compared to 2,667 in April 2019.

HRA had three times as many applications for Food Stamps and twice as many applications for cash assistance during this time. To meet this demand and to protect staff, DSS redeployed and retrained staff from across the agency to process cases – and we built a new remote access platform deploying technology to enable as many staff as possible to process applications and interview clients from their homes. In total we reassigned 1,300 members of our staff and received assistance, for example, from Metro Plus in terms of additional staff being reassigned to help us with processing those benefits applications.

We also advocated for and received a range of waivers from the State to expedite the processing of those applications. Through our work with the New York State Office of Temporary and Disability Assistance (OTDA) we secured critical waivers to ensure we are able to prioritize the health and safety of our staff and clients and continue to provide access to benefits.

Responding to An Unprecedented Pandemic with a Proportional Response

HRA quickly responded to rapidly changing information to ensure clients had access to benefits and staff safety was prioritized. Early on, HRA's offices remained open and ready to serve those in need but we communicated that due to the current situation and for individuals unable or unwilling to come to our centers for scheduled appointments, no negative case actions would be taken. Quickly, as we learned more from medical experts we moved to consolidate HRA Job, SNAP, and Medicaid Center locations, effective March 24. We were able to do this as a result of our partnership with the State, when we asked for and received permission to accept Cash Assistance (CA) applications online and to conduct interviews over the telephone, which began on March 20. The change to the interview portion of the CA application process being conducted by telephone and online is something we have advocated for a number of years given the channel shift in applying and recertifying for SNAP that we had already implemented.

Benefits Online and By Phone

In 2015, with federal and State OTDA approval, we implemented a benefits access reform to enable SNAP/food stamps clients to apply, recertify, and submit documents online using ACCESSHRA. Due to this infrastructure being in place, we were able to quickly make the decision in March to close all but 7 centers to protect the health and safety of our staff and clients.

Prior to the pandemic, in December 2019, 96% of SNAP application interviews and 87% of recertification interviews were held via telephone and the percentage of SNAP applications submitted online had increased to 89%. Only a few short months later, when this pandemic hit, and individuals and families turned to us for assistance, they were able to do so from the safety of their homes. Today 99% of all SNAP business is conducted remotely and outside of centers.

As I noted, we have been seeking approval for the same benefits access approach for Cash Assistance, and, as this crisis hit, we had previously received limited approval to permit clients to apply for Cash Assistance online. On March 20, 2020, within four days of state approval to permit telephone interviews and complete online access we stood up the system to both apply for Cash Assistance online and provide telephone interviews as needed. As a result of this critical reform, as of April over 90% of Cash Assistance applications are now submitted online.

Current Status of Waivers

We have been working closely with the New York State Office of Temporary and Disability Assistance (OTDA) and the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) Food and Nutrition Services (FNS) on critical waivers to ensure benefits access and staff safety.

Our extension requests were recently granted for some of the critical waivers under which we have been operating. These enable us to serve the increased demand for benefits as safely as possible without clients having to come in to our Centers. The below waivers have been extended through December 31, 2020:

- Cash Assistance telephone interview waiver
- Drug/alcohol and DV screenings by telephone
- Extension of DV waivers
- Partial extension of the SNAP interview adjustments (for recertifications only but not applications)
- SNAP and Cash Assistance signature waiver for phone applications taken by HRA staff

We have asked OTDA to request from FNS an extension of the interview adjustments for initial SNAP applications, which expired on August 31, 2020.

With federal and OTDA approval, we implemented a process to waive signatures for SNAP and Cash Assistance applications and recertifications taken by HRA staff over the phone for clients who are homebound or have challenges using ACCESS HRA for submission of their application or recertification. Clients who call HRA Infoline (718-557-1399) and indicate that they are unable to apply online will be provided with alternatives, including the option to apply by telephone. As we have reported, our waiver request to permit community-based organizations to provide this telephone application service has been denied. It is worth noting that pre-COVID-19, the Benefits Data Trust SNAP access program had been granted permission to submit applications and recertifications for clients unable to use ACCESS HRA because of their ability to record a telephonic signature.

The current suspension (effective April 1, 2020) of the federal Able-Bodied Adults Without Dependents (ABAWD) work requirement remains in effect through September 30, 2020. In response to a request from State OTDA which we supported, the USDA has granted a State-wide waiver of the ABAWD work requirements which commences on October 1, 2020 and runs through September 30, 2021. This effectively ensures that clients are not subject to the ABAWD work requirements associated with receipt of SNAP benefits through September 30, 2021.

As required by federal law, we continue to send letters informing clients of their ABAWD status. These letters are not notice of a requirement to work; the federal work requirement is not in effect as described above.

SNAP and Cash Assistance Recertifications

While the federal government extended the SNAP recertification waiver through August 31, 2020, we encouraged clients with SNAP cases that were due to recertify by August 31, 2020 to do so. We opened the recertification portal at the federal government's direction and we processed a significant number of the August cases. Of course, there was no adverse action taken for not recertifying at that time. As OTDA has now systemically advanced cases that had not yet been recertified, clients will not be able to recertify until their next recertification window opens. If these clients need to submit changes, they should use the SNAP Change Case change feature on ACCESS HRA or upload the related documents using the mobile document upload feature on the ACCESS HRA Mobile app.

Clients who are due to recertify by September 30, 2020, have had the ability to recertify now since the period opened on August 1, 2020. As we do not yet have a waiver on recertifications for this month, clients must recertify in order to continue receiving benefits. Recertifications can be completed through ACCESS HRA. There is no need for these clients to come into an HRA Center.

In accordance with the partial SNAP interview adjustments from the USDA, all SNAP applicants must have an interview before any benefits may be issued. We have asked OTDA to seek an extension of the interview adjustments for applications and are hopeful that it will be granted. However, absent the extension, clients who submit their application prior to September 26, will receive a call from an HRA staff member to conduct interview. For applications submitted on or after September 27, clients will be able to call HRA's on-demand system when it comes back on-line on Monday, September 28.

For SNAP cases due to recertify, the SNAP interview adjustments, which expire December 31, 2020, only some SNAP cases will require an interview. Those clients who do require an interview will receive a telephone call from HRA staff. As a reminder, based on the USDA waiver, we can recertify the SNAP case without an interview, provided that **both** of the following conditions have been met:

- the applicant's identity has been verified; and,
- **all** other mandatory information and verification has been provided and is valid:
 1. Identity
 2. Social Security number (as already required by federal law)
 3. Residency
 4. Gross non-exempt income (earned and unearned)
 5. Disability
 6. "Alien eligibility" (as already required by federal law)

Pursuant to the federal waiver, if either of these conditions has **not** been met, then an interview will be required. Under the federal waiver, interviews will still be required if any of the information submitted is unclear or cannot be verified through separate data matches.

The State also extended our recertification waiver for Cash Assistance until August 31, 2020. We encouraged clients with Cash Assistance cases that were due to recertify by August 31, 2020 to do so for the same reasons as above. Of course, there were no adverse actions for not doing so at that time. As OTDA has systemically extended the certification periods for those that had not yet recertified, these clients will not be able to recertify until their next recertification window opens. Clients who need to report a change should do so by uploading documents using the Mobile Document Upload feature of the ACCESS HRA Mobile app.

Clients who are due to recertify by September 30, 2020, have had the ability to recertify since the period opened on August 1, 2020. Clients must recertify in order to continue receiving benefits. Recertifications can be completed through ACCESS HRA. There is no need for these clients to come into an HRA office.

Benefits Access Moving Forward

If and when waiver periods expire, we will continue our advocacy for the Cash Assistance administrative changes to permit clients to have telephone interviews instead of in-office interviews to become permanent. We know that this technology approach and reform provide for a dignity-centered business model and, as we've seen over the last nearly six months, protect public health and safety.

Prior to this global pandemic, we knew all too well that too many New Yorkers are forced to choose between paying rent or paying for groceries. At HRA, we work to disrupt the structural obstacles low-income New Yorkers face to live healthy lives. Our anti-poverty programs and initiatives, including rental assistance, universal access to counsel, employment services, and Fair Fares are meant to address the

challenges that low-income households face by providing critical income supports and ultimately serving to alleviate food insecurity and poverty. Our goal continues to be lifting New Yorkers out of poverty and minimizing hunger, poor health and homelessness – today we face unprecedented new problems but working together we can meet this challenge. I would be happy to take your questions. Thank you.