

TESTIMONY

TO THE NEW YORK CITY COUNCIL

GENERAL WELFARE COMMITTEE

HEARING ON HUNGER IN NEW YORK

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My name is Steven Banks and I am Commissioner of the New York City Human Resources Administration.

I would like to thank the City Council's General Welfare Committee and Chair Stephen Levin for giving me this opportunity to testify today about HRA's efforts to address hunger in New York City.

Hunger is clearly a serious problem in New York City. Nationally, an estimated 14.3% of households were food insecure at least some time during the year in 2013. In New York City, according to an analysis produced by Feeding America, 1.4 million New Yorkers, 17.4%, were food insecure at least some time during the year in 2012.

Households are food insecure when their access to adequate food is limited by a lack of money and other resources. Food insecurity is a consequence of unemployment and low-wage jobs. Hunger is a consequence of food insecurity. In sum, food insecurity is one of the consequences of growing income inequality.

The de Blasio Administration is addressing this issue in two main ways. First, there is the ongoing effort to fight inequality by, for example, raising the minimum wage and improving job training programs to provide the skills for living wage jobs. Second, in the eight months since I became the Commissioner, we have instituted a number of reforms to streamline access to enroll and re-enroll in the federal Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, or SNAP, formerly known as food stamps. We have also begun new outreach efforts to sign up New Yorkers who qualify for SNAP but are not receiving assistance and we are developing additional outreach programs.

One of the key benefit programs that HRA administers is the federal SNAP program. Nearly 1.7 million New Yorkers currently receive federal SNAP benefits from HRA. Only about 350,000 of them are on public assistance. Many of the rest are working in jobs which pay an amount low enough so that they qualify for federal food assistance.

Overall, for almost one in four New Yorkers, federal SNAP benefits play an important role in providing the food they need for themselves and their families.

For New Yorkers struggling to survive in low-income jobs, government benefits such as SNAP aid help them keep those jobs and stay in the workforce and try to build a better future.

After growing for many years, beginning in 2013, the number of people receiving SNAP assistance in New York City has been slowly declining. National usage has also been declining over the same period.

There are two factors that appear to be associated with this national and local decline. First is the improvement in the economy, which has resulted in some people's income increasing enough so that they no longer meet the federal requirements to qualify for SNAP. Further analysis of the New York City numbers also shows that there has been no decline in the number of people receiving both public assistance and SNAP. The decline has been among those only receiving SNAP benefits, many of whom are working. This data indicates that their income may have increased so they no longer qualify for

federal food assistance under the United States Department of Agriculture's rules implementing the federal statute.

The second factor causing a national and local decline in SNAP assistance is Congress's decision to cut the amount of SNAP benefits last year. Therefore, some people may have concluded that it is no longer worth it to obtain and retain the substantially reduced benefit level, which declines as income rises.

Moreover, federal SNAP benefits alone do not solve the problem of hunger, even for those who receive them. For example, the level of SNAP benefits does not reflect increased food costs and other living costs in New York City. We hear from many clients that they run out of SNAP benefits before the end of the month. That has been exacerbated by the federal cuts.

While we must abide by the limitations of federal law, HRA can and is taking steps to help as many New Yorkers as possible who qualify for this benefit actually receive it. We are eliminating bureaucratic barriers so that eligible New Yorkers can apply for and obtain SNAP benefits. And we have implemented several outreach programs to reach those who qualify but are not receiving benefits. Here are some highlights of what we have been doing to address hunger in our City.

### **Continuing Outreach Efforts**

Outreach is a crucial part of the day-to-day work at HRA. HRA's Office of Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program Outreach Services educates the general public about SNAP eligibility guidelines and assists with the application process. In Fiscal Year 2014, this unit provided outreach services at more than 1,543 individual community events.

Because we understand that immigrants with legal status are one of the largest groups of New Yorkers who qualify for but do not receive SNAP benefits, we have increased services to immigrants and non-English speaking New Yorkers by partnering with 53 community-based organizations that primarily serve these groups. In addition, the unit manages three community-based "Paperless Office System" sites to provide on-line access to benefits and monitors the activity at 79 community-based organizations that provide SNAP facilitated enrollment and recertification services. Over the past year, the Office of SNAP Outreach Services prescreened more than 11,300 potentially eligible applicants.

In an attempt to further assist those New Yorkers who seek help through the emergency food network, this unit works with all HRA-funded community kitchens and food pantries to make sure that they are engaged in and providing some type of SNAP outreach services.

### **Senior Citizen Outreach**

In September 2014, HRA started working with the Robin Hood Foundation, the Benefits Data Trust (BDT) and the New York City Department for the Aging to send letters followed by robo-calls and reminder postcards to about 100,000 seniors, 60 and over, whom we have identified as receiving other benefits, such as Medicaid, but not SNAP.

Nationally, more than 60% of eligible seniors do not receive SNAP. In New York, there is a 50% participation rate for eligible low-income seniors. This is due to many barriers, including mobility, lack of knowledge, and supposed stigma of accepting government assistance.

In order to follow up on HRA's mailings and robo calls to the 100,000 seniors, in partnership with HRA and funded by Robin Hood, the New York Benefits Center is 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 has implemented a phone and direct mail campaign for these seniors who are not receiving SNAP. As seniors respond to the targeted outreach, highly-trained contact center staff provides seniors with comprehensive SNAP application assistance, including document support and extensive follow-up.

The goals of the program are as follows:

- Outreach to 85,000 to 100,000 seniors
- Submit 8,000 to 10,000 applications
- Enroll 7,000 to 9,000 seniors

Since the start of the program in September 2014, working with HRA, BDT has:

- Mailed 23,800 outreach letters
- Conducted robo-calls recorded by the Commissioner to 15,542 households in conjunction with the mailing
- Screened 4,385 households for SNAP over the phone
- Began SNAP applications for 2,049 households, or 46.7% of all households screened
- Submitted 1,683 applications on ACCESS NYC
  - 589 of these applications were for senior Bronx residents
  - 1,094 of these applications were for senior Queens residents

## **NYCHA**

HRA and the New York City Housing Authority are working together to develop a computer match to identify NYCHA residents who do not receive food stamps and are likely to qualify for them, and then contact them and offer help in enrolling in the program.

## **SNAP Campaign**

In conjunction with the roll out of the updated AccessNYC website next year, HRA will conduct a broad campaign to reach those eligible for SNAP but not receiving these benefits and let them know that they can enroll and re-enroll online and through community-based organizations around the City. This broad campaign will focus on both seniors and immigrants, the two main groups with significant numbers of New Yorkers identified as likely to be qualified but not receiving benefits. We welcome the help of community organizations, Council Members and other elected officials in this campaign.

## **PROCESS CHANGES THAT MAKE ENROLLING AND STAYING ON SNAP EASIER**

As I noted earlier, in the last few months, HRA has instituted a range of reforms that make it easier to apply and re-enroll in SNAP benefits.

One of the problems we have had in the past was that too often clients would submit documents and the documents would not be included in our records. This created frustration for both clients and HRA staff and could delay receiving benefits. We are addressing this problem in a number of ways.

Five SNAP HRA Centers and 10 community-based organization partners have self-service areas in which applicants or clients can provide required documents electronically through self-service scanners that automatically associate the documents with the appropriate case information. This can be done not only when initially applying, but also to report case changes such as the addition or removal of a family member, change in rent, or address change. Through this initiative, a confirmation receipt is mailed to clients, so they have verification that they have submitted the documents. Additional SNAP Centers will be implementing this technology.

HRA has also instituted "Right FAX" which allows clients to fax their required documents directly into the HRA case viewer. In addition, HRA has provided the Center's FAX numbers on the HRA form (W113K) that highlights the required documents needed to establish SNAP eligibility. This process has reduced the need for clients to have to go to the Centers.

Since 2010 applicants have been able to apply for SNAP benefits on line at [www.nyc.gov/accessnyc](http://www.nyc.gov/accessnyc). During 2015, we are implementing a new system to make it possible to recertify on line.

In addition, 13 of the 16 HRA SNAP Centers have PC banks, a group of publicly available personal computers, from which applicants can submit on-line applications with on-site assistance from HRA staff. Two additional centers are scheduled to roll out PC Banks before the end of 2014.

We also want to ensure that eligible clients do not miss appointments and thereby lose benefits. So as part of our reform efforts this year we instituted robo calls, that is, automated calls which are made to applicants and clients with scheduled telephone interviews to remind them of their upcoming appointments, including the date and time of the appointment. If the appointment is missed, another automated call is made to the applicant or client providing information on how to reschedule their appointment. And SNAP has an entire unit of staff dedicated to rescheduling missed appointments.

Client Service Supervisors have also been placed in 14 HRA SNAP Centers (as well as in various Job Centers) to assist clients with accessing services on-site. These supervisors are placed at the Center's entry point for clients so they can identify those in need of assistance and help them navigate the process with special attention paid to needs such as language access and Americans with Disabilities Act requirements.

And these process improvements this year are only the beginning. During 2015, HRA plans to provide on-demand SNAP interviews, allowing clients to call at their convenience. Eventually we expect that certain functions will be available with a smart phone, such as document upload. By the beginning of 2015, multiple SNAP forms will be consolidated into one streamlined form which will be easier for clients to understand and respond to. We have also filed two waiver requests with the State to improve the processing of SNAP cases and to provide a more efficient and effective means for clients to document certain expenses.

Furthermore, we have also made an important policy change to increase access to federal food assistance. In May of this year, HRA accepted the federal Able-Bodied Adult Without Dependents (ABAWD) waiver, which allows single adults who are unemployed or underemployed to receive food stamps when they cannot find more than 20 hours of work per week. This waiver had already been accepted by 43 of the 50 states and by all other New York counties. In addition to providing federal assistance to address hunger, this policy change provides an economic benefit when this federal assistance is spent in the neighborhoods of our City. The United States Department of Agriculture has found that every dollar of SNAP benefits produces \$1.80 in local economic activity.

### **Emergency Food Assistance Program (EFAP)**

The City also supports food pantries and soup kitchens through HRA. The HRA Emergency Food Assistance Program's (EFAP) baseline funding for food in Fiscal Year 2015 is \$9.7 million. That now includes in the baseline funds which in the past had to be added by the Council. For this year, the Council added an additional \$250,000.

EFAP has also made significant efforts to improve the nutritional standards of all foods that are provided to the emergency food network. Since 2008, EFAP has required that all foods purchased with City funding meet sodium, sugar and trans-fat standards that aim to reduce the prevalence of obesity, diabetes, and cardiovascular disease. In addition, HRA requires that all emergency food programs funded by EFAP receive SNAP outreach services. These services include SNAP eligibility prescreening, assistance with the SNAP application process; and guidance on making healthy food choices.

During the last fiscal year, EFAP distributed 12 million pounds of food.

Finally, HRA is currently working with a sub-group of the Reducing Hunger Service Initiative to create and conduct a survey of the skill-based volunteer needs of the emergency food network. The survey is targeting individual emergency food programs, such as soup kitchens and food pantries. It will assess volunteer needs and program interest in having a skill-based volunteer at the site. The results will be used to recruit volunteers with the needed skills through NYC Service and assign them appropriately.

### **Conclusion**

There is no question that the SNAP program and the emergency food assistance program have and will continue to provide essential help to New Yorkers. It is clear that without SNAP the problem of hunger in the City would be much worse. That said, these programs have not eliminated the problem of hunger. More remains to be done.

The long-term solutions are clear. 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.

So while we work as hard as we can to make the current programs as effective as possible, we can never lose sight of the bigger goals needed to fundamentally address hunger – which is why in fighting poverty and income inequality this Administration is implementing a comprehensive affordable housing plan and initiatives to create more living wage jobs.

Thank you for this opportunity to testify. We look forward to continuing to work with this Committee and the Council as a whole to address these important issues. I am happy to answer any questions that you may have.

