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Human Resources Administration Commissioner Banks Announces Reforms to Fight Poverty and Hunger, Prevent Homelessness, Improve Access to Employment, Reduce Unnecessary Bureaucracy, Address Staff Workload, and Avoid Financial Penalties for the City

New York City will join all other social services districts in New York State and accept a federal waiver to enable Able-Bodied Adults Without Dependents (ABAWD) to receive ongoing Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) benefits

Other changes are aimed at ending counterproductive policies and duplicative and/or unnecessary administrative transactions that have adverse impact on staff workload and clients and now subject the City to potential financial penalties due to unnecessary fair hearings

At the Executive Budget 2015 hearing today before the New York City Council Finance and General Welfare Committees, Human Resources Administration Commissioner Steven Banks announced reforms to reduce the number of New Yorkers living in poverty. The changes address long-standing operational and administrative barriers affecting the delivery of food and income assistance benefits and employment services for low-income families and individuals. This announcement of nearly two-dozen reforms comes seven weeks into Commissioner Banks' tenure at HRA, and after input from HRA staff at all levels, client groups and community organizations. The reforms seek to: alleviate hunger among unemployed and underemployed New Yorkers; remove bureaucratic barriers to access to the federal, state, and local assistance and services to which children and adults are eligible; improve HRA's employment program to connect or reconnect clients to the workforce; and eliminate inefficiency within HRA's assistance programs which may be experiencing adverse impact on staff workload and currently puts the City at risk of financial penalties due to unnecessary New York State fair hearings.

“While much more remains to be done, over the past seven weeks, HRA has already implemented or substantially developed significant reforms of policies and procedures to create a more effective, efficient and compassionate service delivery system, including homelessness prevention and employment services,” said HRA Commissioner Banks. “Policies that in the past have harmed clients, have had an adverse impact on staff workload and morale, and now subject the City to potential financial penalties have been or are in the process of being reformed.”

"Every day, individuals from every corner of the city call my office with issues related to HRA services," said Public Advocate Leticia James. "These are some of the most vulnerable New Yorkers who need immediate help but can't seem to cut through the red tape. It's why we've worked with Commissioner Banks to secure important reforms. The partnership between the Office of the Public Advocate and HRA will result in more constituent cases being resolved and go a long way towards helping individuals facing some very tough circumstances."

"These reforms are a critical step in allowing New York City to help New Yorkers in need," said Council Member Stephen Levin. "After only a few weeks at HRA, Commissioner Banks has already produced a significant set of reforms that ensures services will be delivered more effectively and efficiently and that addresses the serious issues our city faces. Thank you to Mayor de Blasio and Commissioner Banks for making these important reforms at the Human Resources Administration."

"In less than two months on the job, HRA Commissioner Steve Banks has already signaled his sincere commitment to serving New York's neediest," said Federation of Protestant Welfare Agencies CEO and Executive Director Jennifer Jones Austin. "We already are witnessing key changes, including the planned closing of the sanctions center, the streamlining of the benefits application, and increased funding for food supports in the Mayor's Executive Budget. FPWA looks forward to continuing our work with Administration to shore up the social safety net and reduce income inequality."

"Mayor de Blasio and Commissioner Banks are fundamentally overhauling and modernizing every inch of HRA to ensure that the agency does a better job of increasing employment, raising wages, eliminating government waste, obtaining as much federal funding as possible for the city, and reducing poverty, hunger and inequality," said Executive Director of New York City Coalition Against Hunger, Joel Berg. "As both a taxpayer and an advocate, I am simply thrilled by the speed and comprehensiveness of these vital reforms. In just a few weeks, the new leadership has started taking the agency into the 21st Century to make it a leading engine of upward mobility."

"Commissioner Steven Banks' testimony today included various reforms that will make a real difference in the lives of New Yorkers," said Make the Road Deputy Director Theo Oshiro. "Measures such as discontinuing the Immigrant Sponsor Recovery Program, helping New Yorkers address inadequate housing conditions, and the development of a client advocacy unit are important steps in the right direction. Today's testimony shows New Yorkers that important pro-community reforms at HRA are well under way. Make the Road New York and its members look forward to working with the Commissioner on these and other key issues."

"Commissioner Banks has started a shift in approach at HRA to support rather than punish," said Communities Voices Heard Board Member John Medina. "We are glad to see new rental assistance preventing people going to shelter and we are excited about giving input to the new employment plan to make careers and employment for self sufficiency for all new Yorkers."

Reform priorities includes addressing Agency actions that result in requests for New York State fair hearings at which only 10 percent of the hearings that are held result in decisions upholding HRA's actions. A new provision in the recently adopted State budget also now subjects the City to a potential \$10 million chargeback for these unnecessary hearings.

Another fundamental reform is ensuring that HRA's employment program is effective in fighting poverty and income inequality by enabling New Yorkers to remain off of the Cash Assistance caseload. Currently, 25% of New Yorkers who are connected to the workforce by HRA or who leave Cash Assistance for a job return to the HRA caseload within 12 months.

A number of reforms have also been implemented to prevent and alleviate homelessness. HRA recently performed a study that revealed a link between adverse actions taken by the Agency over the last few years and applications for shelter from the Department of Homeless Services. Approximately 12 percent of the current Cash Assistance caseload is in sanction or in the sanction process at any point in time. A sanction is a benefit reduction where HRA believes that there has been noncompliance with an administrative requirement such as attending an employment vendor appointment. The study found that an average of nearly 19,000 cases close each month and over 40 percent of closings are related to HRA making the decision that there has been non-compliance, primarily related to appointments. After combining all individuals with a case closing for non-compliance or a sanction, the study showed that nearly 1 in 10 applied for a homeless shelter after the adverse action was taken by HRA.

The study also analyzed information about all the children and adults in families and all the single individuals applying for DHS shelter during the first six months of 2013 and found that, of all the children and adults on DHS shelter applications, 23 percent had a Cash Assistance case closing or sanction related to non-compliance in the previous 12 months. Moreover, of all the children and adults on DHS shelter applications, 66 percent had involvement with HRA in the past 12 months and 39.3 percent of them had an adverse action that preceded their shelter application.

Specific reforms already implemented since April 1 or in the process of being implemented include:

Fighting Hunger by Maximizing Access to the Federal Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program:

- Joining every other social services district in New York State and 43 other States by accepting the federal SNAP (formerly Food Stamps) waiver for adults without dependents who are unemployed or underemployed. Under the previous two administrations, HRA required the Able-Bodied Adults Without Dependents (ABAWD) population to find full-time work or lose their food stamps, adding another stressor to the already difficult economic situations of thousands of students and homeless and underemployed individuals whose unemployment benefits ended. There are over 1.8 million SNAP recipients in New York City. Currently, about 40,000 18 to 49 year olds with no minor children have been affected by this rule; 61 percent of them live in Brooklyn and the Bronx and nearly half are women. As a result of this policy change, the average amount of SNAP assistance that will be received is approximately \$35 per week per person. According to the US Department of Agriculture, every \$1 of SNAP assistance creates \$1.80 of economic activity. SNAP is reimbursed 100 percent by the Federal government.
- Developing a new initiative with the Robin Hood Foundation to maximize access to SNAP for senior citizens who are currently receiving only Medicaid and/or home energy assistance.

Improving HRA's Employment Services:

- Developing HRA's biennial employment plan for submission to New York State and addressing the need to streamline HRA's administrative procedures to maximize participation in employment and training services and make sure that these services are effective.
- Changing HRA's position to support the provision in the recently enacted State budget that offers four years of college as an option to HRA clients as part of mandated training and employment initiatives.

Averting Unnecessary Fair Hearings and Potential Financial Penalties:

- Disbanding the "Center 71" program that resulted in unnecessary case sanctions and led to substantial numbers of avoidable fair hearings.
- Working with the State Office of Temporary and Disability Assistance to resolve substantial numbers of pending fair hearings.
- Developing a pilot program to reduce unnecessary case sanctions and fair hearings by providing participants in employment programs with five excused absences for illness or family emergency prior to the implementation of a sanction, like the standard of the City's new paid sick leave law.
- Extending the time Cash Assistance applicants have to find appropriate child care arrangements from 5 days to 15 days, with an additional 5 day extension.

Preventing and Alleviating Homelessness:

- Increasing access to services for homeless New Yorkers by working with DHS on a new system for HRA to begin accepting applications for Cash Assistance at DHS intake centers, to process recertifications for assistance directly at DHS shelter locations, and to provide rent arrears assistance directly at DHS HomeBase locations.
- Phasing out the requirement that all homeless New Yorkers seek services at a single center in Queens.
- Working with the Mayor's Office, the Office of Management and Budget (OMB), and DHS to develop new rental assistance initiatives to prevent and alleviate homelessness, including initiatives targeted for survivors of domestic violence who seek shelter from HRA.
- Creating a centralized HRA rent check processing unit to improve the timely processing of rent arrears payments.
- Developing an expedited implementation plan for the new 30 percent rent cap for HASA clients living with HIV and AIDS pursuant to the requirements of the recently enacted State budget.
- Developing and implement a letter for landlords specifying the rental assistance levels for which HASA clients are eligible to maximize access to permanent housing.
- Working with OMB and DHS to make sure that adequate broker's fees are in place to alleviate homelessness.

- Working with the Department of Housing Preservation and Development (HPD) on a new initiative to address inadequate housing conditions in buildings where substantial numbers of Cash Assistance recipients reside.
- Working with NYCHA to ensure that HRA makes timely rent payments to avert the eviction of NYCHA tenants.
- Consolidating the City's civil legal services programs under HRA to enhance the provision of legal services to fight poverty and income inequality and prevent homelessness, and evaluating the need for additional legal services initiatives.

Using Technology to Address Staff Workload and Client Service Problems:

- Expanding HRA's plan for an online portal for applicants and recipients of SNAP/Food Stamps by using the system's existing capacity to include an online portal for Cash Assistance applicants and recipients in order to reduce missed appointments and potentially unnecessary fair hearings.
- Developing a system for appointment reminder calls and text messages for SNAP and Cash Assistance recipients with a rescheduling option.
- Developing a system of missed appointment reminder calls for SNAP and Cash Assistance recipients.
- Seeking additional SNAP waivers to allow SNAP applicants and recipients to schedule telephone interviews at a time of their own choosing, and to allow applicants to self-attest their housing expenses.

Stopping the Sponsor Recovery Policy that Harmed Immigrants:

- Discontinuing the Immigrant Sponsor Recovery Program that harmed sponsors – mostly relatives – of low-income legal immigrants since June of 2012, and implementing a process to return all payments collected to the paying sponsors.

Addressing Client Service Problems

- Implementing a new initiative with the Office of the Criminal Justice Coordinator to outstation HRA staff on Rikers Island to ensure that necessary HRA assistance and services are available upon discharge.
- Developing a new client advocacy unit for clients, community members and elected officials, including an ADA coordinator, a Language Access coordinator, and a LGBTQ Services coordinator, to expedite inquiries about client service needs and the resolution of client concerns about their cases.