



**PRESS RELEASE
FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE**

June 9, 2021

Contact:

- Isaac McGinn, mcginni@dss.nyc.gov (o: 929-221-5564)
- Ian Martin, martini@dss.nyc.gov (o: 929-221-5249)
- Neha Sharma, sharman@dss.nyc.gov (o: 929-221-6632)

**NYC TO PILOT BENEFIT APPLICATION REFORMS FOR CRIMINAL-JUSTICE-INVOLVED
NEW YORKERS**

New approach will make it easier for incarcerated New Yorkers to apply for essential benefits like food assistance ahead of their release

NEW YORK— The NYC Department of Social Services- Human Resources Administration (NYC DSS-DHS) today announced that the City will pilot reforms to the benefits application process for New Yorkers involved in the criminal justice system who are incarcerated in State prisons and are returning home to NYC, with the goal of more effectively helping these individuals apply for and access the resources they need to make ends meet as they re-enter society following their period of incarceration. This pilot was developed in partnership with the National Executive Council (NEC) at Columbia University’s Center for Justice and the New York State Department of Corrections and Community Supervision (NY DOCCS) – and the City will continue to work with NEC during the implementation of the pilot.

“As our City continues to address structural racism and income inequality, we must ensure that New Yorkers, including those involved in the justice system, can access the tools, resources, and opportunities they need to make ends meet,” said **Department of Social Services Commissioner Steven Banks**. “For too long, those New Yorkers involved in the justice system and leaving State prisons have not been provided with the supports needed to establish an effective re-entry into society, including simple food assistance to prevent hunger. This common-sense reform that we are piloting will make it easier for New Yorkers who are incarcerated to apply for essential benefits prior to their release, providing a foundation these individuals can build upon as they get back on their feet.”

“Today’s exciting announcement builds upon the incredible progress that this Administration and this Agency have achieved in expanding access to crucial benefits, such as food assistance, for New Yorkers in need,” said **HRA Administrator Gary Jenkins**. “This innovative pilot program carries forward the same spirit of reform, further expanding access to assistance and helping New Yorkers get back on their feet by making this process as easy as possible, offering individuals involved in the justice system with the opportunity to begin planning for reentry into society. We thank our public and private partners for their support in helping to develop this important intervention and we look forward to continuing to collaborate to identify new ways in which we can support New Yorkers affected by the justice system.”

Recently, NYC DSS-HRA received the waivers the City had requested from the New York State Office of Temporary and Disability Assistance (OTDA) and the USDA Food and Nutrition Service (FNS)

that will allow incarcerated individuals to begin the benefits application process while incarcerated, including conducting application interviews, which is currently prohibited by New York State regulation. This common-sense reform, which the State is allowing the City to implement at two State prisons (Queensboro Correctional Facility and Edgecombe Residential Treatment), will ensure formerly incarcerated individuals are better supported as they re-enter society, including being connected with the benefits they need, such as food assistance – rather than having to first begin the application process after release.

“A few years ago I was given \$40 and a bus ticket back to Manhattan as I left prison,” said **Jay Holder, Director of the National Executive Council (NEC) at Columbia University’s Center for Justice.** “The elation of being home quickly faded as I realized that this money wasn’t going to last. I never understood why so many of my formerly incarcerated peers returned back to prison so quickly. Hunger has a serious impact on thinking. The purpose of this initiative spearheaded with government partners and Lucy Lang, Former Director of the Institute for Innovation in Prosecution at John Jay College of Criminal Justice, includes ending the added punishment of sending people back to the neighborhood without knowing how they are going to eat. It’s Black and Latinx communities who are overwhelmingly dealing with this public health crisis. We are going to end this condition”

“What we need for those exiting the criminal legal system is real support in real time,” said **K. Bain, Executive Director of Community Capacity Development (CCD) & Director of Policy for the National Executive Council (NEC) at Columbia University’s Center for Justice.** “Our partnership with City and State stakeholders demonstrates the progress that can be made when those most impacted by policies have an opportunity to direct real change such as my colleague Jay Holder. Credible messengers in a peer navigator-led initiative focused on expediting essential resources into the hands of those coming out of the prison system is a step towards true healing and genuine justice - human justice”

This project builds on the de Blasio Administration’s progress making it easier for New Yorkers to access the benefits to which they are entitled, including through initiatives like the ACCESSHRA mobile application or pandemic-period reforms which eliminated the need to visit centers in person to obtain Cash Assistance.

Anytime, Anywhere: de Blasio Administration Reforms Make it Easier for New Yorkers to Apply for and Access Benefits On the Go

In 2015, with federal and State OTDA approval, the City developed and implemented ACCESS HRA, a mobile tool/platform that enabled New Yorkers seeking food assistance to apply, recertify, and submit documents online, without having to go into a brick-and-mortar HRA center. In the years since, the City has dramatically strengthened and expanded this platform, adding new features as we secured new permissions from the State to implement reforms we had requested, such as clients calling by telephone to obtain benefits without the need to come into an office for an interview or to submit documents. As a result of these reforms, by December 2019, 96% of application interviews and 87% of recertification interviews were held via telephone, while the percentage of SNAP applications submitted online overall increased to 89% by the end of 2019. These reforms also helped prepare the City for this past year of crisis, as SNAP clients could conduct their business with DSS-HRA from the safety of their homes. Today during the crisis, more than 90% of all SNAP business is conducted online and outside of centers.

For years, NYC DSS-HRA had also sought approval for the same benefits access approach for Cash Assistance clients so that they can avoid the need to come into an office to receive help. As this COVID crisis hit NYC, the City finally received OTDA approval to do so, and on March 20, 2020 – within four days of OTDA approval – stood up a system to apply for Cash Assistance online and provide telephone

interviews as needed, following the effective blueprint developed with food assistance. As a result of this essential reform, more than 80% of Cash Assistance applications were submitted online last year.

###