



**Testimony of Lisa Fitzpatrick  
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**Oversight Hearing: The Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic on SNAP Administration,  
Food Pantries, and Soup Kitchens**

**New York City's Council, Committee on General Welfare  
September 21, 2020**

Good morning. Thank you Chairperson Levin and members of the City Council's General Welfare Committee for the opportunity to testify about the agency's efforts to address the urgency of hunger and food insecurity in New York City during the COVID-19 pandemic. My name is Lisa Fitzpatrick, I am the Chief Program Officer for the New York City Human Resources Administration (HRA). Testifying with me today is Annette Holm, Chief Special Services Officer of the New York City Human Resources Administration (HRA) and Kate MacKenzie Director of the Mayor's Office of Food Policy.

My testimony today will be focused on HRA's administration of the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) and the Emergency Food Assistance Program (EFAP) during this crisis period. As we have testified in the past and as advocates and the Council are aware, food insecurity is one result of unemployment, underemployment, declining wages, and the increasing costs of rent, food, and other commodities. COVID-19 has exacerbated all of these factors and for many low-income New Yorkers, has jeopardized their economic stability and overall wellbeing.

Every day and particularly during these unprecedented times, HRA provides critical programs and supports to low-income New Yorkers, today I will focus on SNAP and EFAP which are aimed squarely at reducing hunger and tackling food insecurity. COVID-19 challenged our agency like never before resulting in moving to work swiftly and in lockstep with our partners in government and the not for profit community to alleviate the burden for so many New Yorkers having to worry about where their next meal is coming from.

In March, recognizing the gravity and scale of the mobilization effort required to galvanize and marshal resources to address New York City's food needs during the pandemic, Kathryn Garcia, former Department of Sanitation Commissioner, was appointed as the COVID-19 Food Czar. Through a coordinated agency effort, the Food Czar's team spearheaded a citywide initiative that provided more

than 135 million meals to hungry and food insecure New Yorkers. Further, under the Food Czar, the City took action to secure the City's food supply chain and support regional agriculture, intervened to keep food pantries and other vital emergency feeding charities open and equipped them to meet the surging demand for their services. Through these actions New York City responded, organized, and expanded food availability to our most vulnerable residents. Today, the City is delivering approximately 400,000 meals each day through its Emergency Food Delivery program, which provides meals to low-income homebound New Yorkers, including seniors, in addition to serving another 450,000 grab and go meals at over 400 New York City schools.

### **SNAP - New Yorkers in Need Seeking DSS Services – Applications Volume Up**

The sheer volume of applications received by the agency during the emergency is indicative of the heightened need for food security resources at this time. During the height of the pandemic, the agency received 84,000 SNAP applications in April 2020, the highest number of SNAP applications in modern history, and more than a 200 percent increase compared to the 27,000 applications received in April 2019.

The vast majority of SNAP applications have been submitted electronically, outside of centers, through ACCESSHRA which has revolutionized the client experience in accessing services. Almost 99% of applications were received electronically by the agency using ACCESSHRA in May 2020, compared to 90% in February of 2020. The increased usage of the online portal and mobile app, coupled with the agency's longstanding efforts to provide clients with flexible case service options has significantly reduced in-center client traffic, undoubtedly saving lives by limiting client and staff exposure to the virus in compliance with social distancing directives. Since mid-March, SNAP center traffic dropped significantly with a daily average of approximately 250 visitors in April 2020, compared to 2,600 visitors in April 2019.

In order to meet the demand, with the number of SNAP applications tripled in this period and cash assistance applications doubled, HRA redeployed and retrained staff across the agency as well as recruited staff temporarily from other City agencies such as ACS and DCAS as well as MetroPlus to help process the high volume of applications. In meeting this challenge and to protect staff and clients, HRA built a new remote access platform deploying technology to enable staff to index documents, process applications and interview clients remotely. In total, we reassigned 1,285 employees from various areas within DSS and HRA and recruited an additional 198 from other agencies.

Through HRA's advocacy, we received approval for a range of critical waivers from the New York State Office of Temporary and Disability Assistance (OTDA) working with the United States Department of Agriculture, Food and Nutrition Service (FNS) to help expedite the processing of applications. This effort enabled us to continue the work required to provide client access to food benefits while prioritizing the health and safety of staff and clients.

## **Responding to An Unprecedented Pandemic with a Proportional Response**

Working under unprecedented circumstances, the agency was responsive to the rapidly changing information and public health guidance to ensure continued access to benefits for clients. For example, in the early phase of COVID when HRA's offices remained open, we communicated to clients that no negative case actions would be taken if they did not attend scheduled in-person appointments due to concerns with COVID-19. Subsequently on March 24, we received public health guidance that led to the agency's decision to consolidate HRA locations such as Job, SNAP, and Medicaid locations, move our back-office operations to a remote environment, seek the aforementioned waivers, and to offer an array of digital or telephonic services. Our partnership with the State, through relationships built over the years, enabled the agency to request and receive permission to accept Cash Assistance (CA) applications online and to conduct interviews over the telephone, which began on March 20.

We have been advocating for the ability to conduct by telephone the interview portion of the cash assistance application process for a number of years, given the efficiency and channel shift of applying and recertifying for SNAP.

## **Online Applications, Telephone Interviews, and Telephonic Applications**

With federal and state approval, SNAP clients can apply, recertify, and submit documents online using ACCESSHRA. This was a reform that DSS successfully advocated for in 2015. During the pandemic, with the ACCESSHRA platform in place and operational, the agency was able to act swiftly in March 2020 to temporarily close most locations, but ensured services were still available in each borough, in order to protect the health and safety of staff and clients, while still meeting the need for individuals who prefer to access services in person.

Prior to COVID, as a result of the agency's proactive advocacy 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%. Months later during the pandemic, families and individuals sought assistance through us from home, allowing us to prioritize public health, during that time 99% of all SNAP business is conducted remotely and outside of centers.

The goal of securing the same client access without the need to come into an office for Cash Assistance as we achieved for SNAP has and continues to be a priority of the agency. In fact, we built a system for online Cash Assistance applications before we had State approval to use it outside of our centers and in other than a limited pilot with 13 community partners, enabling us to go live once the pandemic waiver was obtained in a matter of days. As has been noted, we pushed for these changes in the days before the crisis hit. As a result, we quickly received OTDA approval to permit NYC residents to submit joint

applications for Cash Assistance and SNAP online. Within four days of OTDA approval, the agency stood up the system to apply for Cash Assistance/SNAP online and provide telephone interviews as needed. As of April, as a result of this critical reform, 85% of Cash Assistance applications are now submitted online.

We also secured federal and OTDA approval through the end of December 2020 to waive the requirement for a client's physical or electronic signature on SNAP and Cash Assistance applications so that an HRA employee may complete the application over the telephone with the client. This waiver allowed us to implement a process by which a Cash Assistance or SNAP application is completed over the phone for any applicant who lacks internet connectivity, internet-ready devices, the ability to complete and mail or fax applications, are homebound, or have challenges using ACCESSHRA for application submission. Clients who call HRA Infoline and indicate that they are unable to apply online are provided with alternatives, including the option to apply by telephone. Our waiver request to permit community-based organizations to provide this telephone application service was denied. However, it is worth noting that pre-COVID-19, Benefits Data Trust (BDT) – because of their ability to record a telephonic signature – was able to submit SNAP only applications and recertifications for individuals unable to use ACCESSHRA.

### **Current Status of Waivers**

As mentioned, securing critical waivers is at the core of the agency's COVID-19 response. Currently, our work involves requesting extensions of important benefits-related waivers that were previously approved. Thankfully for New Yorkers who rely on our services, many of our extension requests were recently granted for waivers under which we have been operating. The waivers and extensions enable DSS to meet the increased demand for benefits in a safe way to avoid, whenever possible, clients having to come in person to Centers. The below waivers have been extended through December 31, 2020:

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

The interview adjustments for initial SNAP applications expired on August 31, 2020. All SNAP applicants must have an interview before any benefits may be issued in accordance with the partial SNAP interview adjustments from the federal government. We have asked OTDA to seek an extension of the interview adjustments for applications and are hopeful that it will be granted, but for now the application interview requirement is in effect.

## **SNAP and Cash Assistance Recertifications**

The federal government (USDA) 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 recertify. At the federal government's direction, we opened the recertification portal and processed a significant number of the August cases. There was no adverse action taken for not recertifying at that time.

## **SNAP and Cash Assistance Recertifications Resuming September 2020**

As required by the federal government (USDA), recertification for SNAP benefits resumed with those cases due to expire on September 30, 2020. Clients must now recertify to continue receiving SNAP benefits. Recertifications can be completed through ACCESSHRA and documentation submission can be conducted through the Mobile Document Upload feature of the ACCESSHRA Mobile app. It remains the case that there is no need for clients to visit an HRA SNAP office.

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. We do not yet have a waiver on recertifications for this month, so as required by the federal government clients must recertify in order to continue receiving benefits.

For SNAP cases due to recertify, because of the SNAP interview adjustments from the federal government, 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 federal 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. Social Security number (as already required by federal law)
  2. Residency
  3. Gross non-exempt income (earned and unearned)
  4. Disability
  5. "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. There were no adverse actions for not doing so at that time.

Cash Assistance 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 ACCESSHRA. There is no need for these clients to visit an HRA office.

We will continue our advocacy as waiver periods approach the dates on which they expire. It is imperative that these administrative changes become permanent. We know that these changes provide for a dignity-centered model and as we have seen over the last six months, protect public health and safety.

DSS/HRA also sought to implement various SNAP program changes to ensure all households continue receiving the proper SNAP allotment. Emergency allotments of SNAP initially were approved for March and April 2020, but at HRA's urging, New York State secured approval to extend EA supplements through September 2020. SNAP participating households received the maximum benefit allowance. In addition to all the COVID-19 pandemic SNAP program operational changes, DSS/HRA also worked to waive the ABAWD requirements until September 2020 (with a statewide waiver also granted until September 2021), and ensured that once the federal Pandemic Unemployment Insurance benefits lapsed, this income was removed from households' budget, ensuring the maximum benefit level.

**EFAP: Funding and Emergency Food Distribution in New York City**

HRA's Emergency Food Assistance Program (EFAP) provides funding to 578 community kitchens and food pantries citywide. EFAP provides over 40 food items and purchases the most nutritious food items that also meet the dietary and cooking needs of special populations, such as homeless New Yorkers, those with HIV/AIDS, and those who require a Kosher or Halal diet. The actual purchase of these items is based on an analysis of the needs and trends of the emergency food network. HRA also requires that all 578 emergency food programs funded by EFAP provide SNAP outreach services. These services include SNAP eligibility prescreening, assistance with the SNAP application process, and distribution of SNAP materials that promote this nutritional benefit.

The FY21 EFAP Budget is \$20.9 million and includes \$0.7 million in funds that were added at Adoption. Funding for HRA's EFAP program, including food and administrative expenses, was fully baselined by the Administration, and the funding continues to be leveraged to provide non-perishable and frozen food, as well as to provide administrative grants for non-food related expenses to support the EFAP network and the cost for warehousing and transportation.

In FY20, EFAP distributed more than 14,972,681 pounds of food, including over 1,029,780 pounds of frozen food. In the same period, EFAP programs reported serving more than 17,620,975 people. While working to ensure that New Yorkers have a hot, healthy meal, we are also working to reduce the prevalence of obesity, diabetes and cardiovascular disease. Since 2008, EFAP has required all foods

purchased with City funding to be compliant with the NYC Food Standards requirements and meet nutritional standards, including, but not limited to, standards for sodium, sugar, and trans-fat.

Throughout the COVID-19 period, EFAP continues to explore the purchase of nutritional foods for all populations, including those with special dietary needs and those without cooking facilities. Increases in funding have enabled individual programs to receive increased allocations. EFAP continues to build off the work of the NYC Food Assistance Collaborative to identify additional neighborhoods that have a high supply gap and need increased capacity and additional food to address it.

### **EFAP during the Pandemic**

During this crisis, New York City's food pantries have been vital partners. Particularly at this difficult time supporting them was a priority as a part of our urgent response to keeping New Yorkers fed. We shared pandemic related safety guidance with all of our EFAP food pantry partners, encouraging them to continue operations to provide critical services to food insecure New Yorkers in a way that is safe for everyone. Food distribution to those in need remains our most important objective. DSS Emergency Intervention Services (EIS) developed and shared informational guidance on best practices for EFAP food providers, including:

- the need for expanded pick-up hours to decrease the number of clients that visit at a given time;
- discouraging lines and mass groups congregating by offering, where appropriate diverse pre-bagged items, e.g. family size/demographic, dietary restrictions, etc;
- increase emergency packages to last up to 14 days to reduce the frequency of visits; and
- provide shelf/long-term stable food options with sample food item categories for vegetables, fruits, proteins, grains and dairy (both perishable or non-perishable).

For any New Yorker in need of food, you can get help today at one of New York City's food pantries, which provide groceries to cook at home, or community kitchens, which provide hot meals. A map of local pantries and other options is available at [NYC.gov/GetFood](https://www.nyc.gov/GetFood), or persons seeking food assistance can also call the Emergency FoodLine at 866-888-8777 which is an automated hotline available 24 hours a day, 7 days a week.

### **CONCLUSION**

As we face this crisis head on, we remain committed to providing access to food for all New Yorkers in need. Thank you for taking the time to hold this hearing at a critical time on this important topic. We look forward to answering any questions you may have.