

**Eliot Spitzer  
Governor**

**Testimony**

**of**

**David A. Hansell  
Commissioner  
New York State Office of Temporary  
and Disability Assistance**

**before**

**The New York City Council Committee  
on General Welfare**

**November 20, 2007**

Good morning, Chairman de Blasio and members of the New York City Council Committee on General Welfare. Thank you for inviting me to testify today at this oversight hearing on the topic of "Fighting Hunger in New York City." As you know, I have had the opportunity to sit in this chair many times in my previous role as Chief of Staff at the New York City Human Resources Administration. I am delighted to be back in this chamber and before this Committee today, to continue the dialogue on this very important topic in my new capacity as Commissioner of the New York State Office of Temporary and Disability Assistance (OTDA).

I particularly want to focus my remarks on the innovative things we are doing to expand participation in the Food Stamp Program through Governor Spitzer's Working Families Food Stamp Initiative, an effort that will get underway in earnest this coming January with the full cooperation of HRA and other local social service districts statewide. I am delighted that you will also hear today from HRA Commissioner Robert Doar, reinforcing our partnership to expand Food Stamp enrollment among working families.

Regardless of whether we sit here as government representatives, advocates, providers or consumers, we should all agree that food insecurity is unacceptable in our state and city, and that we must do everything within our power to remedy it. Since assuming the position of Commissioner of OTDA, I have had the opportunity to travel throughout the State and to see the many difficulties confronting low-income New Yorkers. These visits have helped me to better understand the dimensions of poverty across the state, not the least of which is the struggle to put food on the table. These first-hand experiences have helped drive OTDA's current efforts to support individuals and families in need.

Over the past decade, helping those on public assistance gain employment and self-sufficiency has been OTDA's and HRA's primary focus. The number of families relying on cash assistance has dropped dramatically, leading us to broaden our mission to support those families who, while working, still struggle to meet their basic needs. As the reliance on cash assistance has decreased, there has been a corresponding increase in OTDA's emphasis on work supports, including food stamps, child support, child care, and the federal and state earned income and child care tax credits. Through these programs, New York provides a comprehensive array of

supports to help working families pull themselves up the ladder to economic independence. The Food Stamp Program has been a particularly effective tool in these efforts, lifting many families out of the cycle of food insecurity.

New York has been in the forefront of developing new and creative ways to improve participation in the Food Stamp Program, and this hard work has paid off: Between 2002 and 2007, New York's food stamp participation increased steadily from approximately 1.35 million to 1.8 million recipients. During this time, we instituted the New York State Nutrition Improvement Project, which automatically enrolls elderly and disabled individuals who receive federal Supplemental Security Income (SSI) and live alone. Through this single initiative, we were able to connect almost 100,000 people with food stamp benefits, with more than half of those households residing in New York City. Also, we were ahead of the federal government in providing transitional food stamp benefits to recipients leaving cash assistance and transitioning into the workforce, the first state to do so even prior to federal options becoming available. To supplement these initiatives, New York adopted a number of significant simplified reporting options allowed under federal law. All of these actions were taken in partnership with New York City and HRA, have contributed to the substantial increase in enrollment, and have other states looking to New York as a model.

New York's noteworthy progress in the Food Stamp Program has drawn recognition from the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA). We have received awards over the past three years for increased program efficiency and access. This year, USDA awarded New York a \$9.8 million performance bonus for payment accuracy improvements in the Program. Recognizing that it was in large part the hard work of local districts that brought the State this recognition, we are in the process of allocating to them the bulk of these funds, including over \$4 million to New York City, for investment towards further increasing enrollment and easing the application process. These additional funds will make it easier for working families, and other underserved populations, to participate in the program throughout the State.

As proud as we are of our successes, we will not rest while there is so much more to be done. While food stamp participation has grown significantly in New York since 2002, we have seen a leveling over the past two years, with enrollment holding at a plateau of approximately 1.8 million, even though there are clearly more New Yorkers who are eligible. There are several

reasons for this plateau, and explanations as to why certain eligible groups decide not to participate. Research data show that, in New York, food stamp-eligible households with earnings were not participating at the same rate as other eligible households, and were also participating at a significantly lower rate than in many other states.

Why would families forego this benefit? First, because of higher average incomes in New York, working families are likely to get a smaller food stamp benefit, since Food Stamp standards are set by the federal government and are uniform nationwide. In particular, working families between 100 and 130 percent of the poverty level were the most likely to forego the benefits for which they are eligible, because of the relatively small monthly amount they would receive. Second, the hurdles involved in obtaining this benefit are perceived by many working families as too high to make participation worthwhile. These hurdles, or “transaction costs,” include an in-person application process that can mean taking unpaid time off from work, although HRA has done much to address this through its food stamp offices with extended hours. And third, studies have found that states like New York, with greater availability of publicly-funded food pantries and more generous state-funded tax credits for low-income households, were more likely to see lower participation among the working poor.

Given the significant number of working families in New York who are eligible for this work support but not accessing it, OTDA developed the targeted initiative I mentioned at the outset, the Working Families Food Stamp Initiative, to address these obstacles directly and thus ease the enrollment process. Our challenge was to design a program that would overcome the belief among many working families that it was not worth their time and effort to enroll in the Food Stamp Program. Governor Spitzer announced the Working Families Initiative in June, with the goal of enrolling an additional 100,000 low-income households, or approximately 215,000 individuals, by the end of 2008. The initiative targets households with at least one adult member working 30 or more hours per week, or two adults each working at least 20 hours a week, or earning the federal minimum wage equivalent for those hours.

Through a waiver recently approved by the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) that allows us to eliminate the need for a face-to-face application interview, households meeting the WFFSI criteria will soon be able to access the Food Stamp Program without having to take time off from work or spend time waiting in a traditional social services office to apply. While we did not

receive all of the relief we sought from the Federal Government, we believe waiving the face-to-face interview is the critical piece for working families. Combined with existing waivers and other program changes, we will roll out the initiative in 2008 using a staggered pilot approach across the State, including New York City.

Other major program changes underway include eliminating the food stamp resource limit. Through this implementation of categorical food stamp eligibility connected to eligibility for services funded by the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families program, we will encourage savings and asset accumulation by families who are often one emergency away from financial crisis. We are also expanding our pilot program to eliminate the face-to-face interview at recertification, under another USDA waiver. We are currently piloting telephone recertification in 11 districts across the state, including New York City in partnership with HRA, and we plan to implement it statewide next year. We are developing electronic application filing, expanding the use of Interactive Voice Recognition Systems for recertification, and providing outreach to eligible non-citizens, low English fluency and low literacy households. As demonstrated by this new, far-reaching initiative, the State is committed to using every tool available to help New Yorkers succeed on their path to sustained economic independence.

Another requirement of our current Food Stamp Program is finger imaging, which also requires an in-person visit by an applicant. Our goal in this initiative is to remove requirements that potentially conflict with employment and deter working families from applying for food stamps. We are firmly committed to aggressive anti-fraud efforts in New York State's Food Stamp Program, and I am happy to say that our record high payment accuracy rates confirm that the integrity of our program is as strong as it has ever been. We do not, however, have evidence to suggest that a finger imaging requirement for working families contributes significantly to program integrity, particularly in light of all the other anti-fraud mechanisms we have in place. Only four states, including New York, continue to require finger imaging of food stamp applicants.

HRA has told us that it is fully confident that it can meet our ambitious Working Families enrollment targets while maintaining a finger imaging requirement in New York City. The Food Stamp Program is a state-local partnership, and we have agreed to allow HRA to do so on a trial basis, under three conditions. First, it will take steps to make finger imaging as accessible and

efficient as possible for applicants. Second, it will cooperate with us in a six-month evaluation of the administrative and fraud prevention benefits of finger imaging. Third, and most important, it has committed to achieving New York City's proportional share -- 62,000 net additional households -- of the State's increased food stamp participation goal by the end of 2008. We will jointly monitor progress towards this goal over the next year.

We are well aware that program changes to increase access demand a parallel effort to get the word out to eligible households. We are proud to say that New York already conducts one of the most extensive Food Stamp outreach efforts in the country. Through the use of electronic and print media and a well-developed network of grass roots organizations, supported by significant help from annual USDA media campaigns in New York City, we have been able to achieve steady progress on food stamp enrollment. Now OTDA and the local districts must intensify that effort to let low-income New Yorkers know that some important rules have changed, and it will be much easier to access food assistance. We will also be crafting new approaches to reach those who have not responded to a traditional outreach message. I have just taped a new food stamp Public Service Announcement that will be playing on the radio in a 17-county area of the state over the holidays, our first PSA with a target audience of working families. [Play PSA]

I want to emphasize that this cannot be done by the state alone. Through the Working Families Initiative and other avenues, we are implementing changes that have been sought by many of our colleagues in the anti-hunger community for years, and we will be looking for vital assistance from them in getting the word about the Initiative, in all communities and among all community- and faith-based organizations with an interest in fighting hunger. We all have a stake in the success of this effort, and it will take committed cooperation and collaboration to achieve our goals.

I am also pleased to report that in this spirit, Governor Spitzer has created a New York Food Policy Council, chaired by Pat Hooker, Commissioner of the Department of Agriculture and Markets. The Council, of which I am a member, is in the process of setting goals and priorities, and I can assure you that maximizing enrollment in food and nutrition assistance programs will be at the top of its list. I am confident that through the work of the Council, new avenues will open up and new resources will be provided to help us connect with low-income New Yorkers who could benefit from nutrition assistance.

As we move forward with our own efforts to get more people connected to the Food Stamp Program, Congress is debating the reauthorization of the Program as part of the Farm Bill legislation. Earlier this year I traveled to Washington with Commissioner Hooker and Commissioner Grannis of the Department of Environmental Conservation, meeting with Senator Clinton and other members of the New York State delegation, to raise their awareness of New York's priorities for this critical legislation. OTDA continues to advocate aggressively for New York's interests as the bill moves forward, interests that include increasing benefit levels and simplifying the program. Increasing the benefit amount will help not only the neediest New Yorkers, but will enhance our efforts to encourage working families to use this work support. We urge you to join us in our advocacy as the legislation moves through Congress.

Thank you again for this opportunity to testify. I wish everyone a Happy Thanksgiving, and I welcome your questions.

## Oversight-Fighting Hunger in New York City

### Preventing Hunger among Homebound population

*A Testimony to General welfare Committee of City Council of New York*

*Wimal Pitigala, November 20, 2007*

Good morning council chair Mr. Bill de Blasio and council members. My name is Wimal Pitigala, Graduate student from CUNY Hunter College. I would like to thank you for giving me this opportunity presents my proposal on how to prevent hunger among home bound population...

"Hunger" is a well known and well debated issue in New York City. City of New York and nonprofit organizations have launched various programs to fight hunger in New York City. There is large number of organizations involved in this effort. City Of New York Human Resource Administration, Food Bank for New York City, City Harvest, City Meals on Wheels and Coalition for Hunger are some of these organizations. We cannot underestimate effectiveness of these programs. These programs have created very high level of awareness among all levels of New Yorkers from legislatures to general public.

Yet, there is a more vulnerable group of population to hunger. They are the home bound population. According available data there is an estimated 93867 home bound population in New York City. They represent all five boroughs. Brooklyn 30022(32%), Queens 24315(26%), Manhattan 19952 (21%) , Bronx 14839((16%) and Staten island 4739 (5%).o City Of New York Human Resource Administration records shows total of 62,458 home care cases as of August 2007. In New York City the oldest category of elderly is increasing at faster rate... Age of 85 years and older population increased by 18.7 percent as of 2000. The percentage of meal recipients 90 years and old has been increased to 6% over the years. As our elderly population grow older, they are more likely to become homebound. City Meals on wheels data indicates, 90% of the meal recipients use supportive devices for walking; cane (66%), walker (39%) and wheel chair (16%).

Hunger is more prevailing factor among home bound population due to several factors.

- Limited or inability to access food.
- Inability to cook and shop.
- Less flexibility of obtaining food compared to regular consumers.
- Insufficient income.
- Not receiving nutritious meals depending on physical and mental conditions.
- Their food choices are limited due to home bound status and medical conditions.
- Spend more money on food due to the fact they are not able to look for bargains. This minimizes the net value of food they purchase.



- Limited home delivery food services.
- Loneliness, According to City Meals on wheels data many recipients are isolated and lonely.

Home delivery food services are limited and average of 17 percent of the home bound population receives these services. Compared with other boroughs Staten Island has least home delivery food services. Brooklyn 16, Bronx 18%, Manhattan 20%, Queens 22% and Staten Island 10%. According to the recent survey by Food Bank of New York, Emergency Food Pantries provide 25% of their food home delivered. City Meals on Wheels program is one of the most effective program for homebound seniors. City Meals on wheels program is specifically operate for home bound seniors. To qualify for home-delivered meals, a person must be at least 60 years old and have a chronic physical or mental disability preventing them from shopping for food or preparing meals for themselves. I suggest these criteria's should be reconsidered in order to serve more home bound population. This will allow capturing those who are in the margin.

We cannot separate hunger from other life needs such as housing, clothing, health, mental and spiritual. Thus we have to work towards an integrated approach in order to fight hunger.

#### Solutions

1. Reconsider eligibility criteria for home bound individuals to receive food stamps, especially eligible income level should bring to a higher bracket.
2. Create specialized units in each borough to service home bound population. This will help to address food needs of home bound population efficiently and effectively. These units can be set up within exiting Human Resource Administration structure.
3. Establish door to door nutritional counseling service.
4. Constantly monitor home bound population's food and other needs
5. Make home visits to assess their needs and living conditions
6. Closely work with community organizations and local business leaders to secure more food services.
7. Conduct a comprehensive survey to measure number of homebound population, their living conditions, food and nutrition needs.

#### Sources

1. "Just Getting By", An investigative study of the Office of public Advocate of City Of New York
2. City of New York Human Resources Administration, HRA FACTS. September 2007
3. City Meals on Wheels, <http://www.citymeals.org/foodforthought/fact>
4. Food Bank for New York City, NYC Hunger Safety Net, Food poverty focus. 2007



## TESTIMONY

Robert Doar, Commissioner  
Human Resources Administration/Department of Social Services

*Hearing entitled: "Oversight- Fighting Hunger in New York City"*

Meeting of the General Welfare Committee  
New York City Council

*November 20, 2007*

Good morning. I am Robert Doar, Commissioner of the Human Resources Administration and I am pleased to be here today to discuss present accomplishments and upcoming initiatives of our Agency's food assistance programs.

Joining me today is HRA Deputy Commissioner, Cecile Noel who administers our Emergency Food Assistance Program and Ben Thomases, the City's Food Policy Coordinator who has worked hard at addressing so many of the food issues facing our City. I am also glad to see that Commissioner Hansell of the State Office of Temporary and Disability Assistance (OTDA) was here today as we are key partners with the state in many of our efforts.

HRA's work on food assistance continues and expands on the successful strategies that are part of Mayor Bloomberg's goal of combating poverty. Food assistance is an often important support for families as we help them strive for self-sufficiency through employment and work supports. Today, I would like to highlight our efforts on both food stamps as well as emergency food assistance that continue to improve and make a difference in the lives of so many New York City families.

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

Since 1983, the Emergency Food Assistance Program (EFAP) has played a critical role in supporting the efforts of the food assistance community here in New York City. EFAP coordinates the distribution of non-perishable commodities to over 500 emergency food programs (currently, 375 food pantries and 143 soup kitchens). There are 170 member programs in Brooklyn; 81 in The Bronx; 118 in Manhattan; 129 in Queens; and 20 programs in Staten Island. Every year, these soup kitchens and food pantries provide nutritious food that helps low-income New Yorkers stretch their dollars.

### ***Allocation of Limited Resources***

The annual budget for the purchase of commodities is \$7.6 million. A contract is maintained with the Food Bank for New York City to warehouse and distribute the commodities to EFAP members. EFAP provides an average of \$300,000 in funding for administrative grants, of which \$100,000 is City Council discretionary funds, to reimburse a portion of the non-food related costs that emergency food programs incur

during the year. In addition, for the third year in a row, EFAP is administering \$500,000 in City Council funds for enhancement grants to buy refrigerators, freezers, shelving and other goods to allow expansion of the capacity of the emergency feeding programs. While we are cognizant of shortages around the City, you should know that when a program calls us about a specific need, EFAP has a process that ensures that we can respond to the reported shortage. Usually, a delivery can be arranged in a timely manner. To address the shortage in the long term, the Mayor wrote Washington urging that the federal funding for the emergency feeding programs be increased along with an annual inflationary increase.

But we here in New York City can't wait for federal support when pressing need is right in front of us. That is why, this morning Mr. Thomases and I announced Mayor Bloomberg's decision to dedicate \$1 million of the City's Food Stamp bonus money to increase city funding for food for the Emergency Food Assistance Program. This one time allocation of funds will help food pantries and soup kitchens throughout the city restore their supplies despite uncertain Federal support and rising costs.

### ***Nutritional Standards***

Over the past five years, EFAP has improved the nutritional quality of the food that is distributed: we provide low fat 1% milk instead of whole milk, offer whole grain commodities, have tuna in water, not in oil, and supply fruits in light syrup that will be in natural fruit juice in the coming year. In addition, we are compliant with the Department of Health and Mental Hygiene's trans fat initiative, and have also increased the number of low sodium products. As part of the Food Policy Task Force we are working to further improve on the nutritional quality of the EFAP commodities.

### **The Food Stamp and Nutrition Outreach Program**

The Food Stamp and Nutrition Outreach Program specializes in educating the public about the Food Stamp Program and general nutrition. The HRA team of eight staff disseminates eligibility information and assists with the food stamp application process throughout the five boroughs of New York City. Their outreach efforts have proven so successful that we are expanding the number of staff.

Outreach is regularly conducted at soup kitchens and food pantries, hospitals, Women, Infants and Children (WIC) Program sites, senior centers and public libraries. Currently, the unit visits 65 sites monthly on a recurring basis. We also collaborate with community-based organizations and the City Council to provide training to constituents, staff, and other non-profit agencies. I am particularly proud of our staff's outreach efforts and with me here are Tara Walker and Millie Rodriguez from our Food Stamp and Nutrition Outreach Program who were instrumental in the success of one of our HRA pilots. In fact, it was recently awarded a national Hunger Champion Award by the United States Department of Agriculture, the federal agency responsible for overseeing the Food Stamp program. This pilot, at two Emergency Food Assistance Program multi-service sites: the West Side Campaign Against Hunger in Manhattan, and St. John's Bread and Life in Brooklyn, involved training program social service staff on the eligibility guidelines and the application process of the Food Stamp Program. These programs were then linked to two local Food Stamp offices. This collaborative effort improved the quality of Food Stamp applications submitted and increased participation in the program. In fact, more than 70% of individuals screened through this program received food stamps.

Based on the success of this pilot, HRA plans to expand this program. Before the end of this fiscal year, the staff will be taking applications in the field, with the help of laptops loaded with the food stamp application connected to HRA's paperless office system.

### **The Food Stamp Program**

This leads me to the Food Stamp Program where I would like to start by mentioning some of our new initiatives and then provide you an update on some of our ongoing work.

### ***Redesigning HRA's Food Stamp Administration***

To reflect the importance of the Food Stamp Program and to ensure it receives the management attention it deserves, in July of this year we created a unified management structure to manage the Food Stamp-only offices and to be the administrative unit for the Agency's Food Stamp policy and operations. The Food Stamps program had previously been split apart between other offices and programs such as our employment and rental assistance programs. And, it did not have a single place of importance within our

management structure. The new Food Stamp division is headed by Jean Coyle, who is here today, and who has over three decades of Food Stamp and client service experience. Ms. Coyle understands the needs of our workers and what it takes to make our offices work in a client-centered way. Our revised structure will ensure the program's present and future needs are raised directly to me and to my senior administrative staff.

### ***The Working Families Initiative***

One of our current priorities is to implement for New York City the State's Working Families Initiative. We are a pilot district for Working Families and strongly endorse the program's focus on providing food assistance to working New Yorkers. While many of the details of the program are being worked out between HRA and the Office of Temporary and Disability Assistance, the program design will allow households in which one person is working at least 30 hours weekly to complete many elements of the application process without having to come to a food stamp office. Individuals will be able to submit the application and supporting documents through the mail or by fax and can then have the federally required interview over the phone, without coming to a Food Stamp office.

### ***The Importance of Finger Imaging***

While Working Families applicants will not have to apply for Food Stamp benefits at an HRA office, they will be required to come in very briefly to be finger imaged. Finger imaging is a simple process which helps ensure the integrity of our overall Food Stamp Program and has been successful in avoiding the duplication of payments to the same recipient, whether due to intentional fraud, administrative errors, or other reasons. In New York City, from 1998, when finger-imaging was first implemented for non-cash assistance food stamp clients, through 2006 there were 11,049 actions taken on cases for anomalies found through this practice. In calendar year 2006, 31 cases of fraud involving non-cash food stamp clients were detected by HRA through imaging. More important than detecting fraud and administrative errors, finger imaging is also an essential deterrent to potential fraud. Prior to the implementation of the Automated Finger Imaging System (AFIS) in New York City, multiple investigations revealed that fraud was prevalent in the benefit programs, particularly involving multiple case openings and multiple identities. That problem has been virtually eliminated by finger imaging.

To ensure applicants can be imaged as conveniently and expeditiously as possible, as part of Working Families, we are expanding both the available locations and the times during the day when these applicants can be imaged. These enhancements, at minimal cost, include allowing an individual to come into any HRA Food Stamp office in the City to be imaged. There is one office in each borough open on Saturday and at least one office in the city is open until 7 PM each evening. Further we will establish an off-hours finger imaging location by appointment at the agency's 250 Church Street office in Manhattan.

### ***The Facilitated Application Pilot***

When implemented early next year, the Working Families process will be one way for applicants to complete the most time intensive portion of the Food Stamp application without coming to our office, but it is not the only method. Since the Council's last hearing devoted to this subject one year ago, HRA with the assistance of several community partners, has implemented a facilitated application process under a federal grant. This process, now in place in at least one participating soup kitchen or pantry in every borough, allows individuals to submit applications and all the federally required supporting material electronically, prior to arrival at an HRA office. The result is more complete applications and less time spent at the Food Stamp office. More than 600 individuals have submitted applications through this process and the feedback from both applicants and the participating community organizations has been very positive. Over 80% have been determined eligible.

### ***Paperless Food Stamp Offices***

In addition to the facilitated application process, we are also making a major technological upgrade in our food stamp offices. All Food Stamp offices are implementing the Paperless Office System. This System allows for easier processing of Food Stamp applications and re-certifications, electronic storage of case records and better management reports to ensure our offices are functioning efficiently. The System is already being used in nearly half our offices and under an aggressive roll out schedule will be in place at all offices by next fall. As part of the system's implementation, all food stamp staff who handle applicants and recipients will have their own computer to

properly handle their cases. This investment in our Food Stamp offices benefits our staff as well as those we serve.

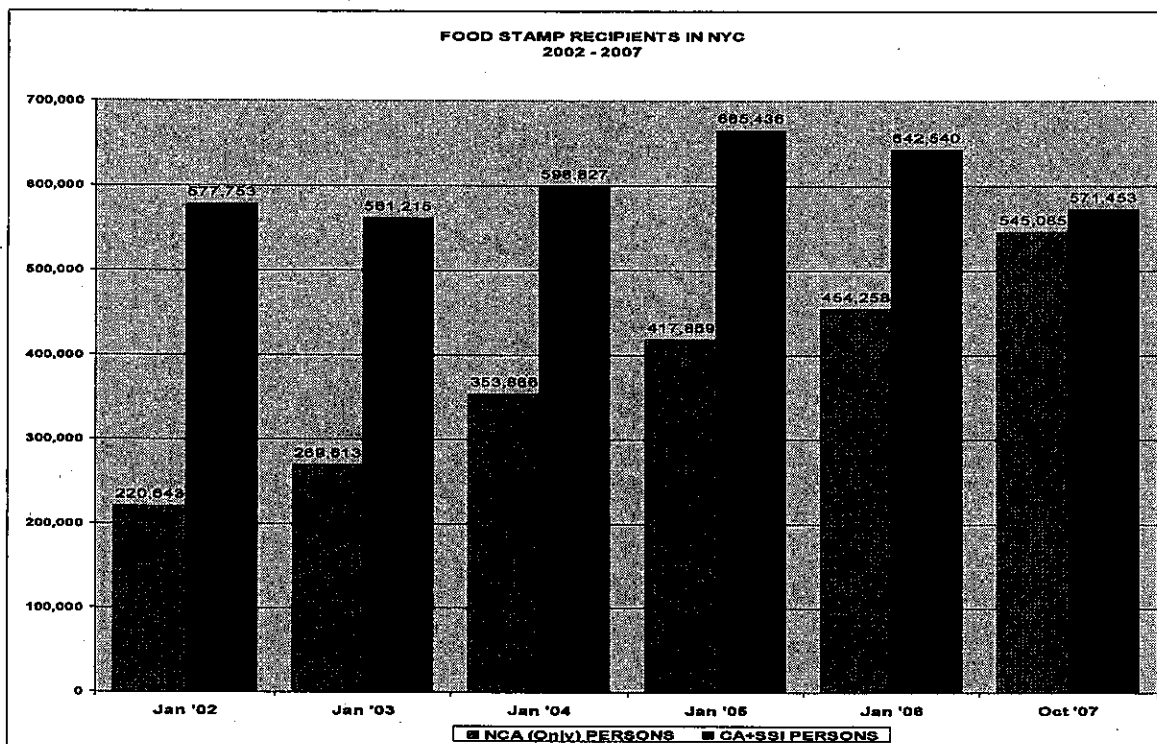
### ***Telephone Recertification Interviews***

Another approach we are taking to the traditional food stamp office based interview is conducting telephone recertification interviews. While the agency has long conducted recertification by mail for nearly 200,000 food stamp recipients, we have not previously conducted large scale telephone recertification interviews. Starting this month, nearly all recipients in two food stamp offices, the East End Center in Manhattan and the Fordham Center in the Bronx, will be able to have their traditional office based recertification interview conducted over the phone. Individuals who choose this option will talk to an HRA worker from their home, office or other convenient location. Any required documents can be mailed, faxed or dropped at the office. Telephone interviews will allow individuals to more easily comply with the federal recertification requirements and should also make the program more efficient.

### ***Getting Food Stamps to More New Yorkers***

The initiatives mentioned above are really towards one end, to ensure we are assisting those New Yorkers who need assistance to feed their families. Today more than 1.1 million New Yorkers receive Food Stamp benefits, an increase of nearly 40% since Mayor Bloomberg took office. In fact, over 300,000 more New Yorkers receive Food Stamps each month today than did in January 2002. While this growth alone shows a commitment to improving access to the Food Stamp program, the true impact of the administration's efforts can be seen in the increase in those receiving Food Stamp benefits alone, without also receiving cash assistance. These programs, where the outreach and improvement efforts have been primarily focused, have resulted in a doubling of the non-cash assistance Food Stamp program during the Bloomberg administration in the past five and a half years. The portion of the Food Stamp program serving individuals not receiving cash assistance or SSI, a group that includes working New Yorkers, has risen by nearly 150%. In the past year, from November 2006 to October 2007, the population of those receiving Food Stamps alone, without cash welfare or SSI, has increased nearly every month, growing to an increase of more than 60,000.





These substantial enrollment growths would not have been possible without a commitment to eliminate barriers and improve the Food Stamp program. These improvements have been recognized by the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA). In the recently published food stamp participation figures, New York State's rate increased significantly, rising from 54% to a 61% participation figure. While we continue to believe these figures do not include all the relevant factors, New York's substantial increase from 2004 to 2005, one of the highest growth rates in the country, clearly demonstrates the impact of our work. Further, these statistics do not go beyond 2005 and so the substantial growth we have had since then will only be reflected in future participation figures. USDA also recently awarded New York State \$10 million, of which the City received four million dollars, for improvement in Food Stamp payment accuracy.

I also want to bring to your attention the recently released Household Food Security Report by USDA which showed that in 2006 even though the national food insecurity rate increased slightly, the food insecurity rate for New York State was not only lower than the national rate of 11.3% but declined slightly from 10% to 9.8%. This rate is also a significant decline from the state food insecurity rate of 11.9% in 1998. Once again this

declining trend in the state's food insecurity rate clearly reflects New York City's efforts to enhance food and nutrition assistance programs.

The progress on Food Stamps has come as a result of initiatives such as the shortened Food Stamp application, translating application and other materials into more languages, longer office hours, an automatic Food Stamp enrollment process for individuals in receipt of SSI and an automated approach to those who have obtained employment and are moving off cash assistance. We have continued to build upon these efforts for additional strategies we can use to ensure that our program is accessible to all eligible New Yorkers who want food assistance.

### ***The Federal Reauthorization Process***

New opportunities to further simplify food assistance and make it more accessible to families may also present themselves as Congress is now debating the reauthorization of most food and nutrition programs including Food Stamps, and the Emergency Food and Nutrition Program. I understand the City Council has submitted recommendations in this debate, many of which we are in agreement. Like the Council, we support increasing the minimum benefit, restoring benefits to legal immigrants, simplifying the process, and increasing funding to The Emergency Food Assistance Program (TEFAP). However, we are very concerned about provisions that prohibit the use of non-government employees, including staff of non-profit organizations, to facilitate applications and we are concerned about possible limitations placed on the use of finger-imaging. However, I understand that final changes are not likely until next year so we will have time to do everything we can to influence the final outcome.

In closing, I would like to say that HRA is committed to ensuring that food assistance continues to be a vital, easy to access, economic support for low-income working New Yorkers.

# **Public Hearing on Food Stamps Recertification and Hunger in New York City**

**New York City Council Committee on General Welfare**

**November 20, 2007**



**Testimony Prepared by:**

**Rebecca Widom**

***Director of Research***

**Homelessness Outreach and Prevention Project**

**Urban Justice Center**

**123 William Street, 16<sup>th</sup> Floor, New York, NY 10038**

**<http://www.urbanjustice.org/hopp/>**

**646-602-5600**

Good morning. My name is Rebecca Widom and I am the Director of Research with the Homelessness Outreach and Prevention Project of the Urban Justice Center. The Urban Justice Center serves New York City's most vulnerable residents through a combination of direct legal service, systemic advocacy, and community education. The mission of the Homelessness Outreach and Prevention Project (HOPP) is to advocate for economic justice for no and low income New Yorkers. Using a legal framework, HOPP conducts direct service, litigation, research and policy advocacy to preserve and expand access to public benefits programs and ensure government accountability. Founded in 1984 under the name Legal Action Center for the Homeless, HOPP has become a leader in the field of public benefits advocacy. Thank you for allowing me to testify today.

**I. The Food Stamps Program is New York City's and the nation's first line of defense against hunger.**

The Food Stamps Program puts food on the table for low income New Yorkers and federal aid in the local economy. The Urban Justice Center's study of the enrollment process found that food stamps could increase household income by an average of 20% for eligible non-participants.<sup>1</sup> The USDA has estimated that each dollar invested in the Program returns nearly two dollars in economic activity.<sup>2</sup> There is public consensus on the need to increase participation in the Food Stamp Program.

**II. Food stamps participation remains low, because of direct and hidden costs of program participation.**

Given the benefits and public consensus, why are hundreds of thousands of New Yorkers still eligible for food stamps, but not receiving them? Direct and hidden costs discourage participation. Direct costs include subway fare to get to the food stamps office, document fees (e.g. to replace a lost birth certificate), child care costs and lost wages while waiting in the office. Hidden costs include the time lost that could have been spent on other tasks such as cleaning the

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<sup>1</sup> Widom, et al. (2006, January). *A Better Recipe for New York City: Less Red Tape, More Food on the Table*. New York City: Urban Justice Center. Retrieved on November 13, 2007 from [http://www.urbanjustice.org/pdf/publications/better\\_recipe\\_full\\_rpt.pdf](http://www.urbanjustice.org/pdf/publications/better_recipe_full_rpt.pdf)

<sup>2</sup> Hanson, K. & Golan, E. (2002, August). Effects of Changes in Food Stamp Expenditures Across the U.S. Economy (Food Assistance and Nutrition Research Report Number 26-6). Washington, DC: Economic Research Service U.S. Department of Agriculture, 1. Retrieved November 13, 2007, from <http://www.ers.usda.gov/publications/fanrr26/fanrr26-6>

house or helping kids with their homework and the emotional impact of humiliating interactions with staff at the food stamps office.

There are two key points where we can look to reduce the costs of participating in the Food Stamps Program: access (the enrollment process where clients first establish eligibility), and retention (the recertification process where they must periodically document ongoing eligibility).

### **III. There has been some progress on reducing access costs, but much work remains.**

In January 2006, the Urban Justice Center released a report analyzing food stamps access for 1,482 outreach clients in New York City.<sup>3</sup> We found that the food stamps application process was unnecessarily burdensome. Even knowing how much they could receive—an average of a 20% raise—only 42% of clients enrolled. Working clients were even less likely to enroll, disproportionately affected by direct and hidden costs. However, easing the application process helped increase enrollment rates.

Since then, HRA has made some progress on easing the application process, but much work remains. HRA has expanded office hours by 2.5 hours per week in one office per borough, but we need to ensure that full services including application and recertification interviews are available in all extended hours. HRA has initiated the paperless office system, to improve efficiency and reduce wait times, but needs to expand beyond the pilot stage to serve all clients. HRA has improved publicity for extended-hours offices on their web-site and 311. Finally, HRA has experimented with allowing a few clients to enroll with help from nonprofits instead of office visits, but needs to fully expand the policy waiving face-to-face interviews.

### **IV. In September of this year, the Urban Justice Center released a report on retention.<sup>4</sup>**

This study describes the direct and hidden costs outreach clients encountered in the food stamps recertification process. Over 36,000 Food Card Access Project and Food Force clients have enrolled since 2003. This study analyzes administrative records from HRA following 9,547 of

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<sup>3</sup> Widom, et al. (2006, January).

<sup>4</sup> Widom et al. (2007, September). *Keeping Food on the Table: Challenges to Food Stamps Retention in New York City*. New York: Urban Justice Center. Retrieved November 13, 2007 from <http://www.urbanjustice.org/pdf/projects/KeepingFoodOnTheTable.pdf>

these clients for 20 months after they were prescreened as eligible for food stamps. In addition, the study draws on interviews with 88 randomly selected clients.

**V. In 20 months of follow-up, most clients received at least 12 months of benefits.**

Most clients successfully recertified at least once, and clients like Ms. Lewis<sup>5</sup> were grateful for the assistance. She told us “It’s a great help. It’s a little, but it’s something for the kids, for me.”

However, success at recertification is to be expected. Recertification is designed to be simpler and less costly than enrollment. The City only needs to check on changes since application, not redo the entire process. Further, the complexity of the enrollment process screens out those who would have the most problems navigating the bureaucracy at recertification, so we expect clients who make it to recertification to be more successful than the average New Yorker in need.

**VI. Still, most cases were closed at least once in the follow-up period, and 81% of case closures had no finding of financial ineligibility.**

The majority of clients in this study (61%) had a case closure at least once within the follow-up period. Further, HRA data indicates that only 19% of these cases were closed for reasons like “excess income” or “excess resources”—reasons that indicate that the client was no longer financially eligible for food stamps. 81% had no finding of financial ineligibility.

Instead, about half of the case closures (53%) were attributed to missed appointments. As in our study of the enrollment process, health problems and work schedules led to missed appointments at recertification. Ms. Cruz, for example a single mom and child care provider from the Bronx, had to leave work and spend \$20 each time she had to visit the food stamps office. She told us “I take care of a girl. I have to leave her with someone when I go out, because I can’t take her with me, because one doesn’t know the time.” Similarly, Ms. Tucker, an elderly woman from Brooklyn explained “No. I didn’t go. I didn’t renew it. I was sick.... I’m aching with pains so much it goes to my head.”

Another 13% of case closures were attributed to missing documents. However, we know that HRA sometimes lost documents and closed cases over documents that clients had taken the time to submit. This was Ms. Ramirez’ experience. She brought everything but her income tax return

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<sup>5</sup> Pseudonyms are used throughout this testimony in order to protect client confidentiality.

to her recertification appointment, and brought tax papers to the office the very next day. A week later, Ms. Ramirez called to check on her case. Her caseworker told her “No, that’s not in the computer.” Similarly, Ms. de la Paz visited HRA on at least three separate occasions. “The social worker hadn’t gotten the paperwork. Three times I called.... What else do they want from me? They have asked me for so much paperwork!”

## **VII. Most of the closed cases were eventually reopened, but only after clients and the City lost out on federal aid.**

Most clients whose cases were closed (57%) ended up reapplying and getting their cases opened again. This suggests that many clients remained financially eligible even after their cases were closed. Unfortunately, the average client missed two or more months of benefits in the process. Understandably, USDA has shown that clients in this position are at increased risk for hunger.<sup>6</sup> In addition to the human impact and health risks of food insecurity, each time the City also wasted time and money redoing the entire application process.

Ms. Clemen is one such client. She missed her recertification appointment, simply because she could not visit the food stamps office on weekdays. She explained “I have to apply again, because for recertification they don’t see people on Saturday.”

## **VIII. Recommendations**

Since September, the City and State have made some progress on recommendations from our research, still much work remains.

- Expand access to telephone interviews. Ms. Amiri told us “I wish they’d do the same thing [as] with Medicaid. They [Medicaid] just do it through the mail.” Since September, New York City has finally entered the state phone recertification program, at two centers.<sup>7</sup> Full roll-out of this program remains to be seen.

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<sup>6</sup> Nord, M. (2007, May) *Characteristics of Low-Income Households With Very Low Food Security*. Washington, DC: United States Department of Agriculture, Economic Research Service. p.14. “Food stamp leavers.” Retrieved on November 13, 2007 from <http://www.ers.usda.gov/publications/eib25/eib25.pdf>

<sup>7</sup> New York City Human Resources Administration. (September 27, 2007.) Policy Bulletin #07-122-OPE “Special Mailing to food stamp telephone recertification households.” Retrieved on November 13, 2007 from [http://onlineresources.wnyc.net/nychra/docs/\\_07-122-ope.pdf](http://onlineresources.wnyc.net/nychra/docs/_07-122-ope.pdf)

- Reduce unnecessary verification requirements. The federal government does not require clients to recreate nor caseworkers to review a full set of application documents at recertification. The paperless office system could reduce problems with lost documents, but has not yet been fully implemented across the City and its effectiveness has yet to be proven.
- Require less frequent recertification. New York State can allow for annual recertification, rather than requiring working clients to repeat the process every six months. New York City could apply for an ABAWD waiver in order to avoid requiring visits from clients with no income every three months. Clients would likely miss out on fewer months of benefits.
- Offset direct and hidden costs of applying and recertifying for Food Stamps. New York City is using incentive programs to encourage desired behaviors among poor people. A flat \$10 or \$20 could encourage low income New Yorkers to complete arduous and uncertain enrollment and recertification processes.

## **IX. Conclusion**

Public consensus supports increasing participation in the Food Stamps Program, the nation's premier nutrition program. However, direct and hidden costs discourage participation. HRA must continue to improve its process in order to promote participation in the Food Stamps Program. Addressing barriers at access and retention are both necessary parts of the solution.

Thank you for your consideration of this testimony. The Urban Justice Center looks forward to renewed efforts to reduce hunger and improve participation in the Food Stamps Program.





**Testimony of Joel Berg, Executive Director  
New York City Coalition Against Hunger**

**Before Hearing of the New York City Council  
Committee on General Welfare  
Regarding Hunger in New York City**

**November 20, 2007**

**Introduction and Overview**

Good morning. I'm Joel Berg, Executive Director of the New York City Coalition Against Hunger (NYCCAH), which represents the more than 1,200 food pantries and soup kitchens in New York City, and the more than 1.3 million low-income New Yorkers forced to obtain food from these charities. This testimony is submitted on their behalf.

First we want to thank the General Welfare Committee and Chairman Bill de Blasio for your continued leadership in fighting hunger and poverty. We also thank Council Speaker Christine Quinn for making hunger reduction such a central part of the whole Council's agenda.

**Hunger and Food Insecurity Are Again Increasing in New York State and City**

I regret to report that the Coalition's annual survey of soup kitchens and food pantries, which we just released, found that the number of people who were forced to use these programs soared in New York City in 2007, while food stocks drastically declined, forcing fully half of these programs to ration food.

The Coalition's survey estimated that pantry and kitchen use increased by 20% in 2007, on top of the 11% increase in 2006 estimated by last year's survey. The Coalition said that the accelerating increase in hunger provided one of the first concrete signs that the local economy has started a significant slow-down.

Fully 59% of agencies – a record number – said they lacked the resources to meet their growing demand in 2007, a sharp increase from the 48% who lacked such resources in 2006.

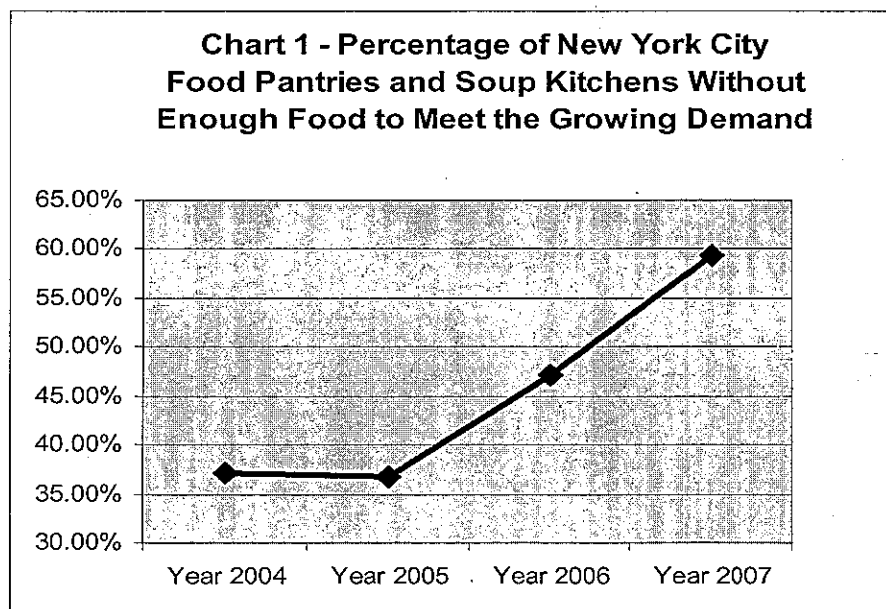
The Coalition's full survey report, entitled: *Rising Food Lines, Sinking Economy: Increase in NYC Hunger is Early Proof of Economic Slow-Down*, is available at [www.nyccah.org](http://www.nyccah.org).

According to the Coalition's estimate based on federal data for 2006 at the state level, 1.3 million New Yorkers – one in six city residents – still live in households who are food insecure, meaning they cannot afford an adequate and consistent supply of food. New York City must pay \$2.65 billion per year due to health care spending, reduced worker productivity and other spending caused by this high level of food insecurity, according to Coalition calculations based on a national study by Dr. Larry Brown of Harvard University.

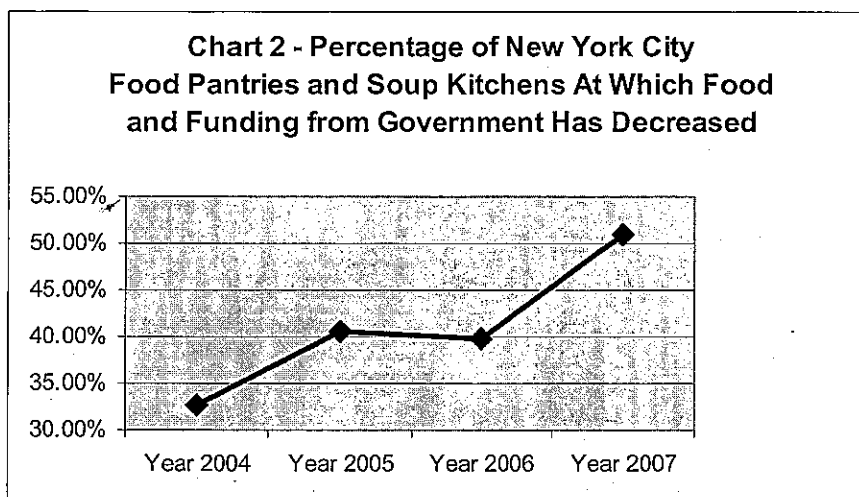
Given that hunger continued to increase in the city even when the economy was still strong last year, it is no wonder that now, when the economy is weakening, lines at pantries and kitchens are getting even worse. This proves the old adage that when the economy gets a cold, people in poverty get pneumonia.

To make matters even worse, federal cut-backs have slashed the remaining food stocks at these feeding programs. The Administration has cut the amount of federal commodities provided to the city's pantries and kitchens by the Food Bank for New York City by 12 million pounds this year. For the 1.3 million food insecure New Yorkers – many of whom are working hard but just don't earn enough to feed their families – this will be a particularly cruel holiday season.

As Chart 1 below demonstrates, fully 59% of agencies – a record number – said they lacked the resources to meet their growing demand in 2007, a sharp increase from the 48% who lacked such resources in 2006.



Also, as Chart 2 below illustrates, likely because of the large cuts in federal commodities, the percentage of agencies at which government food and funding decreased went from 33% in 2003 to 51% in 2007.



Other findings of the survey:

- 81% of responding agencies reported feeding an increased number of people in the last 12 months. 40% said this number increased “greatly.”
- Of the populations that increased “greatly” at responding agencies, the fastest growth was seen among families with children, immigrants, and senior citizens.
- 80% of responding agencies reported feeding an increased number of families with children over the last 12 months (versus 4% reporting a decrease, and 16% reporting no change).
- 71% of responding agencies reported feeding an increased number of seniors over the last 12 months (versus 6% reporting a decrease, and 23% reporting no change).
- 64% of responding agencies reported feeding an increased number of working people over the last 12 months (versus 11% reporting a decrease, and 25% reporting no change).
- 83% of responding agencies believe that their need will continue to increase in the next six months. 34% of responding agencies believe it will increase “greatly.”
- 53% of respondents reported using their own personal money “often,” “always,” or sometimes to support their feeding programs.
- While it is by definition impossible to fully count the number of times people were not served because they were turned away, the Coalition’s rough estimate, based on survey responses, indicates that 52% more people were turned-away in 2006 than in 2007.

- 90% of responding agencies said they would like to improve the nutritional quality of the food they distribute. When asked to indicate the top way to accomplish that goal, 53% needed more fresh fruits and vegetables, 35% wanted more nutritious canned and dried foods, 7% wanted nutrition education for their clients, and 5% wanted nutrition education for their staffs.

### **Borough-to-Borough Comparisons**

<b>Borough</b>	<b>% of agencies at which demand for food increased</b>	<b>% of agencies at which the amount of food was not enough to meet growing demand</b>	<b>% of agencies forced to ration food by limiting portion size, reducing hours of operation, and/or turning people away</b>
The Bronx	88%	65%	54%
Brooklyn	87%	67%	52%
Manhattan	76%	36%	30%
Queens	83%	76%	67%
Staten Island	86%	29%	57%

### **Year-to-Year Comparisons**

	2007	2006	2005	2004
% of responding programs that are faith-based, religiously affiliated, or physically located in a religious institution	73%	74%	72%	71%
% of responding programs that are soup kitchens only	9%	10%	11%	10%
% of responding programs that are food pantries only	65%	65%	64%	66%
% of responding programs that are both food pantries and soup kitchens	21%	18%	21%	21%
% of responding agencies that don't have enough food to meet the current demand	59%	47%	37%	37%
% of responding agencies forced to ration food	50%	44%	47%	50%
% of responding agencies at which government money and food decreased in the past year	51%	40%	41%	33%
% of responding agencies at which overall money and food decreased in the past year	50%	41%	41%	39%
% that received support from The Emergency Food Assistance Program (TEFAP), funded by the Federal government	56%	81%	70%	75%
% that received support from the Emergency Food and Shelter Program (ESFP), which is funded by the Federal government.	49%	45%	56%	41%
% that received support from the Hunger Prevention and Nutrition Assistance Program (HPNAP) program, which is funded by the State	80%	81%	84%	78%
% that received support from the Emergency Food Assistance Program (EFAP), which is funded by the City	75%	73%	70%	64%

The Coalition's full survey report, entitled: *Rising Food Lines, Sinking Economy: Increase in NYC Hunger is Early Proof of Economic Slow-Down*, is available at [www.nyccah.org](http://www.nyccah.org).

### **Food Stamps Program Participation is Increasing in New York City**

This season's only bright side was that participation in the Food Stamp Program has finally started rising significantly in New York City to meet the increasing need. Food Stamp Program participation in New York City rose by 6,125 people in September, reaching a level of 1,117,295 people, the highest level since December 1997. Program participation is now 318,899-people higher than when Mayor Bloomberg took office. As a consequence of the increased participation, low-income New Yorkers now receive \$43 million per month – \$525 million per year – more today in food stamps benefits than they did in January of 2002.

Three factors contributed to this increase: expanded outreach; access improvements by the Federal, State, and City governments; and the weakening economy. Our greatest wish is that more New Yorkers would be able to earn enough through full-time work so that they no longer need food stamps, but until that time, we are grateful that the program is starting to again work as it was supposed to by expanding during tough times. Without this food stamps increase, the problem at feeding programs would be even more catastrophic.

### **Food Stamps Paperless Office System (POS) Project**

One of the most promising recent developments regarding Food Stamp Program access in New York City has been the start-up of the Food Stamps Paperless Office System (POS) Project, funded by a grant from USDA as well as City funds. Part of the new system focuses on HRA's internal systems in select offices, enabling HRA to electronically maintain copies of all forms and documentation submitted by applicants. We hope this internal improvement significantly reduces the instances in which key paperwork is lost, and also allows HRA employees to work more efficiently.

The other part of the Food Stamps POS project – in which people are able to apply for food stamps benefits online at pilot food pantries and soup kitchens – is even more exciting to advocates. The New York City Coalition Against Hunger is proud that we are a key partner in this project with HRA, along with FoodChange, now a subsidiary of the Food Bank for New York City.

This second part of the project has now been implemented at all five of the original pilot soup kitchens and food pantries, which were suggested by the Coalition and approved by HRA and FoodChange. The sites are as follows: Part of the Solution (POTS) in the Fordham neighborhood of the Bronx; Yorkville Common Pantry in the East Harlem neighborhood of Manhattan; Project Hospitality in the Stapleton neighborhood of Staten Island; Hanson Place Campaign Against Hunger in the Ft. Greene neighborhood of Brooklyn; and the East River Development Alliance in the Long Island City neighborhood of Queens.

Here's how the project works: People from the target neighborhoods who are likely eligible for food stamp benefits are assigned by the nonprofit groups to a specific time slot at a pilot agency. Nonprofit employees help the people to submit their applications online at the site during that time slot. At all five of the sites, the nonprofit employees are FoodChange employees, but POTS uses its own employees to perform this function at POTS on some days. All necessary supporting documentation is also scanned by the nonprofit employees into the HRA POS system on site.

If applicants qualify for the hardship waiver as currently defined by HRA for this project – if they live in a household in which at least one person is working 20 hours or more, at least one person is disabled, or at least one person is a senior citizen – then they do not have to visit an HRA office at all and their follow-up interview will be conducted by telephone. If they do not qualify for a hardship waiver, they must physically visit an HRA office, but the office should already have their necessary information in an electronic file so interviews should, theoretically, be conducted much more rapidly than a typical food stamps interview.

In both the cases in which the person qualifies for the waiver and conducts his or her interview with HRA over the phone and the cases in which the person must visit a HRA office in person, the final determination as to food stamps eligibility is made by an HRA employee. This ensures compliance with Federal law, which mandates that only government employees may make the final benefit determination. This is an important distinction, for this project fully engages nonprofit groups in the kind of outreach work at which we are expert, but does not privatize the essential government function of determining which people obtain government benefits and how much they receive.

Given that the final pilot sites only became fully operational in July 2007 – only four months ago – we can not yet draw any definitive conclusions about this project. Furthermore, I will leave it up to HRA's testimony to provide any hard data about the project. However, permit me to provide some very preliminary, general impressions about the success of the project:

- Food stamps applicants very much appreciate the opportunity to have alternative sites at which to apply for benefits. Some of these sites are closer to their homes, and there is a perception of some – rightly or wrongly – that they receive more sensitive treatment from nonprofit workers at these sites than they do from government employees.
- The participating pantries and kitchens are extraordinarily pleased to be able to provide this additional assistance to their clients/customers.
- The project is working. Out of the first 403 people using the system from the pilot sites whose applications were processed through to completion, more than 75% started receiving food stamps benefits. That is a far higher percentage than for any other food stamps outreach project with which I am familiar.
- HRA has gone to great lengths to ensure the success of this project. Given that, on occasion, I have been critical of certain of the practices of HRA, I want to be particularly vocal in thanking the agency for their effective work on this critical project.

- It is a significant challenge for the nonprofit partners to fill enough application slots at each site to keep the application staff busy, but not to fill so many slots that applicants have to wait long times before the staff can get to them.
- Many application submissions still take an hour or more from start to finish. This provides further evidence of the need for the Federal, State, and City governments to make additional legislative and administrative improvements to streamline the requirements for applicants.
- This project is extraordinarily labor-intensive for the non-profit partners, particularly those that are directly facilitating the applications. In the near future, once we are even more confident that the five pilot sites are working at or very near their full capacity, the Coalition would very much like to expand this project to other pantries and kitchens, as well as other potentially effective application sites, such as WIC clinics, hospitals, supermarkets, community fairs, libraries, farmers' markets, senior citizen centers, etc. However, I must be very clear that the nonprofit partners would require a significant infusion of new resources to carry out such additional work.

In sum, early indications are that the Food Stamps POS Project is working extremely well, and can indeed become a model for the rest of the state and nation. We again thank HRA for its work on this initiative, as well as the Council for insistently pushing the City to enable online applications for food stamps.

### **Governors Spitzer's Working Families Food Stamps Initiative**

I am extraordinarily pleased that Spitzer Administration had committed to taking serious steps to make it easier for all eligible New Yorkers, and particularly low-income working families, to access federal food stamp benefits.

The State Commissioner of the Office of Temporary and Disability Assistance, David Hansell, set a goal of adding an additional 100,000 eligible working families, including 215,000 eligible individuals, to the State food stamps rolls by 2008. We greatly thank the Governor and the Commissioner for having the vision to set a concrete goal.

For all food stamps applicants, the State will eliminate the assets cap (currently \$2,000 for most families) that makes it nearly impossible for families to save funds for college, retirement, or other vital purposes and still be able to obtain food stamp benefits.

For working families, the State will enable people to apply for and maintain eligibility for benefits on-line and over the phone rather than be forced to physically visit a government office. The State will also waive finger-printing requirements and reduce reporting requirements for such families.

I am particularly excited that, by eliminating the limit on resources that families can own and still receive food stamp benefits, the State is making it easier for parents to feed their families and at the same time be able to save money to send their kids to college, buy a first home, start a

small business, and/or open a retirement account. This new policy is perfectly in line with the long-held contention of many advocates that the very best long-term way to reduce hunger is to empower low-income families to develop the assets they need to climb out of poverty and enter the middle class.

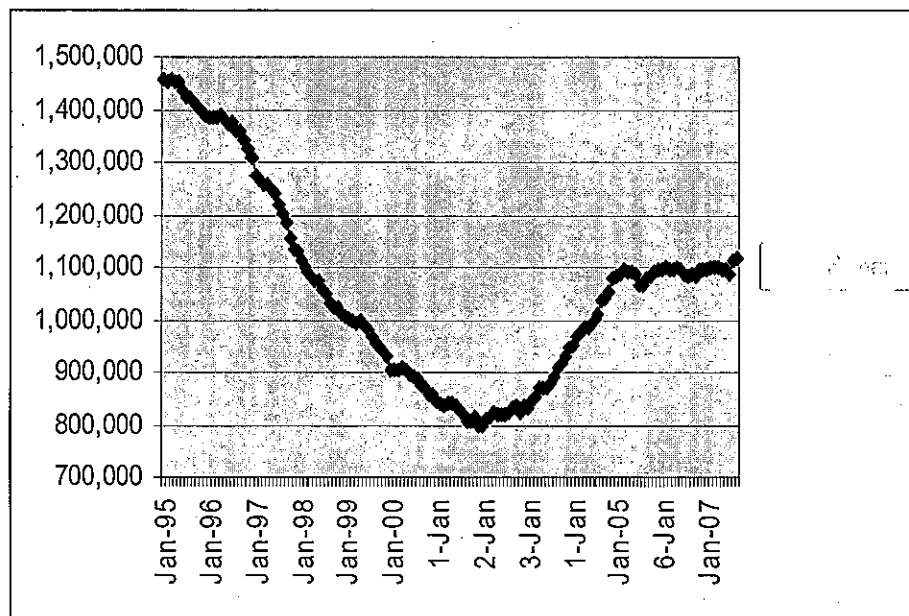
Given that 48 states in the union have no fingerprinting requirement at all for food stamps – and further given that fingerprinting wastes money, fails to prevent significant fraud, and discourages eligible people from applying – we had hoped that the Governor would eliminate finger-printing for all New Yorkers. He did not. He did so only for working families. Ironically, misinformed attacks from conservatives and certain political opportunists falsely slammed the Governor for eliminating all finger-printing. When elected officials get slammed for taking moderate, incremental steps, no wonder they don't feel they can take bolder steps.

I do think what the Governor has proposed does conceivably have the ability to reach its ambitious goals. My only caution is that it will take more than the improvements announced above to reach those goals. It will take the State working with the City to make even more dramatic corrections to the access problems faced by food stamps applicants daily.

#### **Despite Our Significant Progress, Food Stamps Participation Still Lags**

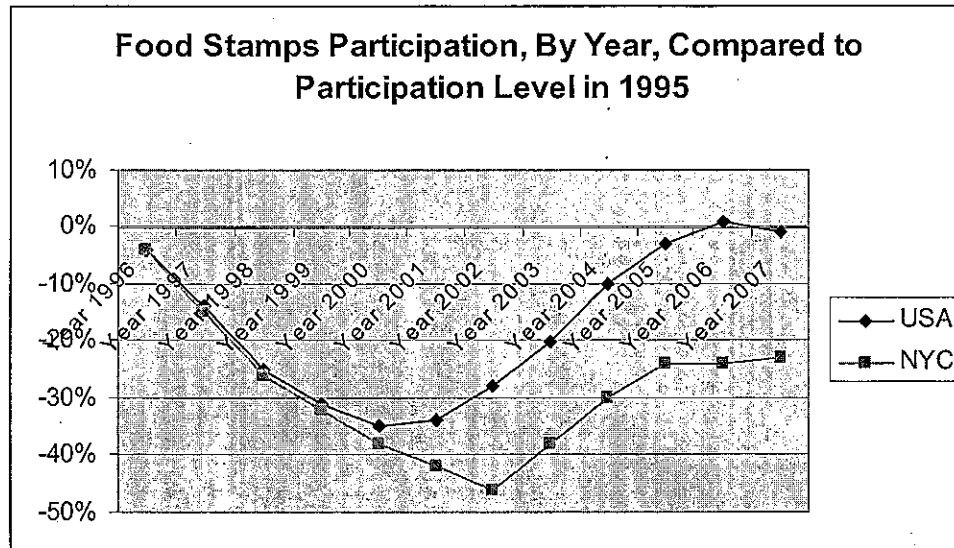
As the chart below graphically demonstrates, Food Stamp participation in the city is still 341,005 people lower than the peak level in March 1995.

**Food Stamp Program Participation in New York City**  
January 1995 – September, 2007





As the chart below demonstrates, while the national levels of participation in the Food Stamps Program are just about equal to their peak levels of participation in 1995, program participation in New York City is still 23% below that of 1995.



As I indicated, I am pleased that the State has launched a food stamps initiative for working families. We hope the City fully and rapidly enacts the changes required by the State. We are also very pleased that Commissioner Doar has appointed one person, Ms. Jean-Ferrer Coyle, to be a point person for the agency on food stamps access. It should certainly help that the agency has clarified its management structure regarding this vital program.

Unfortunately, all-too-frequently, we still hear that people eligible for food stamps must visit HRA offices multiple times, often waiting many hours during each visit simply to obtain benefits for which they should be able to rapidly apply on their first visit.

Permit me to suggest some other ways the State and the City can further work together to improve program access:

- More broadly waive face-to-face interviews at both application and re-certification. Raising small children and having long travel times to HRA offices should both be considered hardships under which phone interviews are allowed, a classification that is fully permissible under Federal law and regulations.
- Build upon the recent progress in making more flexible night and weekend office hours available.
- Adopt clear customer service guidelines, train all employees in these guidelines, and then remove or discipline any managers or employees who repeatedly violate them. Conversely, better reward City employees who do a particularly good job on program access.

- Be clear, consistent, and accurate about what documentation people need to apply. Place the burden of obtaining government documents (such as a SS card) on the government, not on applicants.
- Ensure that HRA complies with the requirement of federal law that all eligible applicants receive food stamp benefits within 30 days of their original applications. That is the bare minimum requirement. Given current technologies and laws, HRA could – and should – make food stamps benefits available to eligible applicants within just a few days. Yet in 2005, according to HRA’s JobStat reports, City job centers failed to meet the 30-day federal processing deadline for food stamps applicants in 8.0% of all cases. Encouragingly, in response to a 2005 campaign questionnaire from the Coalition Against Hunger, Mayor Bloomberg said that he would ensure that HRA complied with the 30 day deadline. Yet in 2006, HRA missed this legal deadline in nearly 20% of all cases. In 2007, in the year-to-date, HRA has improved a bit, but HRA still fails to meet this legal deadline at jobs centers in more than 8% of all cases. That means that, for one in 12 households applying, they not only don’t get the food help they need within the few days that would be most efficient and compassionate, they don’t even get it in the full month required by law.
- Make it clear to applicants that merely writing a date and name starts the application process.
- Grant more exact appointment times to applicants and reduce overall wait times at HRA offices.

The Mayor also should accept the State’s ABAWD waiver, thereby allowing unemployed people to continue receiving food stamps while they are looking for work. The City’s continued refusal to accept the ABAWD waiver contributes to the city’s hunger crisis in two significant ways. One: it discourages unemployed people from applying for food stamps, since they are worried that the great effort involved in obtaining benefits in the first place will not be worth it if they are removed from the program after a few months simply because they cannot find work. Two: It removes people from the food stamp rolls who desperately need help.

I once again note that obtaining the waiver does not eliminate the requirement that all able-bodied food stamps recipients seek employment; it simply allows those seeking employment, but not able to obtain it, to continue receiving food stamps. When an ABAWD waiver is in place, federal law still requires that all able-bodied food stamps recipients make a good-faith effort to look for work.

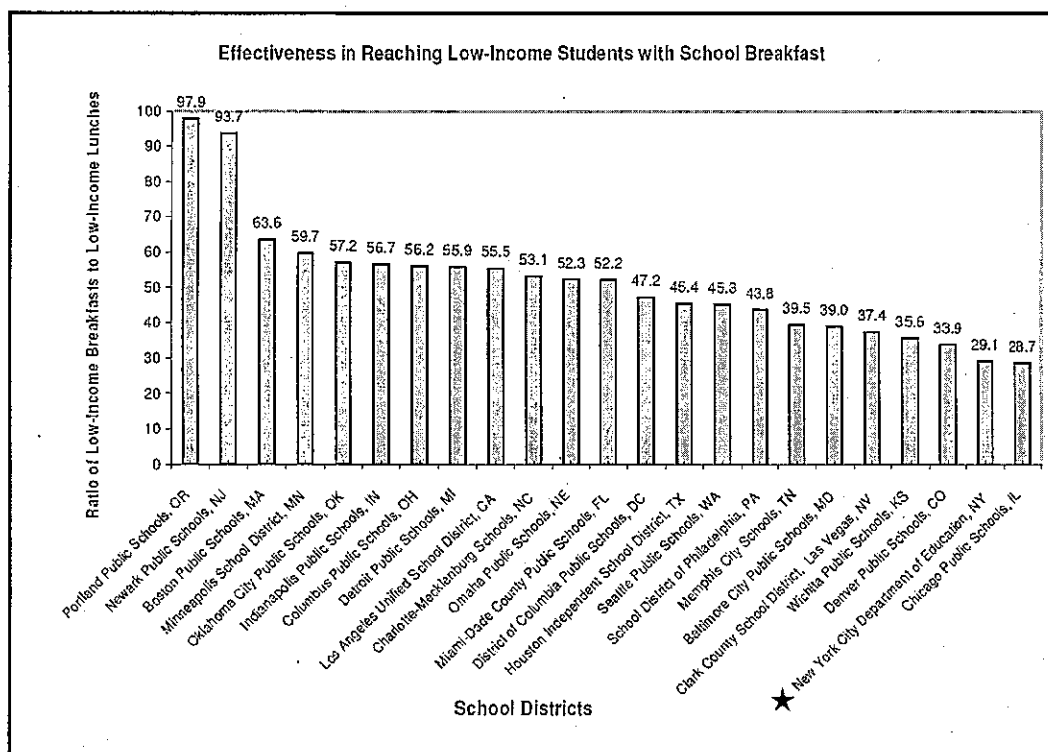
Even if the City accepts the waiver, ABAWDs can still be required to participate in job search, workfare, or other employment activities, and be sanctioned (terminated/denied) if they do not comply and/or do not have good cause.

If the City again refuses to accept this common-sense waiver, the State should use its existing authority to direct the City do so.

## Need to Increase Other Food Assistance Programs

Despite the significant progress that New York City public schools achieved by making school breakfast available universally to all students regardless of family income, New York has the second lowest participation rate out of 23 large American cities, according to a recent study by the national anti-hunger group, the Food Research Action Center (FRAC). {Report available at: [www.frac.org](http://www.frac.org).}

Because the Bloomberg Administration adopted universal school breakfast and started experiments to allow some children to eat breakfast in their classrooms, breakfast participation in New York has increased by six million meals over the last three and a half years. Still, 80% of low-income public school students in New York fail to receive them. As the chart below indicates, only 29% of the city's children who obtain school lunches obtain school breakfasts, compared to 98% in Portland, 94% in Newark, 64% in Boston, and 55% in Los Angeles. The report indicates that the districts with higher participation rates are those that tend to more fully make breakfast available in classrooms than does New York City, where most children must still face the stigma of going to a separate lunchroom to eat breakfast.



Source: "Breakfast in America's Big Cities," 2007, the Food Research and Action Center (FRAC)

We are grateful that the Bloomberg Administration and the Department of Education (DOE) Office of SchoolFood have taken proactive steps that have increased school breakfast participation in the city. The city's move to universal breakfast was truly visionary, and a six million-meal increase is certainly an impressive beginning. However, this report makes it clear that we all have our work cut out for us in catching up with other cities on breakfast participation.

While it is always a sad day when we lose to Boston in baseball, it is truly heartbreaking when we lose to them and 20 other cities in feeding our children. We hope this report prompts New York to decide to provide breakfasts in every classroom in the system, as does neighboring Newark, which has a far higher participation rate.

The report calculated that, if New York increased the percentage of children who receive lunch and who also receive breakfast from the current rate of 29% to a rate of 70%, that would provide the school system with an additional \$49 million in federal funding per year to feed low-income children.

Not only would increasing breakfast participation boost test scores and improve child health and well-being, it would bring significant federal dollars into the city. For all those reasons, DOE, parents, educational unions, elected officials, and advocates all must make it a top priority to work together to raise breakfast participation levels

According to Federal data calculated by the New York City Coalition Against Hunger, more than 400,000 New York City children – one in five of the city’s children – lived in homes that could not afford a sufficient supply of food in 2005. At a time when one in five of the city’s children live in hunger or at the brink of hunger, we should re-double – and re-triple – our efforts to ensure all eligible children receive federally-funded nutrition assistance such as school breakfasts.

The Coalition has proposed addressing these issues by serving more breakfasts directly to home-room classes, which differs from the current practice in which individual students must face stigma and take extra time to go to a separate lunchroom to eat the breakfast, thereby demonstrating to their peers that their family is poor. As an alternative, there are three options: 1) whole classes can start their days eating breakfast together in lunchrooms; 2) there can be “grab and go” carts in which kids take food from a tray in the hallway and eat it in their classrooms; or 3) the food can be directly served in each classroom. Given the complexity of the New York City School system, there is no one size fits all approach. We urge DOE to test all three approaches in pilots.

We have been extraordinarily encouraged by our meetings about this issue with the Department of Education (DOE) Office of SchoolFood. They are extraordinarily committed to feeding more low-income children and have been very open and responsive to our ideas for options on how to do so. We are very hopeful that DOE will soon announce expanded efforts to increase breakfast participation in line with our discussions.

Participation in other federally-funded child nutrition programs – including the WIC, after-school snacks, and summer meals programs – continue to lag, but we are pleased by recent progress in these areas as well, particularly the fact that DOE has improved the nutritional quality of food at summer sites previously served by the New York City Housing Authority. We will continue to work with City’s Food Policy Coordinator and others in the city to seek out creative partnerships to increase participation in these vital programs.

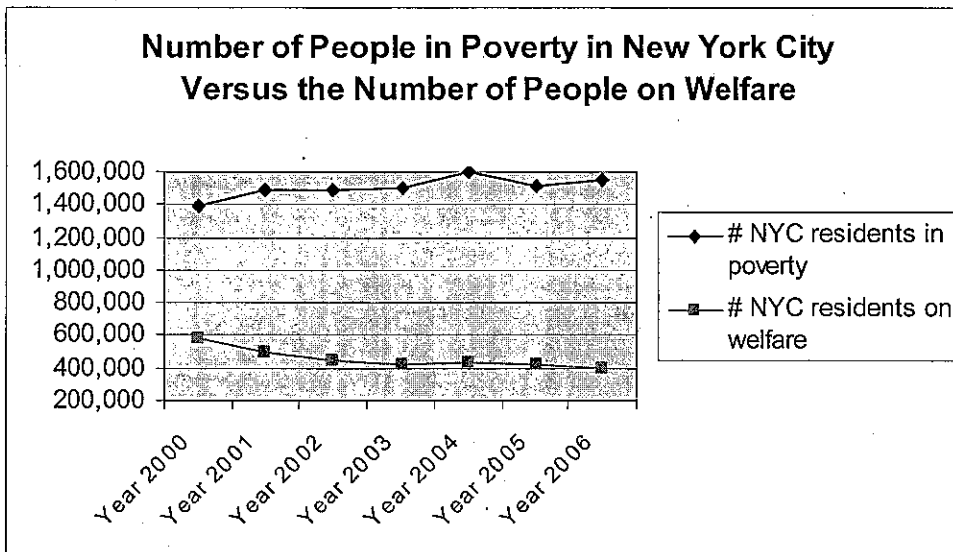
## Increasing Poverty is the Main Cause of Increasing Hunger

On some occasions, people get the impression that we have hunger in New York City because we don't have enough food. That's never been the case. We have hunger here because many New Yorkers earn too little money to be able to afford all the food they need.

According to new data released in August by the U.S. Census Bureau, the number of people living in poverty in New York City increased to 1.54 million people, even as there was a slight dip in the number of people in poverty nationwide. The number of poor New Yorkers has increased by 151,000 since 2000. While the City claims this increase is not significant because the Census Bureau slightly changed its methodology, even the City admits there was no reduction in poverty in 2006 despite a soaring stock market and a high-profile Mayoral anti-poverty initiative.

About one in five city residents now live below the federal poverty line, which equals a family of *three* surviving on an income of \$16,600 per year. Brooklyn, the borough with the most poor people, had an increase of 85,000 people in poverty from 2000 to 2006. While poverty rates soared, the number of people receiving public assistance dropped by 241,388.

While, in the 1990's, reductions in the welfare rolls were accomplished while poverty decreased in New York City and nationwide, as the chart below demonstrates, the welfare rolls have continued to go down in New York City since 2000, even though the number of people in poverty has increased. For this reason, we believe failures of welfare reform in New York City have been one of the factors responsible for the increasing hunger, homelessness, and poverty in New York City.



Sources: Poverty: Census Bureau, ACS; Welfare: NYC HRA

Because this Committee has had other extensive hearings on the city's broader poverty problem, I won't dwell on them at length. Suffice it to say that, when 1.7 million New Yorkers are living in poverty, the City must do far more to address this problem than sponsor a few experimental programs that aid only a few thousand people each.

### **Five Basic Steps to End Hunger in New York City and America**

I conclude with a five-point plan to end hunger in New York and America:

**1) The Federal, State, and City governments should launch ambitious new anti-poverty plans that focus more on increasing the wages of workers and making quality education, health care, housing, and child care available for working families – and less on lecturing low-income people on their personal behavior.**

The bottom line is simple: for people to escape poverty, they must earn more and/or spend less. Our public policies must deal with that essential reality.

**2) The Federal Farm Bill should include more funding for the Food Stamps Program, for commodities for pantries and kitchens, and for fresh produce – and it should pay for those improvements by cutting corporate welfare for wealthy agribusinesses.**

I am thrilled that the City, the State, and the Council seem to all agree with each other and with advocates on what should be the major nutrition-related improvements in the Farm Bill.

As the bill continues to be considered by Congress, I hope the following improvements can be included in it:

#### **Increase Food Stamp Benefit Levels**

- Rolls back the two significant across the board cuts enacted in 1996. Maximum benefits would be restored to 103% of the Thrifty Food Plan and the standard deduction would be returned to the 1996 levels, and indexed annually to stop all future benefit erosion. When fully phased-in, the typical working family of three would see a \$37 per month benefit increase.
- Help vulnerable people stuck at the monthly minimum benefit level (raising it from \$10 to \$32)
- Address particular families' needs by letting families deduct the full amount of their child care expenses, and not counting military combat pay against food stamp eligibility.

#### **Increase Food Stamp Access**

- Improve resource rules by raising asset limits and indexing them as well as exempting retirement and certain education funds from counting against financial resources.
- Provide food stamp benefits to hundreds of thousands of legal immigrants, including by eliminating a five-year waiting period that now affects many adults.
- Repeal the arbitrary time limit on food stamp eligibility for jobless, childless adults.

- Give states greater flexibility to provide food stamps to individuals reentering society from prison.
- Extend to more clients, especially elderly, the 2002 Farm Bill state option for simplifying client reporting on changes in income and circumstances.

### **Food Stamp Bonuses and Grants**

- Increase funds for participation grants and state bonuses for effective operations; support state expenses to test program improvements; give states an enhanced match for Disaster Food Stamp Program costs; support state efforts to expand use of food stamps at farmers' markets.

### **Emergency Feeding and Other Programs**

- Increase to \$250 million a year and index for inflation mandatory funding for The Emergency Food Assistance Program (TEFAP); provide extra money for transportation of perishable food.

Beyond the Farm Bill, Congress and the President should also increase funding for the **FEMA Emergency Food and Shelter Program (ESFP)**, the main source of federal cash funding for faith-based and secular food pantries, soup kitchens, and food banks – and a significant source of funding for homelessness prevention efforts. Yet national funding for this program has been stuck at only \$153 million for the last five fiscal years. Due to a national distribution formula in which the economy of New York City has theoretically improved relative to the economy of other distressed areas, EFSP funding to New York City has decreased in each of the last three years, despite the soaring hunger and homelessness here. EFSP funding for New York City is now \$1.2 million (21%) less than in the 2003-2004 program year. Given that the need for this program is great nationwide, we would hope that Congress could provide this program with enough additional funding nationwide so that there would also be an increase in New York City. Therefore, we are urging a national funding level of \$200 million.

### **3) The State Food Policy Council should coordinate and simplify access to federally-funded nutrition assistance programs and should increase the accessibility and affordability of nutritious foods in low-income neighborhoods and towns.**

It is vital that this Council not just aid farmers (which is certainly a vital goal), but should also have a very significant focus on reducing hunger and poverty. Fully 1.8 million New York State households are food insecure. The State should use all its resources – on a cross-agency basis – to address that problem.

### **4) The City should accelerate its existing efforts to increase access to the Food Stamp, School Breakfast, and Summer Meals Programs.**

Our suggestions for how to do so are detailed above.

**5) Private corporations and businesses should voluntarily commit to ensuring that all their workers, as well as all the workers for their contractors and suppliers, earn a living wage sufficient enough to enable such workers to feed their families and pay for all other basic expenses.**

Yes, government should increase and expand minimum and living wage laws, and index them to the cost of inflation, but corporate leaders shouldn't need to have laws to force them to do the right thing. Any corporation that can afford to pay multiple executives millions of dollars each year – whether they manage well or drive it into the ground – can afford to pay all the people who work for them – directly or indirectly – enough to feed their families. Besides the moral reasons to do so, it simply makes economic sense to pay workers living wages. Even Henry Ford – surely no liberal – understood that he had to pay his workers well enough so that they could afford to buy his company's cars.

The good news is that we really can end hunger in New York and America if our elected officials take those few basic, affordable steps. Given that one in six New York City residents still live in homes that can't afford enough food, this is a problem that urgently needs to be fixed. If the nation rapidly takes the basic steps we suggest, next year we would be able to have this annual hearing and be able to say – finally – that hunger had actually decreased.





**MANHATTAN OFFICE**  
90 John Street, Suite 702, New York, NY 10038-3239 t: 212.566.7855 f: 212.566.1463

**WAREHOUSE & MAIN OFFICE**  
Hunts Point Co-op Market, 355 Food Center Dr., Bronx, NY 10474-7000 t: 718.991.4300 f: 718.893.3442

[www.foodbanknyc.org](http://www.foodbanknyc.org)

Testimony prepared by

**Áine Duggan and Ashley Baughman**

for the

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**“Fighting Hunger in New York City”**

**November 20<sup>th</sup>, 2007**

on behalf of

**Food Bank For New York City / FoodChange**

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## **INTRODUCTION**

Good afternoon. I am Áine Duggan, Vice President for Government Relations, Policy & Research with the Food Bank For New York City/FoodChange. The Food Bank appreciates the opportunity to present testimony this afternoon to the City Council regarding the status of hunger and the needs of low-income New Yorkers throughout the city.

First, I would like to acknowledge the continued commitment of the Council, and the General Welfare Committee, to address the problem of hunger in New York City, and thank you for your leadership in ensuring ongoing support for the city's Emergency Food Assistance Program and food stamp outreach initiatives.

The Food Bank For New York City, in conjunction with its subsidiary organization, FoodChange works to end hunger through a range of programs and services that increase access to nutrition, education and financial empowerment. The organization warehouses and distributes food to approximately 1,000 emergency and community food programs citywide; provides food safety, networking and capacity-building workshops; manages nutrition education programs for schools and emergency food programs; operates food stamp outreach and education; coordinates the largest EITC program in the country; and conducts research and develops policy to inform community and government efforts to end hunger throughout the five boroughs.

In my testimony today, I wish to provide a brief overview of recent research findings demonstrating the magnitude of hunger in New York City, the myriad of contributing socioeconomic factors and the challenges currently faced by the emergency food network.

**The mission of the Food Bank For New York City  
is to end hunger by organizing food, information and support for community survival and dignity.**



## BACKGROUND

*NYC Hunger Safety Net 2007: A Food Poverty Focus* is the second report in the *Hunger Safety Net (HSN)* series which is designed to track trends in hunger and create research-based solutions to hunger and poverty throughout the five boroughs of New York City. The report includes findings on New York City residents who rely on emergency food programs (EFPs), including soup kitchens and food pantries; the operations, resources and services of EFPs; and an analysis of New York City residents' access to private and government food assistance at varying poverty levels, including a spatial analysis of need and services. This research updates and expands upon results from *Hunger Safety Net 2004: Measuring Gaps in Food Assistance in New York City*.

Findings within *Hunger Safety Net 2007* show that throughout New York City, 1.3 million residents are accessing emergency food programs (EFPs) — an increase of 24 percent since the release of *Hunger Safety Net 2004*. The 1.3 million people currently relying on New York City soup kitchens and food pantries, includes 397,000 children (up from 269,000 in 2004), 730,000 adults ages 18 to 64 (up from 599,000 in 2004) and 154,000 elderly adults (155,000 in 2004).

This is not a surprising finding in light of recent Census data showing that approximately 1.5 million New York City residents live below the federal poverty level (approximately \$16,000 annually for a family of three).<sup>1</sup> Difficulty affording food among a larger population of New Yorkers is not unexpected given rising costs of basic necessities. For example, the cost of food at home in the New York Metro area increased more than 10 percent from 2003 to 2006.<sup>2</sup>

Further, 2004-2006 average food insecurity data released by the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) in November 2007 shows that approximately one of every ten New York State households (9.8 percent or approximately 732,000 households) are food insecure. As the costs of basic necessities continue to rise in New York and throughout the United States, we will likely also see rising food insecurity in future years.

The increase in city residents accessing emergency food reveals a complex story about greater access of services by households in need, a growth in need among households at higher income and education levels and the inadequacy of the food stamp benefit. On the one hand, increased access speaks to the success of outreach and the strength of ongoing community work to provide households in need with some form of help. On the other hand, the picture of increased hardship for a broader population of city residents begs for a broad focus on a continuum of programmatic and policy approaches in order to achieve the goal of ending hunger and ensuring that all New Yorkers have permanent, local access to affordable, nutritious food.

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<sup>1</sup> *American Community Survey 2006*. United States Census Bureau.

<sup>2</sup> The US Department of Labor's Bureau of Labor Statistics reports that the Consumer Price Index (CPI) for food at home in the New York metro area increased from 181.7 in 2003 to 200.5 in 2006. The CPI for all goods in the New York metro area increased 11.6 percent from 197.8 in 2003 to 220.7 in 2006.

## INCREASED FUNDING FOR NUTRITION PROGRAMS, INCLUDING EMERGENCY FOOD AND FOOD STAMPS, IS VITAL FOR NEAR-TERM HUNGER RELIEF

Insufficient resources are both driving and meeting the increased demand for emergency food in NYC.

On the front end, EFPs are seeing more people with higher levels of education, full-time workers and households enrolled in the Food Stamp Program accessing emergency food because increased cost of living is making it harder for people to make ends meet and the average food stamp benefit is inadequate. Among EFP households that are receiving food stamps, approximately one-quarter (24 percent) run out of their monthly allocation after one week, 60 percent run out after two weeks and 84 percent run out at the three-week mark, forcing residents to turn to soup kitchens and food pantries by the end of the month. This is not surprising given that the average food stamp benefit amount for EFP households is only \$147 per month (\$37 per week). In addition, the minimum monthly benefit (which largely impacts the elderly) has been stuck at \$10 for the last thirty years (it has not been increased since 1977).

On the back end, there is an insufficient supply of food at EFPs to meet the need. Loss of support from government-funded emergency food programs is an underlying cause of this hardship. The government sources of emergency food for soup kitchens and food pantries in New York City include The Emergency Food Assistance Program (TEFAP), administered by the United States Department of Agriculture; the Emergency Food and Shelter Program (EFSP), administered by FEMA; the Hunger Prevention and Nutrition Assistance Program (HPNAP), administered by the New York State Department of Health; and the Emergency Food Assistance Program (EFAP), administered by the New York City Human Resources Administration.

Most worrisome is the dramatic decrease in the supply of emergency food through The Emergency Food Assistance Program (TEFAP), funded by the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA), due to severe cuts to the bonus commodity component and flat-funding of the entitlement component of the program. Consequently, there is a national shortage of TEFAP food in soup kitchens and food pantries around the country, including a loss of approximately 12 million pounds of TEFAP food to New York City EFPs over the past few years, from approximately 29 million pounds to approximately 17 million pounds. As a result of these cuts, the city's emergency food network is currently experiencing the most severe food shortage the Food Bank has ever seen.

That the increased demand (from 2004 to 2007) at soup kitchens and food pantries has come at a time when basic resources for those programs are decreasing at an alarming rate is problematic and potentially catastrophic. *Hunger Safety Net 2007* findings show that EFPs are spending almost two-thirds (64 percent) of their budgets on food (up from 59 percent in 2004), at the expense of allocations for paid staff, rent, utilities, equipment and supplies. The percentage of EFPs open less than once per week has sharply increased from 1 percent to 12 percent while the number distributing food two or more days per week has dropped considerably. With EFPs open less frequently yet serving more people, approximately one-half (49 percent) ran out of food almost one out of every six times they were open, causing city residents looking for food assistance to be turned away.

The 2007 Farm Bill currently being debated by Congress provides an ideal opportunity to address the dual concern of shortages of emergency food at soup kitchens and food pantries and inadequate food stamp benefit amounts. Increased funding for the nutrition title of the Farm Bill, which is reauthorized every five years, is critical to setting more adequate food stamp benefit levels, adjusting policies and procedures to improve access for eligible households to food stamps and raising the funding level of the TEFAP entitlement program.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>3</sup> *Anti-Hunger Policy Platform for NYS and NYC, 2007–2012*. (2006) New York State and City Anti-Hunger Organizations. The platform provides detailed recommendations on city, state and federal programs and policies.

## RECOGNIZING AND INVESTING IN EFPs AS A BRIDGE TO GOVERNMENT NUTRITION PROGRAMS AND OTHER SERVICES

Recognizing the importance of connecting their participants with government and nutrition assistance programs, many EFPs throughout the five boroughs conduct outreach for programs such as FSP, the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants and Children (WIC), the Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC), Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) and also the School Breakfast, Lunch and Summer Food Service Program (SFSP). *Hunger Safety Net 2007* findings strongly indicate that efforts by EFPs to link participants with programs including FSP are working: FSP enrollment among EFP households increased from 31 percent in 2004 to 46 percent in 2007, and income-eligible households who have been visiting EFPs for longer than one year are 23 percent more likely to be receiving benefits.

Still, huge potential remains for strengthening this natural bridge between EFPs and government programs. While more than one-half of EFPs provide information on FSP, 40 percent provide information on SFSP and only approximately one-third provide information on programs including WIC, TANF, EITC and School Lunch and Breakfast. Specific borough and EFP participant data from the report findings can help target FSP and other government nutrition program outreach and enrollment initiatives with the EFP network. For example, similar to 2004 findings, elderly EFP household members continue to have extremely low participation rates in FSP (only 19 percent of EFP households with elderly members receive food stamps). Increasing EFP staff training and resources is a further need as only one-quarter (25 percent) of EFPs have staff or volunteers who have been trained on FSP within the past 12 months and only 22 percent have FSP applications on site.

Good examples of the connection between EFPs and government nutrition programs include:

- The USDA-funded pilot Food Stamp Paperless Office System (POS), developed by the New York City Human Resources Administration in collaboration with community-based organizations, and also supported by the City Council, which allows food stamp offices to complete applications electronically and makes applying for food stamps easier for eligible individuals utilizing EFPs. Spatial analysis of 2007 EFP participant findings identifying the geographic locations of the highest percentage of EFP participants not accessing FSP can inform future expansion of POS.
- The community-based food stamp outreach conducted by the City Council, through the “*Food Today, Healthy Tomorrow*” campaign is a further example of working with existing resources like EFPs to link eligible New Yorkers to the Food Stamp Program. The involvement of elected officials in promoting the program legitimizes participation and adds to the anti-hunger community’s ongoing work to destigmatize food stamps.
- The New York State Working Families Food Stamp Initiative<sup>4</sup> which aims to expand access to FSP for low-income working families lends itself to promotion activities at EFPs as less than one-third (31 percent) of EFP households with employed members are enrolled in FSP (in contrast to almost one-half of all EFP households).

Similarly, the consideration of EFPs in targeted initiatives to connect low-income New Yorkers to other social services, including health insurance programs and nutrition education and awareness services, should be expanded. Health conditions including asthma, diabetes and heart disease are prevalent among EFP households, including one-fifth of children living in EFP households who have been diagnosed with asthma and more than one-third of elderly EFP household members who have been diagnosed with diabetes. While most EFP household members are covered by Medicaid and Medicare insurance programs, one-fifth have no health coverage, including one in every five EFP participants diagnosed with cancer, and 17 percent and 16 percent of EFP participants diagnosed with asthma and diabetes. While

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<sup>4</sup> Part of the New York State Working Families Food Stamp Initiative will be implemented first in New York City and several upstate counties before being implemented statewide.

findings indicate that approximately 39,000 EFP household members (3 percent) have been diagnosed with obesity, it is extremely likely that this is a very low estimate, given that obesity awareness is low among the general population and obesity diagnosis may still be considered a relatively new focus in medicine.

Addressing the connection between poverty and health conditions such as diabetes and heart disease, nutrition continues to be an important consideration at EFPs. A growing percentage of soup kitchens and food pantries distribute fresh produce (87 percent) and one-half offer one or more special food services such as nutrition counseling.

## **SOLVING HUNGER NECESSITATES A BROADER FOCUS ON FOOD POVERTY**

Recognizing and investing in the pivotal role that EFPs play in connecting eligible low-income New Yorkers to government nutrition programs, health and nutrition education, awareness programs and related services broadens the discussion about hunger. Report findings testify to the importance of widening the lens in this way as data show that any number of interrelated issues can affect residents' access to food. Engaging stakeholders from these various sectors that relate to hunger, such as food and nutrition, health, education, childcare, housing, government agencies and academics, brings a wider range of voices to the table to take part in the process of solving hunger. This collaborative process refocuses the discussion on hunger to one of food poverty.

### ***Hunger as a Nucleus of Food Poverty Issues***

The findings on EFP participants demonstrate that a myriad of social service factors converge on the waiting lines (and in the homes of those who wait on line) of soup kitchens and food pantries, illustrating that hunger is at the heart of the poverty picture. In addition to questions of enrollment of eligible EFP participants in government nutrition assistance programs and health issues as outlined in the previous section, income, education, disability and housing are other key factors to consider.

The majority of households relying on emergency food are struggling to make ends meet on extremely low annual incomes, including 29 percent with incomes less than \$5,000 and 59 percent with incomes less than \$10,000, and among EFP participants, 50 percent have less than a grade 12 education level. Still, as indicated above, the increase of individuals and families accessing emergency food includes a higher percentage of participants who are working and have higher levels of education. More than one-fifth (21 percent) of EFP participants are working (up from 19 percent in 2004), and the percentage who are employed full-time has increased 73 percent from one-third (33 percent) in 2004 to 57 percent in 2007. Almost one out of every four (24 percent) participants has been to college (including some college, associate's, bachelor's and graduate degrees), up from 15 percent in 2004. This trend may be linked to trends identified in the Food Bank/Marist College annual opinion polls showing a steadily increasing number of New Yorkers with higher income and education levels experiencing difficulty affording food.<sup>5</sup>

In addition, there has been a large increase in the percentage of disabled New Yorkers turning to EFPs for help — from one-quarter (25 percent) in 2004 to almost one-third (31 percent) in 2007, indicating that further analysis may be required to determine if this population has special needs or requires additional services not currently being provided.

Housing findings, similar to 2004, show that the majority of EFP households (79 percent) are living in rented accommodation while 11 percent of households are homeless and 7 percent own their own homes. Demonstrating that lack of affordable housing is a significant contributing factor to hunger, EFP households in rented accommodations pay an average of 59 percent of their average monthly income on rent, and the average monthly mortgage cost comprises 68 percent of the average monthly income for EFP households that own.

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<sup>5</sup> NYC Hunger Experience 2006. Food Bank For New York City / Marist College Institute for Public Opinion, 2007.

### ***The Picture of Hunger at Various Levels of Poverty***

Understanding that different sectors and government agencies consider different levels of federal poverty when determining need, this report analyzes hunger at a range of poverty levels. This broad view further helps to engage more stakeholders in discussions about food poverty.

In addition, *Hunger Safety Net 2007* findings and other research<sup>6</sup> demonstrate that households up to and beyond 200 percent of poverty are having difficulty making ends meet. For example, of the almost 1.3 million EFP participants, approximately 180,000 have incomes above 125 percent of the poverty level (up to and above 200 percent of poverty — approximately \$32,000 annually for a family of three).

Given this broader population of New Yorkers having difficulty affording food, the examination of access to services at 125 percent, 150 percent, 185 percent and 200 percent of the federal poverty level provides a spectrum through which the problem may be analyzed. The city's population accessing some form of food assistance (EFPs and/or FSP and/or WIC) includes 96 percent of New Yorkers at 125 percent of poverty, 84 percent of New Yorkers at 150 percent of poverty, 69 percent of New Yorkers at 185 percent of poverty, and 64 percent of New Yorkers at 200 percent of poverty.

Trend analysis on access to food assistance in the 2007 report, which is conducted at 125 percent of poverty for comparison purposes with the 2004 study, shows a substantial decrease in the percentage of New York City residents living below 125 percent of poverty and not accessing EFPs, FSP or WIC, from 28 percent in 2004 to 1 percent in 2007. Factoring into this change was a 39 percent increase in the population accessing only FSP and/or WIC and also a rise in the population accessing EFPs and FSP and/or WIC, which has more than doubled from 12 percent in 2004 to 31 percent in 2007, demonstrating that outreach efforts since the last report have been effective throughout the city.

### **CONCLUSION – NEXT STEPS FOR ENDING HUNGER AND FOOD POVERTY**

*Hunger Safety Net 2007* illustrates the necessity for a combination of policy and programmatic approaches to guarantee that all New Yorkers have local access to affordable, nutritious food.

Strategies to ensure residents in need receive near-term assistance include increasing food supplies and funding for the city's EFPs.

The broader goal should be to recognize the vital connector role that EFPs play in communities throughout the city and developing and expanding initiatives that link EFP participants to government programs for which they are eligible. For example:

- Supporting EFPs in their efforts to connect participants to relevant services, for instance by expanding the Food Stamp Paperless Office System (POS);
- Facilitating enrollment in FSP and other nutrition assistance programs through projects such as the New York State Working Families Food Stamp Initiative; and,
- Developing measures to conduct outreach campaigns about relevant health, financial empowerment and career development programs at EFPs.

In the long-term, solving hunger requires expanding the discussion and addressing the myriad of hardships faced by low-income New Yorkers. Viewing hunger in this way allows for a broader coalition of stakeholders from sectors including food and nutrition, health, education, childcare, housing, government agencies and academic institutions to join the anti-hunger community in developing comprehensive solutions. Bringing more voices to the table refocuses the problem of hunger to address the broader problem of food poverty.

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<sup>6</sup> *The Unheard Third 2006: Bringing the Voices of Low-Income New Yorkers to the Policy Debate*. Community Service Society, 2007.