

CITY COUNCIL
CITY OF NEW YORK

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TRANSCRIPT OF THE MINUTES

Of the

COMMITTEE ON GENERAL WELFARE

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September 21, 2020

Start: 10:10 a.m.

Recess: 1:12 p.m.

HELD AT: Remote hearing

B E F O R E: Stephen T. Levin
Chairperson

COUNCIL MEMBERS:

Vanessa L. Gibson
Barry S. Grodenchik
Robert F. Holden
Brad S. Lander
Antonio Reynoso
Rafael Salamanca, Jr.
Ritchie J. Torres
Mark Treyger

A P P E A R A N C E S (CONTINUED)

Lisa Fitzpatrick
NYC HRA Chief Program Officer

Annette Holm
HRA Chief Special Services Officer

Kate MacKenzie
Director of Mayor's Office of Food Policy

Nicholas Buess
Food Bank NYC

Rachel Sabella
No Kid Hungry New York

Joel Berg

Craig Willingham
CUNY Urban Food Policy

Dr. Charles Platkin
Hunter College NYC Food Policy Center

Elizabeth Peralta
Rethink Food

Ravi Reddy
Asian American Federation

Carlyn Cowen
Chinese Planning Council

A P P E A R A N C E S (CONTINUED)

Jeehae Fischer
Korean American Family Service Center

Carol Daly
YWSDA

Emanuel Negron
Met Council

Maria Melchor
Legal Aid Society

Abby Biberman
NYLAG

Natosha McCray
Food Action Board of Hunger Free America

Abraham Grosse

1
2 UNIDENTIFIED: Sergeant Jones, if you can
3 start your cloud recording, please?

4 UNIDENTIFIED: Cloud started.

5 UNIDENTIFIED: Thank you. Good morning
6 everyone and welcome to today's remote New York City
7 Council hearing on the Committee of General Welfare.
8 At this time, would all panelists, all panelists,
9 please turn on your video for verification purposes.
10 Once again, please turn on your videos for
11 verification purposes. To minimize disruptions,
12 please place all electronic devices on silent or
13 vibrate. If you wish to submit testimony, you may do
14 so at testimony@council.nyc.gov. Again, that is
15 testimony@council.nyc.gov. Thank you for your
16 cooperation. Chair Levin, we are ready to begin.

17 CHAIRPERSON LEVIN: [gavel] Thank you
18 very much. Good morning everybody and welcome to
19 this hearing on the City Council's Committee on
20 General Welfare. Today, the Committee will be
21 conducting an Oversight hearing to examine the impact
22 of the COVID-19 pandemic on SNAP Administration, food
23 pantries and soup kitchens. Despite progress on food
24 insecurity in the years prior to the COVID-19
25 pandemic, too many New Yorkers faced hunger, missed

1 meals, and insufficient access to adequate and
2 healthy food. The widespread loss of income and
3 unemployment due to the pandemic has significantly
4 exacerbated food insecurity in New York City and
5 around the United States. Their partner Social
6 Services testified in the Executive Budget hearings
7 earlier this year that there were three times as many
8 SNAP applications than prior to the pandemic. In
9 order to accommodate the increase in applications
10 during a public health crisis, the agency retrained
11 1,500 staff members to manage enrollment and
12 recertifications remotely. Despite the agency's
13 swift efforts to mobilize their staff and to reorient
14 benefit applications to the access to HRA application
15 and telephone interviews, clients have reported long
16 wait times, dropped calls on the phone, and
17 difficulty navigating their cases remotely.
18 According to the Food Bank of New York's report from
19 June, 75 percent of food pantries and soup kitchen's
20 survey reported serving more New Yorkers in April
21 2020 than in the months prior to the pandemic, and of
22 the pantries and kitchens reporting an increase in
23 visitors, 91 percent reported an increase in first
24 time visitors, 79 percent reported an increase in
25

1 facilities with children, 71 percent reported an
2 increase in laid-off or furloughed workers, and 59
3 percent reported an increase in undocumented
4 immigrants. In April during the peak of the virus in
5 New York City, the number of recipients for SNAP
6 increased by 68,714, which according to Hunger Free
7 New York is the largest one-month increase in modern
8 times. The Federal Government's efforts to impose
9 additional barriers to SNAP enrollment prior to the
10 pandemic coupled with threats to funding will only
11 exacerbate this crisis. I hope today's hearing will
12 offer insight into the essential work of the
13 emergency food providers throughout this crisis and
14 how the Council can further support these efforts to
15 ensure that we're doing everything we can to get
16 every New Yorker the food that they need. I want to
17 thank the advocates and the members of the public for
18 joining us today. I want to thank representatives
19 from the Administration for joining us, and I look
20 forward to hearing from you in these critical issues.
21 At the moment, I would like to now acknowledge my
22 colleagues who are here today, and let's see-- I'd
23 like to acknowledge Council Members Holden and
24 Grodenchik. We do expect new Council Members to be
25

1 joining us as well. And I would also like to thank
2 my Chief of staff Johnathan Bouche [sp?], my
3 Legislative Director Elizabeth Adams, Committee Staff
4 Amenta Killawon [sp?], Senior Counsel Crystal Pond
5 [sp?], Senior Policy Analyst Natalie Omeree [sp?],
6 Policy Analyst [inaudible], and Frank Sarnoff [sp?]
7 Finance Analyst. With that, I'll turn it over to the
8 Counsel of the Committee, Amenta Killawon.
9

10 COMMITTEE COUNSEL: Thank you, Chair
11 Levin. Good morning everyone. I am Amenta Killawon,
12 Senior Counsel to the General Welfare Committee of
13 the New York City Council. I will be moderating
14 today's hearing. Before we begin, I want to remind
15 everyone that you will be on mute until you are
16 called upon to testify. At that point you'll be
17 unmuted by the host. I'll be calling panelists to
18 testify today. Please listen for your name to be
19 called and I will periodically be announcing which
20 panelist will be called next. The first three
21 panelists will be members of the Administration, HRA,
22 Chief Special Services Officer and At Home, followed
23 by HRA Chief Program Officer Lisa Fitzpatrick with
24 Kate MacKenzie, Director of Food Policy presence for
25 questions, and I will call on you when it is your

1 turn to speak. During the hearing, if Council
2 Members would like to ask a question, please use the
3 Zoom raise hand function, and Chair Levin will call
4 on you in order. We'll be limiting Council Member
5 questions to five minutes, and that includes both.
6 Please also note that for ease of this virtual
7 hearing, we will not be allowing a second round of
8 questioning. Now, I'm going to call upon our Members
9 of the Administration to testify, and they are
10 Annette Holm, Lisa Fitzpatrick, and Kate MacKenzie.
11 At this point, I will deliver the oath to the
12 Administration, so if you will all please listen to
13 the oath and at the end of it you may affirm. Do you
14 affirm to tell the truth, the whole truth, and
15 nothing but the truth before this committee and to
16 respond honestly to Council Member questions? Thank
17 you, and you may begin when you're ready.

18
19 CHAIRPERSON LEVIN: Sorry, Lisa, I think
20 you're still muted.

21 LISA FITZPATRICK: Okay.

22 CHAIRPERSON LEVIN: There you are, okay.

23 LISA FITZPATRICK: Okay. Good morning.

24 Thank you, Chairperson Levin and members of the City
25 Council's General Welfare Committee for the

1
2 opportunity to testify about the opportunity to
3 testify about the agency's efforts to address the
4 urgency of hunger and food insecurity in New York
5 City during the COVID-19 pandemic. My name is Lisa
6 Fitzpatrick, I am the Chief Program Officer for the
7 New York City Human Resources Administration.
8 Testifying with me today is Annette Holm, Chief
9 Special Services Officer of the New York City Human
10 Resources Administration and Kate MacKenzie Director
11 of the Mayor's Office of Food Policy. My testimony
12 today will be focused on HRA's administration of the
13 Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, SNAP, and
14 the Emergency Food Assistance Program, EFAP, during
15 this crisis period. As we have testified in the past
16 and as advocates and the Council are aware, food
17 insecurity is one result of unemployment,
18 underemployment, declining wages, and the increasing
19 costs of rent, food, and other commodities. COVID-19
20 has exacerbated all of these factors and for many
21 low-income New Yorkers, has jeopardized their
22 economic stability and overall wellbeing. Every day
23 and particularly during these unprecedented times,
24 HRA provides critical programs and supports to low-
25 income New Yorkers, today I will focus on SNAP and

1 EFAP which are aimed squarely at reducing hunger and
2 tackling food insecurity. COVID-19 challenged our
3 agency like never before resulting in moving to work
4 swiftly and in lockstep with our partners in
5 government and the not for profit community to
6 alleviate the burden for so many New Yorkers having
7 to worry about where their next meal is coming from.
8 In March, recognizing the gravity and scale of the
9 mobilization effort required to galvanize and marshal
10 resources to address New York City's food needs
11 during the pandemic, Kathryn Garcia, former
12 Department of Sanitation Commissioner, was appointed
13 as the COVID-19 Food Czar. Through a coordinated
14 agency effort, the Food Czar's team spearheaded a
15 citywide initiative that provided more than 135
16 million meals to hungry and food insecure New
17 Yorkers. Further, under the Food Czar, the City took
18 action to secure the City's food supply chain and
19 support regional agriculture, intervened to keep food
20 pantries and other vital emergency feeding charities
21 open and equipped them to meet the surging demand for
22 their services. Through these actions New York City
23 responded, organized, and expanded food availability
24 to our most vulnerable residents. Today, the City is
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1 delivering approximately 400,000 meals each day
2 through its Emergency Food Delivery program, which
3 provides meals to low-income homebound New Yorkers,
4 including seniors, in addition to serving another
5 450,000 grab and go meals at over 400 New York City
6 schools. The sheer volume of applications received
7 by the agency during the emergency is indicative of
8 the heightened need for food security resources at
9 this time. During the height of the pandemic, the
10 agency received 84,000 SNAP applications in April
11 2020, the highest number of SNAP applications in
12 modern history, and more than a 200 percent increase
13 compared to the 27,000 applications received in April
14 2019. The vast majority of SNAP applications have
15 been submitted electronically, outside of centers,
16 through ACCESS HRA which has revolutionized the
17 client experience in accessing services. Almost 99
18 percent of applications were received electronically
19 by the agency using ACCESS HRA in May 2020, compared
20 to 90 percent in February of 2020. The increased
21 usage of the online portal and mobile app, coupled
22 with the agency's longstanding efforts to provide
23 clients with flexible case service options has
24 significantly reduced in-center client traffic,
25

1 undoubtedly saving lives by limiting client and staff
2 exposure to the virus in compliance with social
3 distancing directives. Since mid-March, SNAP center
4 traffic dropped significantly with a daily average of
5 approximately 250 visitors in April 2020, compared to
6 2,600 visitors in April 2019. In order to meet the
7 demand, with the number of SNAP applications tripled
8 in this period and cash assistance applications
9 doubled, HRA redeployed and retrained staff across
10 the agency as well as recruited staff temporarily
11 from other City agencies such as ACS and DCAS as well
12 as MetroPlus to help process the high volume of
13 applications. In meeting this challenge and to
14 protect staff and clients, HRA built a new remote
15 access platform deploying technology to enable staff
16 to index documents, process applications and
17 interview clients remotely. In total, we reassigned
18 1,285 employees from various areas within DSS and HRA
19 and recruited an additional 198 from other agencies.
20 Through HRA's advocacy, we received approval for a
21 range of critical waivers from the New York State
22 Office of Temporary and Disability Assistance, OTDA,
23 working with the United States Department of
24 Agriculture, Food and Nutrition Service, FNS, to help
25

1 expedite the processing of applications. This effort
2 enabled us to continue the work required to provide
3 client access to food benefits while prioritizing the
4 health and safety of staff and clients. Working
5 under unprecedented circumstances, the agency was
6 responsive to the rapidly changing information and
7 public health guidance to ensure continued access to
8 benefits for clients. For example, in the early
9 phase of COVID when HRA's offices remained open, we
10 communicated to clients that no negative case actions
11 would be taken if they did not attend scheduled in-
12 person appointments due to concerns with COVID-19.
13 Subsequently on March 24, we received public health
14 guidance that led to the agency's decision to
15 consolidate HRA locations such as Job, SNAP, and
16 Medicaid locations, move our back-office operations
17 to a remote environment, seek the aforementioned
18 waivers, and to offer an array of digital or
19 telephonic services. Our partnership with the State,
20 through relationships built over the years, enabled
21 the agency to request and receive permission to
22 accept Cash Assistance applications online and to
23 conduct interviews over the telephone, which began on
24 March 20. We have been advocating for the ability to
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1 of all SNAP business is conducted remotely and
2 outside of centers. The goal of securing the same
3 client access without the need to come into an office
4 for Cash Assistance as we achieved for SNAP has and
5 continues to be a priority of the agency. In fact, we
6 built a system for online Cash Assistance
7 applications before we had State approval to use it
8 outside of our centers and in other than a limited
9 pilot with 13 community partners, enabling us to go
10 live once the pandemic waiver was obtained in a
11 matter of days. As has been noted, we pushed for
12 these changes in the days before the crisis hit. As
13 a result, we quickly received OTDA approval to permit
14 New York City residents to submit joint applications
15 for Cash Assistance and SNAP online. Within four
16 days of OTDA approval, the agency stood up the system
17 to apply for Cash Assistance/SNAP online and provide
18 telephone interviews as needed. As a result-- as of
19 April, as a result of this critical reform, 85
20 percent of Cash Assistance applications are now
21 submitted online. We also secured federal and OTDA
22 approval through the end of December 2020 to waive
23 the requirement for a client's physical or electronic
24 signature on SNAP and Cash Assistance applications so
25

1 that an HRA employee may complete the application
2 over the telephone with the client. This waiver
3 allowed us to implement a process by which a Cash
4 Assistance or SNAP application is completed over the
5 phone for any applicant who lacks internet
6 connectivity, internet-ready devices, the ability to
7 complete and mail or fax applications, are homebound,
8 or have challenges using ACCESS HRA for application
9 submission. Clients who call HRA Infoline and
10 indicate that they are unable to apply online are
11 provided with alternatives, including the option to
12 apply by telephone. Our waiver request to permit
13 community-based organizations to provide this
14 telephone application service was denied. However, it
15 is worth noting that pre-COVID-19, Benefits Data
16 Trust, because of their ability to record a
17 telephonic signature, was able to submit SNAP only
18 applications and recertifications for individuals
19 unable to use ACCESS HRA. As mentioned, securing
20 critical waivers is at the core of the agency's
21 COVID-19 response. Currently, our work involves
22 requesting extensions of important benefits-related
23 waivers that were previously approved. Thankfully for
24 New Yorkers who rely on our services, many of our
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1 extension requests were recently granted for waivers
2 under which we have been operating. The waivers and
3 extensions enable DSS to meet the increased demand
4 for benefits in a safe way to avoid, whenever
5 possible, clients having to come in person to
6 Centers. The below waivers have been extended through
7 December 31, 2020: SNAP and Cash Assistance signature
8 waiver for phone applications taken by HRA staff,
9 Cash Assistance telephone interview waiver,
10 Drug/alcohol and Domestic Violence screenings by
11 telephone, Extension of DV waivers Partial extension
12 of the SNAP interview adjustments for
13 recertifications only but not applications). The
14 interview adjustments for initial SNAP applications
15 expired on August 31, 2020. All SNAP applicants must
16 have an interview before any benefits may be issued
17 in accordance with the partial SNAP interview
18 adjustments from the federal government. We have
19 asked OTDA to seek an extension of the interview
20 adjustments for applications and are hopeful that it
21 will be granted, but for now the application
22 interview requirement is in effect. The federal
23 government extended the SNAP recertification waiver
24 through August 31, 2020. We encouraged clients with
25

1 SNAP cases that were due to recertify by August 31,
2 2020 to recertify. At the federal government's
3 direction, we opened the recertification portal and
4 processed a significant number of the August cases.
5 There was no adverse action taken for not
6 recertifying at that time. As required by the
7 federal government, USDA, recertification for SNAP
8 benefits resumed with those cases due to expire on
9 September 30, 2020. Clients must now recertify to
10 continue receiving SNAP benefits. Recertifications
11 can be completed through ACCESS HRA and documentation
12 submission can be conducted through the Mobile
13 Document Upload feature of the ACCESS HRA Mobile app.
14 It remains the case that there is no need for clients
15 to visit an HRA SNAP office. Clients who are due to
16 recertify by September 30, 2020, have had the ability
17 to recertify now since the period was opened on
18 August 1, 2020. We do not yet have a waiver on
19 recertifications for this month, so as required by
20 the federal government clients must recertify in
21 order to continue receiving benefits. For SNAP cases
22 due to recertify, because of the SNAP interview
23 adjustments from the federal government, which expire
24 December 31, 2020, only some SNAP cases will require
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1 an interview. Those clients who do require an
2 interview will receive a telephone call from HRA
3 staff. As a reminder, based on the federal waiver,
4 we can recertify the SNAP case without an interview,
5 provided that both of the following conditions have
6 been met: the applicant's identity has been verified;
7 and, all other mandatory information and verification
8 has been provided and is valid: Social Security
9 number, as already required by federal law,
10 residency, gross non-exempt income both earned and
11 unearned, disability, "Alien eligibility" as already
12 required by federal law. Pursuant to the federal
13 waiver, if either of these conditions has not been
14 met, then an interview will be required. Under the
15 federal waiver, interviews will still be required if
16 any of the information submitted is unclear or cannot
17 be verified through separate data matches. The State
18 also extended our recertification waiver for Cash
19 Assistance until August 31, 2020. We encouraged
20 clients with Cash Assistance cases that were due to
21 recertify by August 31, 2020 to do so for the same
22 reasons as above. There were no adverse actions for
23 not doing so at that time. Cash Assistance clients
24 who are due to recertify by September 30, 2020, have
25

1 had the ability to recertify since the period opened
2 on August 1, 2020. Clients must recertify in order
3 to continue receiving benefits. Recertifications can
4 be completed through ACCESS HRA. There is no need
5 for these clients to visit an HRA office. We
6 continue our advocacy as waiver periods approach the
7 dates on which they expire. It is imperative that
8 these administrative changes become permanent. We
9 know that these changes provide for a dignity-
10 centered model and as we have seen over the last six
11 months, protect public health and safety. HRA also
12 sought to implement various SNAP program changes to
13 ensure all households continue receiving the proper
14 SNAP allotment. Emergency allotments of SNAP
15 initially were approved for March and April 2020, but
16 at HRA's urging, New York State secured approval to
17 extend emergency allotment supplements through
18 September 2020. SNAP participating households
19 received the maximum benefit allowance. In addition
20 to all the COVID-19 pandemic SNAP program operational
21 changes, DSS/HRA also worked to waive the ABAWD
22 requirements until September 2020, with a statewide
23 waiver also granted until September 2021, and ensured
24 that once the federal Pandemic Unemployment Insurance
25

1 benefits lapsed, this income was removed from
2 households' budgets, ensuring the maximum benefit
3 level. HRA's Emergency Food Assistance Program,
4 EFAP, provides funding to 578 community kitchens and
5 food pantries citywide. EFAP provides over 40 food
6 items and purchases the most nutritious food items
7 that also meet the dietary and cooking needs of
8 special populations, such as homeless New Yorkers,
9 those with HIV/AIDS, and those who require a Kosher
10 or Halal diet. The actual purchase of these items is
11 based on an analysis of the needs and trends of the
12 emergency food network. HRA also requires that all
13 578 emergency food programs funded by EFAP provide
14 SNAP outreach services. These services include SNAP
15 eligibility prescreening, assistance with the SNAP
16 application process, and distribution of SNAP
17 materials that promote this nutritional benefit. The
18 FY21 EFAP Budget is \$20.9 million and includes \$0.7
19 million in funds that were added at Adoption.
20 Funding for HRA's EFAP program, including food and
21 administrative expenses, was fully baselined by the
22 Administration, and the funding continues to be
23 leveraged to provide non-perishable and frozen food,
24 as well as to provide administrative grants for non-

1 food related expenses to support the EFAP network and
2 the cost for warehousing and transportation. In
3 FY20, EFAP distributed more than 14,972,681 pounds of
4 food, including over 1,029,780 pounds of frozen food.
5 In the same period, EFAP programs reported serving
6 more than 17,620,975 people. While working to ensure
7 that New Yorkers have a hot, healthy meal, we are
8 also working to reduce the prevalence of obesity,
9 diabetes and cardiovascular disease. Since 2008,
10 EFAP has required all foods purchased with City
11 funding to be compliant with the New York City Food
12 Standards requirements and meet nutritional
13 standards, including, but not limited to, standards
14 for sodium, sugar, and trans-fat. Throughout the
15 COVID-19 pandemic, EFAP continues to explore the
16 purchase of nutritional foods for all populations,
17 including those with special dietary needs and those
18 without cooking facilities. Increases in funding
19 have enabled individual programs to receive increased
20 allocations. EFAP continues to build off the work of
21 the NYC Food Assistance Collaborative to identify
22 additional neighborhoods that have a high supply gap
23 and need increased capacity and additional food to
24 address it. During this crisis, New York City's food
25

1
2 pantries have been vital partners. Particularly at
3 this difficult time, supporting them was a priority
4 as a part of our urgent response to keeping New
5 Yorkers fed. We shared pandemic related safety
6 guidance with all of our EFAP food pantry partners,
7 encouraging them to continue operations to provide
8 critical services to food insecure New Yorkers in a
9 way that is safe for everyone. Food distribution to
10 those in need remains our most important objective.
11 DSS Emergency Intervention Services developed and
12 shared informational guidance on best practices for
13 EFAP food providers, including: the need for expanded
14 pick-up hours to decrease the number of clients that
15 visit at a given time; discouraging lines and mass
16 groups congregating by offering, where appropriate
17 diverse pre-bagged items, for example family
18 size/demographic, dietary restrictions, etc.;

19 increase emergency packages to last up to 14 days to
20 reduce the frequency of visits; and provide
21 shelf/long-term stable food options with sample food
22 item categories for vegetables, fruits, proteins,
23 grains and dairy, and both perishable or non-
24 perishable. For any New Yorker in need of food, you
25 can get help today at one of New York City's food

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2 pantries, which provide groceries to cook at home, or
3 community kitchens, which provide hot meals. A map
4 of local food pantries and other options is available
5 at NYC.gov/GetFood, or-- I want to repeat that,
6 nyc.gov/getfood-- or persons seeking food assistance
7 can also call the Emergency Food Line at 866-888-8777
8 which is an automated hotline available 24 hours a
9 day, seven days a week. As we face this crisis head
10 on, we remain committed to providing access to food
11 for all New Yorkers in need. Thank you for taking
12 the time to hold this hearing at a critical time on
13 this important topic. We look forward to answering
14 any questions you may have.

15 CHAIRPERSON LEVIN: Thank you very much.

16 COMMITTEE COUNSEL: Administration, I
17 just to remind you all that throughout the committee
18 session if you could all remain unmuted so that we
19 don't have to have any technical difficulties. You
20 can all remain unmuted for our question and answer
21 session, and I'll pass it back over to Chair Levin.

22 CHAIRPERSON LEVIN: Thank you very much,
23 Ms. Killawon, and thank you very much Ms.
24 Fitzpatrick. I'm going to turn it over to Council
25 Member Grodenchik for questions because he has to

1
2 leave, but I first want to just acknowledge that the
3 work that HRA did prior to the pandemic, setting up
4 ACCESS HRA and all of the remote systems that you
5 have spent years starting with this Administration,
6 really not the prior Administration, but this
7 Administration, limited the difficulties and damage
8 and mitigated those damages when the pandemic hit.
9 So, you highlighted them, Ms. Fitzpatrick in your
10 testimony, but I can only imagine how difficult this
11 would have all been if we were creating these systems
12 on the fly. So when you mentioned, I think it was
13 with the PA system being able to basically turn on
14 within a couple of days, I couldn't imagine being
15 able to do that, you know, on the fly. So, I just
16 want to acknowledge that this is an example of your
17 preparedness on part of the Administration, and it
18 worked in large parts. I want to thank you and
19 acknowledge that.

20 LISA FITZPATRICK: Thank you.

21 CHAIRPERSON LEVIN: And I'll turn it over
22 to Council Member Grodenchik for questions. And
23 also, we've been joined by Council Member Brad Lander
24 as well.

1
2 COUNCIL MEMBER GRODENCHIK: Thank you,
3 Mr. Chair. Good morning everybody. I do regret that
4 I have to take a least a lengthy break today to
5 attend a funeral of a dear, dear friend's mother-in-
6 law. Unbelievably, he lost his mother and his
7 mother-in-law in the space of an hour this past week.
8 So, today the funeral for this mother-in-law. I want
9 to thank you all for being here today, especially the
10 advocates. We have worked so far, and one of her
11 first hearings that I ever attended with Chair Levin
12 was the annual hearing on hunger soon after I came to
13 the Council, and I want to echo Chair Levin's
14 comments that a lot of what we're able to accomplish
15 over the last six months with his unprecedented
16 pandemic, at least unprecedented in our lifetime, was
17 based upon the work that we're able to do. Good
18 morning, Ms. Fitzpatrick. How are you today?

19 LISA FITZPATRICK: I'm doing-- I'm doing
20 well. Thank you, Council Member.

21 COUNCIL MEMBER GRODENCHIK: I'm glad to
22 hear that. I'd like to talk a bit about EFAP, which
23 is certainly near and dear to my heart, and you had
24 mentioned the funding at 20.9 million, and we have
25 worked very closely with the Administration and many

1 of the people who are going to testify today to raise
2 that number. My understanding, though, is that there
3 ws additional 25 or 26 million dollars that we
4 allocated in the spring for that, and I don't see
5 that number accounted for this morning, and obviously
6 very important. It went to some of our largest
7 providers. I'd like you to comment on that.

9 LISA FITZPATRICK: First, Council Member,
10 let me give you my sincerest condolences--

11 COUNCIL MEMBER GRODENCHIK: [interposing]
12 Thank you.

13 LISA FITZPATRICK: for the loss of your
14 friends. Difficult times and, you know, everyone is
15 suffering at this point, and I just hope that there's
16 an end to this pandemic.

17 COUNCIL MEMBER GRODENCHIK: Well, yeah,
18 she -- the two people that passed were not COVID-
19 related, just old age essentially.

20 LISA FITZPATRICK: Okay, but any loss is
21 still difficult--

22 COUNCIL MEMBER GRODENCHIK: [interposing]
23 It is tough, tough.

24 LISA FITZPATRICK: I'd like to turn this
25 question over to my colleague Annette Holm. She's

1
2 the Chief Special Services Officer, and she manages
3 the EFAP program. So, Annette Holm will respond to
4 your inquiry.

5 COUNCIL MEMBER GRODENCHIK: Thank you.

6 ANNETTE HOLM: Good morning. I don't
7 want you to think that we're playing round robin
8 here, but in regards to 25 million, Kate MacKenzie
9 [sp?] from the Food [sic] Czar program is really the
10 one who can answer that question, and Kate is--

11 COUNCIL MEMBER GRODENCHIK: [interposing]
12 [inaudible] at this point.

13 KATE MACKENZIE: Thank you so much
14 Annette and certainly Chair Levin and members of the
15 Committee. Again, I want to extend my condolences.
16 That's just tragic. My name is Kate MacKenzie and I'm
17 the Director of the Mayor's Office of Food Policy,
18 and I want to just take a moment to acknowledge that
19 with Commissioner Garcia's departure I am and have
20 been since March integrally involved and will be
21 continuing the overseeing the management and the
22 operations of Get Food Program in many of the related
23 pieces. I've had the real pleasure to be able to work
24 hand-in-hand with the Council on the coordination and
25 ultimately distribution of the 25 million that you're

1 referring to Councilman. Those dollars are actually-
2 - the contracts are with DSNY, and as you may know,
3 we work certainly very closely with council and
4 council determine the 10 organizations that
5 ultimately served as the sort of umbrella
6 organizations that ultimately have insured that more
7 700 pantries across the City received food and funds,
8 and that has just been a mammoth undertaking, and I
9 really, again, appreciate the Council's leadership in
10 ensuring that that program could be created.

12 COUNCIL MEMBER GRODENCHIK: Well, I would
13 like to think that since Chair Levin remark and his
14 comments, we didn't have to reinvent the wheel here,
15 so to speak, and that New York City has
16 infrastructure in place, and we certainly have the
17 infrastructure in our houses of worship and other
18 places where people can go to get food. I think that
19 the pandemic has really ripped open, if we didn't
20 know it already, but it has really ripped open the
21 fact that too many people in this city are going
22 hungry. One is too many, obviously, but we know that
23 HRA touches some three million New Yorkers a year,
24 not all for food, but in large measurement many, you
25 know, many people need food. And so it's my hope as

1 we start to think about budget for next year, which
2 will be Mayor de Blasio's last budget, that we
3 consider-- and I hope that all the three people who
4 are here from HRA and any others who may be
5 listening, we really need to rethink how we feed
6 people in this city. There is absolutely, and I've
7 said this and I'm going to continue to say it, and I
8 want to thank Chair Levin for being such a strong
9 supporter on this, as well as the Speaker who made
10 this a top priority as soon as he took office,
11 there's no reason for anybody to go hungry in this
12 city. We have the food. We have the logistics in
13 place. So, and I can go on and on, but I'm running
14 out of time. But I do hope that the Administration
15 will take to heart that this cannot be a one-shot,
16 that we have got to help people in need. I don't
17 live in a poor neighbor. I live in a relatively
18 affluent part of New York City, but I can tell you
19 the work that my office has done and the numbers of
20 people lined up at my local schools to this day are
21 around the block, which is just incredible. So,
22 please take to Chair Banks, if he's not listening,--
23 Commissioner Banks, not Chair Banks, that message
24 from me, and I think it's shared by all 50 parent
25

1 members of the New York City Council. With that, Mr.
2 Chairman, I will yield back, and I'm sorry I've got
3 to leave, but I thank you all for your work, and if
4 you would, the Council committee or whoever's taking
5 testimony, I would appreciate that testimony being
6 forwarded to my Chief of Staff so I can read it when-
7
8 -

9 SERGEANT AT ARMS: [interposing] Time's
10 up.

11 COUNCIL MEMBER GRODENCHIK: Thank you.

12 CHAIRPERSON LEVIN: Thank you, Council
13 Member Grodenchik. Also our condolences on the loss
14 of your friend's family.

15 COUNCIL MEMBER GRODENCHIK: Thank you.

16 CHAIRPERSON LEVIN: WE are also joined
17 this morning by Council Member Salamanca, Gibson, and
18 Reynoso. And with that, I will ask a few questions,
19 and then I will be turning it over to colleagues for
20 questions as well. And so my first question is, can
21 you all explain the kind of how the Get Food Program
22 and HRA's food programs are working side by side and
23 how are they coordinated? How are they ensuring that
24 the efforts are not necessarily publicative [sic],
25 but are additive?

1
2 KATE MACKENZIE: I'll take a stab at that
3 just from the Get Food perspective, and again, really
4 appreciate the extraordinary partnership with HRA and
5 my colleagues specifically within the EFAP program.
6 You know, Councilman, I know you also really know
7 this, the Emergency Food Network so well and can
8 appreciate the fragility of it in the best of times
9 let alone in these tragic times. We certainly are
10 working hand in hand both exploring the EFAP network,
11 and then also you know, with regard to this 25
12 million-- and just the entire landscape of the
13 Emergency Food Network, ensuring that in some cases
14 pantries that are not part of EFAPs program are
15 attended to and able to service communities that are
16 I need. And also, I want to make a special attention
17 to the Taskforce on Racial Equity and Inclusion that
18 modified some of the EFAP rules to change
19 specifically the time frame of a pantry being in
20 existence from six months to four months to be
21 considered for EFAP participation. So, I would-- it
22 would-- to say that I'm touch with EFAP daily is
23 incredibly realistic if not multiple times a day to
24 ensure that we're hearing in real-time the needs,
25 whether it be food needs, funding needs, openings,

1
2 closures, what have you, and can really-- to your
3 colleague Council Member Garodnick's point, make sure
4 that this network comes back even more resilient as a
5 result of having gone through this tragedy.

6 CHAIRPERSON LEVIN: Thank you. Now, how-
7 - in terms of the caseloads for the Get Food Program,
8 how are those-- if you kind of give a 30,000 foot
9 view of how that program is working alongside HRA's
10 programs and also is working alongside DFTA's
11 programs, how-- just to give New Yorkers a clear
12 picture of which programs they may be qualifying for
13 in which might serve their needs.

14 KATE MACKENZIE: Sure. Thank you for
15 that question. It's important that New Yorkers do
16 understand the resources available for them. in the-
17 - in the late days of March, this Get Food Emergency
18 Home Delivery Program was created literally in a
19 matter of days to be able to ensure that all New
20 Yorkers did not have to worry about where their next
21 meal was going to come from. You know, it's been
22 such a long road, but we can think back to March when
23 really the guidance for everyone, in particular
24 seniors, was to stay home. And so thinking about
25 what that would mean for people who could no longer

1
2 maybe go to the grocery store or have a chance to be
3 able-- the money maybe to be able to provide to get
4 deliveries. I remember during those times even if
5 you could order for deliveries of groceries, the time
6 slots that were available were just so hard to find.
7 So, this Get Food Program, still active and very much
8 alive, nyc.gov/getfood or calling 311 if you cannot
9 leave your home to get food, if you have no one who
10 can get food for you or you have difficulty affording
11 private delivery services, the City will provide you
12 with deliveries to your door of emergency meals. So,
13 that program at its peak served more than one--
14 essentially 1.2 million New Yorkers, and at this
15 point I'm pleased to say that we're down to about
16 127,000 New Yorkers who are still utilizing the
17 program. Certainly, that's far too many, but on the
18 positive side, it does mean that people, you know,
19 are able to get food by going to the grocery store or
20 utilizing other food access points available. I also
21 want to make mention certainly of the Department of
22 Education's Grab-n-Go program. There are more than
23 400 Grab-n-Go locations across the City,
24 predominantly at the schools. Once again, my
25 colleague mentioned, but I'll put the plug in also

1 for the Mapnyc.gov/getfood to be able to identify
2 where those locations are. Those will be in
3 operation through Friday of this week, at which point
4 the program will evolve to accommodate for the return
5 of blended and in-classroom learning.
6

7 CHAIRPERSON LEVIN: Okay, so the home
8 delivered meal portion,-- those are meals not
9 necessarily-- that wasn't shelf stable food.

10 KATE MACKENZIE: It's self-- it's
11 predominantly-- again, it's predominantly self-stable
12 meals. So, each delivery would be a box of
13 predominantly self-stable meals because this is,
14 again, the, you know, sort of option of last resort
15 to ensure that people had a steady supply of food.
16 Foods were delivered through TLC taxis and we wanted
17 to-- again, at the height of this we were serving
18 more than a million people with meals, more than a
19 million meals a day, and wanted to make sure that we
20 could scale the program while also providing a steady
21 supply of food. So most definitely they were tilted
22 on the shelf stable side, but also aligned to very
23 strict nutrition standards that the City has.

24 CHAIRPERSON LEVIN: And so, the decrease
25 that you see, almost a 90 percent decrease since its

1
2 peak, and that's because of some of the easing of
3 restrictions.

4 KATE MACKENZIE: Yeah, we monitor the
5 program daily for obviously to be sure that we have
6 the supply of food and all of that and ensuring that,
7 you know-- I should make note that certainly there
8 are halal, Kosher, vegetarian, and standard meal
9 options available. But yeah, if we just look at the
10 landscape changes from, you know, when the program
11 was created back in March, the number of stores that
12 are now open that weren't open, that delivery slot
13 that were open, certainly the utilization of
14 promotion of Grab-n-Go, all of these factors have
15 made it easier to access food across the city.

16 CHAIRPERSON LEVIN: Now, how many-- how
17 much-- how well has Grab-n-Go been utilized?

18 KATE MACKENZIE: Extraordinarily well.
19 My colleagues from Department of Education who are
20 not here at the moment, but I know that we're
21 averaging, you know, again typically between 400 and
22 500,000 meals a day, and again, the City Department
23 of Education offered kosher and halal options as
24 well. So that program has been really significant.

1
2 CHAIRPERSON LEVIN: Now what happens what
3 that program now that school is opening? Are we
4 going to-- I'm assuming that not all of those Grab-n-
5 Go meals work for school-aged children.

6 KATE MACKENZIE: Sure.

7 CHAIRPERSON LEVIN: So what are we-- how
8 are we going to-- how are we-- how are we doing that?

9 KATE MACKENZIE: Yep, at a very high
10 level, and I'll certainly follow up with more
11 information specifically from DOE, but beginning--
12 you know, so again, through the end of this week, so
13 through Friday the 25th, all of those 400 locations
14 will continue to operate as they have, you know, for
15 the past several months. Beginning on actually
16 Tuesday, the 29th, which is when blended learning
17 will commence for elementary schools, many of those
18 schools will transition those public food hubs will
19 decrease to 207 sites and will be open from 3-5:00
20 p.m. for adults who don't have other options. So,
21 those sites and that map will be available once
22 again, certainly on the DOE's site, as well as on
23 nyc.gov/getfood. There will--

24 CHAIRPERSON LEVIN: [interposing] I'm
25 sorry, just-- just to interrupt. So you're said

1
2 it's-- they're going to be open from 3:00-5:00 p.m.
3 What were they open until now? Sorry.

4 KATE MACKENZIE: They were-- now they--
5 we were open-- they were not open that late. I
6 [inaudible] the hours right now. But certainly we
7 can appreciate with the school really surveying-- and
8 all the-- serving students and faculty and staff
9 wanting to really separate and accommodate with
10 school learning [inaudible] public seating element.

11 CHAIRPERSON LEVIN: Now, we had heard
12 that a number of homeless New Yorkers were utilizing
13 Grab-n-Go, and so there's a concern that, you know,
14 that will-- they'll be losing that as an option.
15 Have you guys looked at that and are coordinating
16 with DHS on that?

17 KATE MACKENZIE: Yeah, thank you for that
18 question. It's absolutely a population that we're
19 working very closely to ensure continuity of
20 services. I really would defer that question
21 specifically to my colleagues at DOE, but I do know
22 that they're taking in many of the special
23 populations into consideration.

24 CHAIRPERSON LEVIN: Okay, I'm going to--
25 let's see, ask about-- with SNAP enrollment. So, Ms.

1
2 Fitzpatrick, if-- so, looking at the testimony, HRA's
3 testimony to the Assembly on September 9th, that the
4 agency received 56,755 more applications than in
5 April of 2019 which is a 207 percent increase. Do
6 we know what the percentage increases were for the
7 months of July and August, from the same time of last
8 year, and do we know-- I mean, are we tracking to see
9 kind of what that-- the rate of increase has been
10 dropping?

11 LISA FITZPATRICK: Yes, we do have that
12 information here. There was a slight decrease in the
13 number of applications in July of 2020, but after the
14 federal pandemic unemployment benefit expired, then
15 August applications increase significantly. So, in
16 July of 2020 we had 29,762 applications, and that was
17 a decrease of three percent compared to July of 2019,
18 which at that point was 30,682 applications. In
19 August of 2020, applications increased to 35,723
20 applications, and that was a 24 percent increase from
21 the year before. In August of 2019 application
22 volume, SNAP application volume was 28,712.

23 CHAIRPERSON LEVIN: And do we have--
24 what's the correct number of SNAP recipients in the
25 City?

1
2 LISA FITZPATRICK: The current number of
3 SNAP recipients as of--

4 CHAIRPERSON LEVIN: [interposing]
5 Recipients and households if you give both of that.

6 LISA FITZPATRICK: Okay, yes, I have both
7 those figures here. The SNAP households for August
8 2020 is 882,201 in the households, which was an
9 increase-- which was actually was a decrease of about
10 12 percent compared to August of 2019. We had
11 985,088 households at that time in August of 2019.
12 SNAP recipients for August 2020 we had 1,511,568
13 recipients as of August 2020, and that was a decrease
14 of about 11 percent from August of 2019 where the
15 number of recipients stood at 1,683,674 individuals.

16 CHAIRPERSON LEVIN: How would that
17 compare, those numbers, to where-- what the
18 enrollment was in early March?

19 LISA FITZPATRICK: I don't know if I have
20 the March data here.

21 CHAIRPERSON LEVIN: We have seen an
22 increase in SNAP, obviously since early March, so it
23 must have declined pretty significantly from last
24 August to March I suppose.

1
2 LISA FITZPATRICK: We'll have to get back
3 to you. I don't have the March data. I have--

4 CHAIRPERSON LEVIN: [interposing] Okay.

5 LISA FITZPATRICK: I have March 2020, but
6 not March 2019.

7 CHAIRPERSON LEVIN: Oh, no, March 2020 is
8 fine, because I'm just curious how it's-- how the
9 enrollment has gone from March to today.

10 LISA FITZPATRICK: Well, I just have the
11 number of applications, I don't have the--

12 CHAIRPERSON LEVIN: [interposing] Oh,
13 okay.

14 LISA FITZPATRICK: other component for
15 period.

16 CHAIRPERSON LEVIN: Okay, got it.

17 LISA FITZPATRICK: I may be able to get
18 it before the end of this hearing.

19 CHAIRPERSON LEVIN: Okay. Do you have
20 the percentage of SNAP applications since the start
21 of the pandemic that have been approved versus how
22 many have been denied, and given all of the waivers,
23 what would be the reasons for denial at this point?

24 LISA FITZPATRICK: Yes, I have that
25 information. From March through July of 2020, 46

1 percent of our SNAP applications were approved, and
2 52 percent were denied. The top reasons for denials
3 tend to be a failure to return-- to provide
4 verification, excess unearned income, which makes the
5 household ineligible for SNAP, excess earned income
6 which makes the household ineligible for SNAP. Then
7 we have some other denial reasons, like the person is
8 receiving SNAP on another case or they're active on
9 cash assistance, so they're not eligible for SNAP-
10 only benefits. And when we compare that data to
11 where we were last year in August of 2019, our top
12 reason for denial back in August of 2019 was a
13 barrier to complete on-demand application interviews.
14 So, 45 percent of applications were denied in August
15 of 2019, because individuals failed to have an
16 interview, and at that point we had on-demand
17 application interviews. Since we did not have
18 application that required application interviews
19 during COVID-19 up until August of 2020, that was no
20 longer a top denial reason, and the failure to
21 provide documents-- the failure to provide
22 verification rose to 33 percent of the applications
23 as of August 2020 was denied for failing to provide
24 verification of required document-- required mandated
25

1
2 eligibility factors. Back in August of 2019, that
3 was a lower rate of denial at 21 percent, because the
4 top denial reason happened to be the failure to have
5 the on-demand application interview.

6 CHAIRPERSON LEVIN: If it's possible, and
7 I realize you wouldn't have it now, but for-- if you
8 could follow up for months, month by month from April
9 'til August, if you could provide us the--and you've
10 given us a lot of this data already, but the number
11 of applications and the number of rejections by month
12 as well as the number of closures by month as well
13 for SNAP cases. Just as a follow-up from this
14 hearing.

15 LISA FITZPATRICK: Okay.

16 CHAIRPERSON LEVIN: Now, we-- we've been
17 told that there were 8,000 SNAP cases that were
18 closed for failure to recertify as the documented
19 reason for their closure, but that doesn't make sense
20 because they have-- under the federal waiver they
21 should be automatically extended. So, I thought the
22 recertification has been waived. Can you speak to
23 that? Do you know what's happened with those 8,000
24 cases?

1
2 LISA FITZPATRICK: There were issues with
3 the extensions. The State of New York provided the
4 six-month extension starting in March of 2020. Some
5 households were closed in March because the failure
6 to recertify happened prior to receiving the six-
7 month extension. So those were legitimate closings.
8 After that six-month extension was granted, the state
9 had a file which was supposed to prevent anyone from
10 closing because of failure to recertify.
11 Unfortunately, there were errors on that record, and
12 they sent the cases to HRA and we were able to reopen
13 any cases that were inappropriately closed, but
14 failing to recertify after that March vow. So there
15 were errors in this transfer of information from the
16 state to New York City, but those errors were
17 resolved.

18 CHAIRPERSON LEVIN: Those 8,000 cases
19 have been reinstated?

20 LISA FITZPATRICK: Correct. And there
21 were some cases that were legitimately closed for
22 other reasons, but the cases that were closed for
23 failing to recertify were sent to New York City in
24 order to ensure that cases were appropriately
25 restored.

1
2 CHAIRPERSON LEVIN: Now, in terms of
3 applications that have been denied because of failure
4 to provide verification, we understand that there is--
5 - there's a policy directive from HRA, a duty to
6 assist policy directive that states that the JOS
7 worker should not delay or reject an applicant,
8 participant's application, or recertification due to
9 missing documentation if the information can be
10 obtained from other system or through self at
11 [inaudible] if applicable. Can you speak to how HRA
12 is ensuring that staff is complying with its
13 directive, and how is HRA following up with those
14 20,000 applicants to ensure that they-- that HRA is
15 receiving or working with the applicant to get that
16 documentation.

17 LISA FITZPATRICK: Most of our
18 documentation requirement have been greatly relaxed
19 during COVID-19. Households can declare their
20 shelter expenses and a number of other factors. It's
21 really at this point, about any earned or unearned
22 income that we cannot verify through computer
23 matches. We still have matches that we're running
24 for state unemployment insurance benefits. We still
25 are utilizing the talk [sic] systems wherever

1 possible to verify earned income. So we're
2 continuing to use collateral context as much as
3 possible to get the information that's needed in
4 order to verify information in order to make a
5 determination on the case. If all of the information
6 is presented by the household prior to September, if
7 all the information was provided by the household as
8 a new applicant, then HRA did not have to have a
9 telephone interview with the household, and any
10 household that did not have all that verification
11 would have had a conversation with an employee or a
12 redeployed worker in order to gain as much
13 information as possible to see how we could assist
14 that individual with getting that information. Now,
15 with the expiration of the interview waiver, all
16 application cases require an interview, and it's in
17 those conversations that we get an understanding with
18 clients as to how we can best help them to get that
19 documentation that they need to verify their
20 eligibility for assistance. But some households,
21 there is an ability for us to reach out to employers,
22 but as you can imagine, many employers when they get
23 information-- when they get telephone calls from
24 individuals about a person's employment, they don't'

1 want to provide detailed information about the
2 employed individual's income. So, we rely greatly on
3 the computer matches in order to verify earned
4 income. Households that are not able to verify their
5 earned income through pay stubs or a letter from
6 their employer makes it much more difficult for us to
7 be able to assist them if the employer does not
8 cooperate with the City, but we still reach out to
9 employers where we have that information from the
10 household. We still reach out to them in order to
11 that information. So the primary issue really is
12 about any type of earned income. We're getting
13 computer matches from the Department of Education to
14 verify residency for children so we're not requiring
15 households to go to the Department of Education in
16 order to get that information. As I said before,
17 we're using the state unemployment system in order to
18 verify unemployment insurance benefits. We're
19 continuing to use a lot of strategies in order to
20 assist clients during this time, but there are some
21 eligibility requirements that we really do need the
22 client's cooperation in order to assist them.

24 CHAIRPERSON LEVIN: So, now with
25 recertification, I'm a little concerned that now that

1
2 we are not using on-demand for recertificaitons,
3 because that would require 100 percent of those
4 households to have interviews. We deployed workers
5 in FIA staff in looking at case information and
6 making a determination as to whether or not they can
7 recertify the household without having to speak to
8 the individual, and through that process there's no
9 telephone call that is made to the SNAP recipient
10 asking additional information. As--

11 CHAIRPERSON LEVIN: [interposing] So we--
12 just to clarify, so recertification is done entirely
13 on the HRA side without the applicant having to do
14 anything?

15 LISA FITZPATRICK: The recertification--
16 the individual still needs to submit the
17 recertification, but if everything is submitted with
18 that recertification, all the documentation to verify
19 eligibility, we can go ahead and recertify the case
20 without having to have a conversation with the
21 household. So that interview, that partial interview
22 waiver still exists for active cases.

23 CHAIRPERSON LEVIN: And that-- for that
24 documentation, you know, overwhelming majority is

25

1 done through a smart phone, through AccessHRA at this
2 point?
3

4 LISA FITZPATRICK: That's correct, yes.
5 Most of our applications-- that's why our
6 recertifications are submitted through AccessHRA and
7 the documentation is uploaded and is able to be
8 reviewed by HRA staff and we deploy workers.

9 CHAIRPERSON LEVIN: What's the
10 percentage on that, I'm sorry?

11 LISA FITZPATRICK: For the use of the on-
12 demand system?

13 CHAIRPERSON LEVIN: Yeah, for-- in terms
14 of recertificaitons right now, percentage of cases
15 that have-- they're submitting their documentation,
16 because they know that obviously walk in-- the
17 opportunity for walk-ins are vastly decreased. So,
18 just-- I just want to make sure that there aren't
19 recertification recipients that were seeking to
20 recertify who don't-- maybe don't have access to
21 AccessHRA or not proficient [inaudible].

22 LISA FITZPATRICK: Okay, prior to COVID-
23 19, 96 percent of SNAP applications and 87 percent of
24 recertification interviews were held over the
25 telephone, but in the months since the pandemic those

1 numbers have increased to about 89 percent of SNAP
2 applications submitted online and about 99 percent of
3 all SNAP business is conducted remotely and outside
4 of our locations. So people have really embraced the
5 mobile app and the document upload, and that's made
6 it much easier for people to maintain their benefits
7 during the pandemic. Your question regarding
8 recertification, for those households that require
9 interview, HRA is reaching out to them. They'll
10 review information that the household has presented.
11 They'll make a phone call to the household in order
12 to-- in order to interview them. If they do not
13 reach the individual by telephone with that first
14 time, they'll make a subsequent attempt to contact
15 them by telephone. We also send a notice of missed
16 interview to the household to let them know that HRA
17 tried to reach them, if after two attempts we are not
18 able to reach them. And they can always call HRA
19 info line and then we will connect with them and have
20 that interview wherever possible after they receive
21 the notice of missed interview. The SNAP
22 recertifications for September, the period opened on
23 August 1st, so we're keeping an eye on it at this
24 point to see how many of those clients actually
25

1 submit the recertification's compared to this time
2 last year. We don't have that information at this
3 point because we're still in the month of September,
4 and applications are still coming in and workers are
5 continuing to do the recertifications. What we do
6 know is that with the recert numbers that are coming
7 in that we are pretty on top of those recertification
8 telephone calls. Many of our-- many of our workers
9 are making those calls if they need to make a call to
10 speak to the household within two or three days after
11 the recertification is submitted. So, the process is
12 very efficient right now, given the volume of cases
13 that we are receiving.

14
15 CHAIRPERSON LEVIN: You mentioned that if
16 we did an on-demand-- if we were using on-demand,
17 then 100 percent would have to have an interview, is
18 that right?

19 LISA FITZPATRICK: That's correct.
20 There's no way to bifurcate the process to open on-
21 demand for recertification, and call out those that
22 don't need to be interviewed. Because with on-
23 demand, anybody can call. If you're scheduled for an
24 interview-- if you're scheduled for recert, the
25 system allows you to get into the system and speak to

1
2 a live operator. And what we try to avoid is
3 individuals calling us when we don't even need to
4 have an interview with them at this point.

5 CHAIRPERSON LEVIN: I see. So in some
6 sense that would make for ironically less efficient
7 system right now, is that what you're saying?

8 LISA FITZPATRICK: For recertification's,
9 absolutely.

10 CHAIRPERSON LEVIN: Okay. And that was--
11 that was the case before as well, but it wasn't such
12 a-- I mean, before the pandemic, that would have been
13 the case, too, or is that different?

14 LISA FITZPATRICK: No, it was different
15 blood we did not have the partial interview waiver--

16 CHAIRPERSON LEVIN: [interposing] Oh.

17 LISA FITZPATRICK: prior to the pandemic.
18 So, 100 percent of those households needed to have a
19 telephone interview.

20 CHAIRPERSON LEVIN: I see, okay.

21 LISA FITZPATRICK: That's why the on-
22 demand system was more efficient.

23 CHAIRPERSON LEVIN: Okay. The partial
24 waivers until?

1 LISA FITZPATRICK: Until December 30th,
2
3 31st.

4 CHAIRPERSON LEVIN: Until December, okay.
5 I mean, honestly, I'm a little bit confounded why
6 these waivers aren't being extended. Is it Congress
7 that extends the waiver, or is the Administration?

8 LISA FITZPATRICK: So, for the food stamp
9 waivers, the Federal Government has to approve all of
10 the state's request for extensions on these waivers.
11 So, the SNAP recertification waivers were submitted
12 by New York State OTDA to USDA for approval, and we
13 got approval for some things, but not for others.
14 Starting, we requested an approval to extend the
15 waiver of recertification's altogether, but that
16 approval was not granted to us, so that is why we are
17 at this point in the month of September actually
18 having interviews with clients and scheduling
19 recertificaitons. If individuals do not recertify in
20 the month of September for those cases that are due
21 to expire by September 30th, they will lose their
22 benefits, because as of today we do not have approval
23 from the Federal Government to extend that waiver.

24 CHAIRPERSON LEVIN: And the waiver was--
25 the extension was submitted by OTDA to the USDA.

1 LISA FITZPATRICK: That is correct.

2 CHAIRPERSON LEVIN: So, OTDA has asked
3 for every extension that they can ask for?
4

5 LISA FITZPATRICK: They-- we work with
6 our partners in the state to request as many
7 extensions on all of these waivers as possible. So,
8 HRA made the request to extend the waivers for the
9 month of September. We really would like to extend
10 all waivers throughout the entire period until the
11 end of the year, but our state partners said it has
12 been clear that FNS [sic] wants to return to normal.
13 They want cases to be recertified. They want the
14 processes to go back to normal, which is why we do
15 not have a full waiver for application interviews.
16 We had the full waiver for application and
17 recertification interviews in order to just interview
18 those households. That did not submit everything that
19 was required. We have since lost that waiver for the
20 application interviews, but we still have a partial
21 interview waiver for the recertifications. So, we've
22 been working with our partners and we've submitted
23 letters to the state requesting an extension of those
24 federal waivers, but they have to go to USDA in order
25 to gain approval.

1
2 CHAIRPERSON LEVIN: You know, is that
3 consistent across all states or is New York being
4 treated in any way differently than other states?

5 LISA FITZPATRICK: All states have to go
6 to USDA for extensions on waivers for food stamp
7 related rules.

8 CHAIRPERSON LEVIN: And then are the
9 waivers being granted by USDA different for New York
10 than other states, or do we now know? Or?

11 LISA FITZPATRICK: That's not my
12 understanding at this point.

13 CHAIRPERSON LEVIN: So, it's all-- so,
14 USDA is telling every state that now they have to
15 recertify SNAP fines.

16 LISA FITZPATRICK: That's my
17 understanding, that USDA is encouraging states to go
18 back to normal processing and have full interviews
19 for our applicants as well as starting the
20 recertification process.

21 CHAIRPERSON LEVIN: So, at least they're
22 not singling us out, but they are, but the USDA is
23 putting, you know, pretty onerous requirements on
24 states and localities in terms of recertification in
25 the middle of a pandemic, you know, with the possible

1 consequence of people losing their SNAP benefits all
2 across the country. So,--

3
4 LISA FITZPATRICK: [interposing] Yeah,
5 right.

6 CHAIRPERSON LEVIN: Shows what, you know,
7 how little the Trump Administration actually cares
8 about people receiving SNAP benefits.

9 LISA FITZPATRICK: And we've heard from
10 our partners in the state that other states, there
11 are many other states that have gone back to normal
12 processing, but you know, with the volume of cases
13 that we have in New York City, this is not something
14 that we think we can effectively do and also-- while
15 also ensuring that clients don't lose their benefits.

16 CHAIRPERSON LEVIN: I hope that our
17 members of the Congress are making it clear to the
18 Administration that that is-- that this is very
19 problematic. I'm going to turn it over to my
20 colleagues, and then I will have some more questions
21 on the back end of that. I think-- so I'll turn it
22 back over to Ms. Killawon for Council Member
23 questions.

24 COMMITTEE COUNSEL: Chair Levin, I see no
25 raised hands from Council Members.

1
2 CHAIRPERSON LEVIN: Oh, I thought Council
3 Member Lander had questions. Is he still on the
4 phone?

5 COMMITTEE COUNSEL: Council Member Lander
6 no longer has questions.

7 CHAIRPERSON LEVIN: Do any members want
8 to ask questions? Alright, seeing nobody. Okay.
9 Alright, the option is open. Let's see. I wanted
10 to ask about the pandemic unemployment assistance,
11 the 600 dollars a week. Were there applications that
12 were denied between August and July for that income,
13 making them over-income?

14 LISA FITZPATRICK: Yes. We had-- we had
15 applications that were denied for excess earned, and
16 excess unearned income. There were households who
17 first applied for cash assistance or snap before the
18 pandemic benefits came through for them, and once
19 they came in, then they were over income for those
20 benefits. So, by the time the application was begin
21 process, the individual was actually receiving the
22 600 dollars per week, and as a result was not
23 eligible for assistance. Since the pandemic benefit,
24 the 600 dollars has ended, we've encouraged people to
25 reapply for assistance. We cannot go back and

1 retroactively make a determination on those cases at
2 this point. But if they do reapply, then we can
3 examine the application to determine eligibility
4 based on their current income.
5

6 CHAIRPERSON LEVIN: How are you
7 encouraging them?

8 LISA FITZPATRICK: Through social media
9 posts and on AccessHRA, as well as on the HRA
10 internet.

11 CHAIRPERSON LEVIN: Okay, so there's a--
12 like a message that goes out to them on HR-- on those
13 specific applicants? There's a message that would go
14 out to them saying--

15 LISA FITZPATRICK: [interposing] There was
16 a message out telling people that they could reapply
17 for assistance. For individuals who are currently
18 receiving assistance and that-- and were still
19 eligible for SNAP, we removed the extra 600 dollars a
20 week once we got the determination that it was
21 expiring. So, any--

22 CHAIRPERSON LEVIN: [interposing] Their
23 benefits might go up then.

24 LISA FITZPATRICK: Yeah, their benefits--
25 well, because of the emergency allotment that was

1
2 issued by the state, then their benefits went up to
3 the maximum regardless, even ahead of us re-budgeting
4 those cases because any household that received less
5 than the maximum, received a difference in that
6 allotment based on the states emergency allotment
7 supplement.

8 CHAIRPERSON LEVIN: Okay. Okay. So,
9 they- right, okay. So they're still getting the
10 maximum.

11 LISA FITZPATRICK: They are still getting
12 the--

13 CHAIRPERSON LEVIN: [interposing]
14 [inaudible]

15 LISA FITZPATRICK: They're still
16 receiving the maximum. The emergency allotment is
17 being issued for the month of September as well, but
18 we did go ahead and rebudget cases. So after that
19 allotment, the emergency supplement ends. Then the
20 case can get on a recurring basis receive the correct
21 amount of benefits.

22 CHAIRPERSON LEVIN: Oh, okay. So the
23 state is not continuing the emergency allotment past
24 September?

1
2 LISA FITZPATRICK: We don't know yet. We
3 haven't heard word from the state at this point.

4 CHAIRPERSON LEVIN: Okay, so that's
5 something that we can do. So recipients should--
6 because that could be a significant amount per month.
7 That could be a couple hundred dollars a month--

8 LISA FITZPATRICK: [interposing] Yeah.

9 CHAIRPERSON LEVIN: for SNAP recipients?

10 LISA FITZPATRICK: Yeah, no, it can be.
11 I have an example here. If you have a household of
12 two individuals, and let's just assume that they were
13 issued \$237 and regular food stamp benefits because
14 they had other income. The maximum for two people is
15 actually \$355. So, because of that state supplement,
16 they would get an additional \$118, and that's a
17 significant amount of money for households that are
18 struggling during the pandemic. So--

19 CHAIRPERSON LEVIN: [interposing] 118 a
20 piece?

21 LISA FITZPATRICK: No, for the household.

22 CHAIRPERSON LEVIN: Oh, oh.

23 LISA FITZPATRICK: So, the household of
24 two, they would be brought up to \$355 a month, and
25 you know, we want that. We strongly encourage that

1
2 to continue for the duration of the pandemic, but we
3 have not received word from our state partners about
4 the money, the allocation being issued beyond
5 September of this year.

6 CHAIRPERSON LEVIN: Okay, so that's
7 something we can get the word out about--

8 LISA FITZPATRICK: [interposing] Yes.

9 CHAIRPERSON LEVIN: that we need our
10 state partners in the State Legislature, Assembly
11 Members and our Senators, as well as Governor Cuomo,
12 as well as all the advocates to take note of that,
13 because we need that.

14 LISA FITZPATRICK: Continue to advocate
15 for it, absolutely. Continue to advocate for the
16 maximum emergency allotment.

17 CHAIRPERSON LEVIN: Do you know whether
18 that was a specific amount that was allocated in the
19 state budget back in march or whether this is a
20 programmatic decision by OTDA, or do you know the
21 process for that or how that would work?

22 LISA FITZPATRICK: I'm not familiar with
23 the process, but I think it requires going to the
24 Federal Government, because this is SNAP funding.

1
2 CHAIRPERSON LEVIN: Okay. Okay. This is
3 something that can make a very big difference for New
4 Yorkers. So, I appreciate that, if we just kind of
5 multiply that out. That can be very-- it's a lot of
6 money coming back into the city. on the info line
7 issues, so safety net advocates, activists, made a--
8 did a report over the summer that found that over 50
9 percent of calls were being dropped without ever--
10 before connecting with a worker, and that there
11 might-- there's some issues around language access.
12 Have you read the report, or have you seen the
13 report, and what's your-- how do you-- what do you
14 think about it?

15 LISA FITZPATRICK: We read the report.
16 There were clearly some issues that were identified.
17 While I manage the cash assistance and SNAP program,
18 info line is an integral part of the work that we do
19 because many of our clients go through info line in
20 order to get assistance. The info line agents were
21 also working from home at the same time at the same
22 time the FIA's job center and SNAP center employees
23 were working from home. In April of this year, the
24 Office of Constituent Services which manages our info
25 line system, they started using new technology called

1 ring central, which is a telephonic system, a cloud-
2 based system that allows operators to take calls from
3 home. And in switching to that cloud-based system,
4 they allow agents to answer calls and provides
5 service to clients. So, as a result of the change to
6 ring central, we were not able to provide reports for
7 certain data fields. But-- so there were delays in
8 the answering of the calls, but we continue to
9 connect New Yorkers with the services that they need.
10 Their average wait time continues to improve at this
11 point now that we have more agents online and taking
12 calls. I know there were hiccups in the beginning
13 because of the pandemic and getting-- making sure
14 that everyone was on board and able to provide
15 services remotely, but the average wait time
16 continues to improve, and I think it's currently
17 about five minutes, which is the longest wait time
18 for a caller to reach an agent, and 15 minutes during
19 much higher call volume at the beginning of every
20 month. So there's been a lot of improvements since
21 that report was published, as well as ongoing
22 training, because I know the report said that some
23 agents did not fully understand how to address client
24 needs if the client said they were unable to use
25

1
2 Access HRA in order to submit an application for SNAP
3 or cash assistance. So there's been ongoing training
4 to make sure that everyone was familiar with that
5 telephonic application process so HRA employees or
6 BDT would be able to initiate the application.

7 CHAIRPERSON LEVIN: Alright, bear with me
8 for one moment. There's issues around language
9 access. There's currently four languages that are
10 offered, but obviously we know that there are, you
11 know, dozens of languages spoken in the City. How
12 are you with investing language access issues on the
13 info line?

14 LISA FITZPATRICK: During the pandemic,
15 info line answered over half a million calls, and at
16 that point, about 100,000 of these calls were in
17 languages other than English. Info line continues to
18 use our interpretation services, and connect clients
19 with operators who either speak the language that the
20 individual speaks or can connect them through a
21 language line service to someone who can assist the
22 operator with communicating with the individual. So
23 language services are absolutely still being utilized
24 by info line during this COVID-19 period. There may
25 have been issues, as I've said, because of the change

1
2 to the cloud-based technology, but they're back on
3 track and they are assuring the agents are using the
4 language line services for any client who does not
5 speak the language that the agent presents with.

6 CHAIRPERSON LEVIN: is there-- is it
7 possible-- so, I think as it is now, the language
8 menu does not play-- it's not the first menu that is
9 played on the call. Is there a way to put the
10 language menu at the outset of the call so that
11 clients are getting that, those options first?

12 LISA FITZPATRICK: That's something we
13 can absolutely check into. I'm not familiar with what
14 script is first heard by clients when they call, the
15 HRA info line, but if it's not the language menu,
16 then I think that's something we could look into.

17 CHAIRPERSON LEVIN: And this is a
18 question that is kind of addressing an ongoing issue,
19 so not necessarily a-- not necessarily pandemic-
20 specific, but with-- how is HRA ensuring access is
21 always available on the app and website for people
22 that may not have-- that have language access issues
23 or have issues with literacy or tech or Wi-Fi to
24 access, tech literacy? How-- you know, there are--
25 there's a percentage of clients, and even if it's

1
2 five percent who prefer to go into in person,
3 particularly elderly people or seniors or those
4 people that are not proficient with technology. How
5 are we making sure that services are available? What
6 are the-- what-- maybe explain a little bit about
7 what's in place right now.

8 LISA FITZPATRICK: We've continued to
9 maintain a presence in every borough, and there are
10 both job centers, SNAP centers, and other offices
11 open currently in every single borough. We have at
12 least two job centers open in Brooklyn and the Bronx.
13 We have drop boxes for individuals who need services,
14 but there's no SNAP center at that particular
15 location that's open so they can drop off documents.
16 Through HRA info line, if we have elderly or disabled
17 or homebound individuals or anyone who doesn't have
18 access to technology, if they tell the operator that
19 they are unable to submit an application either by
20 mail, fax, in-person, or online, the operator will
21 connect them with an HRA employee who can help them
22 submit a telephonic application. So, an HRA employee
23 can actually take the information while the client is
24 on the telephone and start the application and have
25 it submitted without the individual actually having

1 to sign the application. As I stated in my
2 testimony, this is a feature that Benefits Data
3 Trust, BDT, had in place prior to COVID, and they
4 assist individuals with applying for SNAP through
5 this telephonic signature process when they reach out
6 to clients in order to make sure that they can submit
7 applications without necessarily using our
8 technology. So, we have HRA staff that provide
9 telephonic applications for both cash assistance and
10 SNAP. We have BDT that is helping individuals to
11 apply for SNAP only using a telephonic signature. We
12 also have open centers if somebody absolutely needs
13 to come into any one of our sites. They can come
14 into our sites and apply or submit a recertification
15 for assistance, but we also still offer mail, fax,
16 and last but not least, AccessHRA, which has been
17 predominantly how people have been submitting
18 applications and documentations at this point.

19
20 CHAIRPERSON LEVIN: Okay. One thing we've
21 heard from advocates around the phone calls for
22 recertification for applications that because there's
23 no on-demand right now, and people are getting phone
24 calls, and they're coming up as an unknown number, if
25 people don't pick up, there's no number for them to

1
2 call back, and so they have to wait for that call,
3 but you know, for a second call. But if it's coming
4 up as unknown, a lot of people-- I know a lot of
5 people that don't pick up unknown numbers ever.
6 There's no way to tag those numbers as HRA or some
7 kind of-- or have a call-back number available or
8 some other way to address that so that that's not
9 getting-- people aren't getting lost in the shuffle
10 because of that specific reason. I've heard that
11 from two different sources that that's an issue.

12 LISA FITZPATRICK: I understand it's an
13 issue, and that's why we're using the HRA info line
14 for people to call back, because we don't have an on-
15 demand system in place now. If we published a number
16 for everybody to call other than HRA info line,
17 everyone would call, and there's no way with the
18 current technology to be able to route those calls to
19 an operator without the on-demand system. So, if a
20 call is missed for an application interview, then we
21 send a notice of missed interview to the family, and
22 we let them know that they can call the HRA info line
23 and we can schedule a call for them for a time for an
24 HRA employee to contact them again. But--

25

1
2 CHAIRPERSON LEVIN: [interposing] Is there
3 a way within this system that if they schedule a call
4 that like-- does the call go exactly at that moment?
5 So I say I want to do my call at 3:00 p.m., that the
6 call is like generated by the system, and then it
7 would go to an HRA-- the next available HRA operator,
8 that, you know, call the next available HRA operator
9 so that people can at least, like, sign up for a time
10 and the call comes in at that exact time?

11 LISA FITZPATRICK: At this point because
12 we have the partial interview waiver for
13 recertifications, we are not scheduling a time and
14 date certain appointment for recertification, because
15 an actual telephone conversation with the client may
16 not even be necessary. So when we send out the
17 recert notices we tell clients that an HRA worker
18 will contact them if they need additional
19 information, and we're hoping as we have in the past
20 that many clients can recertify based on the
21 documentation that has been submitted without even
22 having to have a telephone conversation with them.
23 if however, the individual misses the two calls that
24 HRA makes at the time that they need information from
25 them, that's when we send a notice of missed

1 interview, and then the client has the ability to
2 call the HRA info line and let HRA info line that
3 they missed the telephone call, and at that point we
4 will reschedule an interview with that household.
5 So, at the point where the call is missed, we now
6 know that the person absolutely did need to speak to
7 an HRA employee. At the time when the letter went
8 out to the client, we did not know whether or not an
9 interview was required, and that's why we did not
10 provide a time and date certain appointment, but once
11 we've made the call, we've reached out to them twice,
12 they don't respond to the telephone calls, then we
13 send a notice of missed interview. At that point,
14 they have an opportunity to speak to--

16 CHAIRPERSON LEVIN: [interposing] Call the
17 info line.

18 LISA FITZPATRICK: Right, call the HRA
19 info line, and we will have a scheduled appointment
20 for someone to call them back.

21 CHAIRPERSON LEVIN: Okay, and that
22 appointment is like-- that's a time and date and a
23 call will absolutely come in at that time and date?

24 LISA FITZPATRICK: It will come very
25 close. You know, as I said earlier, we're pretty

1 close with calling individuals within three to four
2 days of the time their recertification was submitted.
3 So, right now, you know, everything is running pretty
4 smoothly. As time progressed and we have even more
5 applicants and more individuals recertifying, that we
6 might be falling behind schedule a bit with those
7 calls, but as it stands today in September, we're
8 actually interviewing people very rapidly.

10 CHAIRPERSON LEVIN: Okay. I will say
11 that I've heard from two different sources that the
12 info line is-- that they're getting a-- that they're
13 getting a lot of complaints about it. This is
14 organizations that work with clients. Said clients
15 can't get through. I'll just read you one, "We have
16 gotten a lot of complaints about info line, about the
17 centralized number. Clients can't get through.
18 They're cut off. It is hard to use. Why isn't info
19 line being replaced until fall of 2021? Client
20 misses the call." Stated for example, their cell
21 phone doesn't ring, and the worker application call
22 goes right to voice-- or your work or application
23 call goes right to voicemail. They can't dial the
24 worker back. So it's certainly something that we're
25 hearing that the info line maybe is not working.

1
2 It's not working as smoothly as we might hope. Is
3 there-- is there a way for you all to be in touch
4 with some of the advocates and provider community to
5 trouble-shoot some of this?

6 LISA FITZPATRICK: We meet with the
7 advocates on a regular basis. There has been-- I'm
8 not sure on the timing of the comments that you
9 received from some of the advocates--

10 CHAIRPERSON LEVIN: [interposing] This
11 morning.

12 LISA FITZPATRICK: Okay. But there have
13 been improvements, as I said earlier. The wait time
14 is now about five minutes during non-peak times and
15 about 15 minutes during peak time like on Mondays and
16 the beginning part of the day. So I think it might
17 also depend what time of the day they're calling, but
18 they are seeing dramatic improvements since they
19 introduced this cloud-based software. They've seen
20 dramatic improvements in their ability to answer the
21 call.

22 CHAIRPERSON LEVIN: Well then--

23 LISA FITZPATRICK: [interposing]
24 Something--

1
2 CHAIRPERSON LEVIN: [interposing] The
3 issue of whether to call--

4 LISA FITZPATRICK: [interposing]
5 [inaudible] to follow up on.

6 CHAIRPERSON LEVIN: Whether the call
7 could be identified as an incoming call for clients
8 of HRA or something like that, Human Resources
9 Administration, instead of unknown or unidentified?

10 LISA FITZPATRICK: So, we introduced soft
11 [sic] phone [sic] technology to the individuals who
12 are making telephone calls for client for application
13 and recertification interviews. Unfortunately,
14 because individuals are working from home, there
15 isn't a way to make sure that everyone is using the
16 soft phone technology. We did not have it fully
17 rolled out to everyone in the beginning stages of the
18 pandemic. Many of our re-deployed workers were using
19 their personal phones, and I really thank everyone
20 for the hard work that they've been doing during the
21 pandemic because they've actually, you know, jumped
22 on board, and you know, readily used their own
23 computers, use their own phones in order to help us
24 meet the demand of application and recertifications.

1
2 So, if they were using their own phone, workers were
3 blocking the calls--

4 CHAIRPERSON LEVIN: [interposing] Yeah.

5 LISA FITZPATRICK: so their own personal
6 number would not show up. We since have rolled out
7 the soft phone technology to all of our agents, and
8 we're encouraging everyone to use it and not to use
9 their personal devices. With the soft phone
10 technology people can make the telephones through
11 their laptops, and there is identifying information
12 at that point.

13 CHAIRPERSON LEVIN: Okay, okay.

14 LISA FITZPATRICK: When they make it
15 through the soft phone technology.

16 CHAIRPERSON LEVIN: Okay, that's helpful.
17 So the more obviously that that's doable the better,
18 because you know, again, nobody picks up the phone
19 when it-- I mean, a lot of people don't pick up the
20 phone when it's a blocked number, an unidentified
21 number. And I do want to acknowledge the herculean
22 efforts of your staff are doing everything remotely
23 and keeping, you know, keeping the ship upright.
24 It's a huge, huge task. I could just imagine going
25 through a recertification or some-- or documentation

1 interview with having-- I have two little kids, and
2 so having two little kids, you know, crying or asking
3 for stuff while doing an interview, I can only
4 imagine how many times your staff has had to do
5 something like that. I commend them for their work.
6 So, I don't think I have-- let me, I'm sorry. Do you
7 know how many cases are up to be closed if they're
8 not recertified in the next few months?
9

10 LISA FITZPATRICK: I'm not sure I
11 understand that question.

12 CHAIRPERSON LEVIN: So, the-- the cases
13 that are up for recert-- cases are up for recert-- a
14 certain number of cases are up for recertification
15 every month, right? So how many a month are up for
16 recertification?

17 LISA FITZPATRICK: I don't think that I
18 have the September data. I can see if I can get that
19 to you. But--

20 CHAIRPERSON LEVIN: And maybe what
21 percentage are you finding require-- [inaudible]

22 LISA FITZPATRICK: First month in
23 September where we absolutely have to do
24 recertifications. The prior month's people who did
25 submit, it wasn't mandated, but we opened a portal so

1
2 people were able to submit their recertification's in
3 the month of August and in the month of July. With
4 September being now the official first month of
5 mandated recertifications, then we'll know-- it's
6 only the 21st at this point, but we'll know exactly
7 how many have actually submitted at the end of the
8 month, because they have until September 30th to
9 submit their recertifications. We do the recerts
10 down to the last day of the month.

11 CHAIRPERSON LEVIN: Just maybe we can
12 follow up maybe in October or November to kind of get
13 a little bit of a clearer picture.

14 LISA FITZPATRICK: Prior to the pandemic,
15 about 25 percent of our clients did not recertify,
16 but a number of them would come back before-- within
17 the next three months in order to submit the
18 recertification. So, we're trying to keep an eye on
19 it to see if it changes much where it has been in the
20 past.

21 CHAIRPERSON LEVIN: And then just lastly
22 around center closures. Can HRA commit at this point
23 that all of the centers that have been closed due to
24 the pandemic will be reopened when the pandemic is
25 over?

1
2 LISA FITZPATRICK: That's a great
3 question.

4 CHAIRPERSON LEVIN: I don't mean as a
5 gotcha, it's just--

6 LISA FITZPATRICK: [interposing] No,
7 that's a really great question. What we do know is
8 with the resources that have been utilized during the
9 pandemic with online applications and online
10 recertifications, that that's greatly eliminated or
11 reduced the need for individuals to actually come
12 into our locations, and if at all possible, we'd like
13 to continue these strategies into the future. You
14 know, we feel that it's a more dignified way of
15 providing services to individuals of providing
16 services to individuals. There should be no reason
17 for someone who's working or parenting to have to
18 take a day and leave home in order to come in person
19 in order to access HRA services. So, best case
20 scenario for us would be that these benefits and
21 services would continue throughout-- after, post-
22 pandemic into the future. As we've said before,
23 we've been advocating for telephone interviews with
24 cash assistance individuals, and if that was granted
25 into the future, then that could potentially reduce

1 the need for such a footprint in the community. But
2 we always had and will continue to have services
3 available in the community for those individuals who
4 do not have access to the technology or hesitant to
5 use the technology. But you know, I don't think that
6 a physical center is necessarily the answer. I think
7 that just providing access to individuals is more of
8 what we're trying to push for going forward.

10 CHAIRPERSON LEVIN: That's certainly
11 something-- I hope that's something that we'll be
12 talking about while I'm still in office. So I'll be--
13 - I'm in office only until the end of next year, so
14 hopefully that's-- hopefully we'll be able to have
15 that discussion next year and the pandemic doesn't
16 drive it to the following year. Sorry, just two
17 follow-- two last questions here. Just on Friday HRA
18 sent an email to community partners that said,
19 "Please note that due to an urgent system issue, the
20 AccessHRA website will only allow SNAP and cash
21 assistance applications to be submitted online at
22 this time. All services including recertifications
23 are currently unavailable. Has that issue been
24 resolved?

1
2 LISA FITZPATRICK: Yes, it has. It was
3 resolved over the weekend, and the system back up-- I
4 think it came back up either Saturday night or Sunday
5 morning, but I believe it was Saturday evening.

6 CHAIRPERSON LEVIN: Okay. And then just
7 lastly, I just want to confirm. So the issue around
8 the maximum SNAP benefit, the state-- that's the
9 state that has that discretion? The state can-- that
10 money is coming from the state budget, or is that
11 federal money?

12 LISA FITZPATRICK: It's federal money
13 through the CARES Act.

14 CHAIRPERSON LEVIN: Okay.

15 LISA FITZPATRICK: And they-- continues
16 to work with the Federal Government for extensions,
17 and we're hoping that there will be an extension
18 beyond September of this year.

19 CHAIRPERSON LEVIN: Okay, alright. So
20 we'll make sure to let our federal and state partners
21 know that there are a lot of SNAP recipients that can
22 really use that, that extra [inaudible]. Okay, well,
23 thank you very much Ms. Fitzpatrick and Ms. MacKenzie
24 and Ms. Holm. I see Deputy Commissioner Drinkwater
25

1 on the call as well. Amenta, do we have any other
2 members that have questions at this point?
3

4 COMMITTEE COUNSEL: We do not have any
5 other members with questions at this point, Chair.

6 CHAIRPERSON LEVIN: Okay, well, I thank
7 you very much for your time and for talking with us.
8 We may have some follow-up questions for you in the
9 coming days and weeks. We communicate in writing,
10 but-- and if somebody could stay on the zoom call to
11 hear the testimony of providers and advocates and
12 clients, that would be great.

13 UNIDENTIFIED: We have staff who will
14 remain online. It won't be the staff on this zoom,
15 but they are [inaudible] the live stream.

16 LISA FITZPATRICK: I just would like to
17 add that I really want to thank the HRA employees and
18 the re-deployed employees from various city agencies
19 that chipped in during this crisis in order to help
20 make sure that HRA was able to provide benefits and
21 services to the public. I especially like to thank
22 those employees who continued to come in to our in-
23 office offices in order to provide assistance during
24 the crisis. You know, we hear a lot about heroes and
25 essential workers, and often times HRA employees are

1 overlooked, but we provide critical services to the
2 public during crisis. You know, this happened during
3 September 11th, and is happening now more than ever
4 before during the pandemic. Well, we have employees
5 that are putting their own personal needs to the side
6 and they come in on a day to day basis to make sure
7 that HRA is able to serve the public. So I just
8 thank them from the bottom of my heart.

10 CHAIRPERSON LEVIN: Here, here. I agree.
11 Yes, as a-- you know this could have-- It's the work
12 of HRA and your staff and your leadership that kept
13 things going for many, many New Yorkers, and it could
14 have been so much worse. And so yes, I
15 wholeheartedly agree and I appreciate you saying
16 that.

17 LISA FITZPATRICK: Thank you.

18 CHAIRPERSON LEVIN: Okay. Well, thank
19 you to the Administration and we look forward to
20 keeping up these conversations.

21 LISA FITZPATRICK: Thank you.

22 COMMITTEE COUNSEL: Thank you, Chair
23 Levin, and thank you to members of the Administration
24 for your testimony. We are now going to turn to
25 public testimony. I'd like to remind everyone that

1
2 unlike our typical council hearings, we're going to
3 be calling on individuals one by one. Panelists are
4 going to have three minutes to testify, and we ask
5 that you limit your testimony to three minutes.
6 Council Members who have questions for a particular
7 panelist can use the raise hand function in Zoom, and
8 I will call on you after that panelist has completed
9 their testimony. Panelists, once your name is
10 called, a member of our staff is going to unmute you
11 and the Sergeant at Arms is going to give you the go-
12 ahead to begin speaking upon setting the timer.
13 Please wait for the Sergeant to announce that you may
14 begin before delivering your testimony. Also, there
15 is a slight delay with the mute function, so please
16 again wait until the Sergeant announces that you may
17 begin your testimony, and then you can proceed to do
18 so. The next three panelists are going to be in the
19 following order: Nicholas Buess, Rachel Sabella
20 [sp?], and Joel Berg [sp?], and we are going to begin
21 with Nicholas Buess.

22 SERGEANT AT ARMS: You may begin.

23 NICHOLAS BUESS: Thank you. Hi, good
24 morning. Thank you, Chair Levin and members of the
25 City Council for the opportunity to testify today on

1
2 New Yorkers experienced a meal gap of 185 million
3 meals per year. Today, as workers have lost wages
4 and unemployment atop 20 percent, which is five
5 [inaudible] from the previous year. Need for food
6 assistance has only grown as more New Yorkers turn to
7 SNAP, emergency food, and other food assistance
8 programs that have been mentioned today. COVID's
9 impact on food pantries and soup kitchens in New York
10 was immediate. As Chair Levin noted by April 75
11 percent of the food pantries and soup kitchens
12 reported increased food need from just months
13 earlier, and at our own side, the Community Kitchen
14 of West Harlem, we were serving three times as many
15 people compared to the same time period last year.
16 As the pandemic strains households, it also strained
17 emergency food providers, and at the height of the
18 pause order, over a third of emergency programs were
19 forced to make the difficult decision to suspend its
20 service. Agencies that continue to serve have faced
21 growing needs. Our own emergency food program later
22 has been accessed 1.2 million times in just six
23 months. Our dedicated warehouse staff, based in the
24 Hunt's Point cooperative market, continued the
25 essential worker food distribution and has served

1 over 30 million meals at the start of the pandemic.
2 We've redoubled our efforts to support our member
3 network and activated community response partners,
4 which are agencies in each borough that have-- asked
5 to extend hours and offer other innovative
6 distributions such as drive-thru or appointment-based
7 pick-up. We've worked to support nontraditional food
8 distribution at NYCHA facilities as well as icon
9 locations like Lincoln Center [sic] and Yankee
10 Stadium. Resilient and dedicated, many programs have
11 now reopened--

12
13 SERGEANT AT ARMS: [interposing] Your time
14 is up.

15 NICHOLAS BUESS: Oh, 16 percent of food
16 programs remained closed. May I have a minute
17 longer?

18 CHAIRPERSON LEVIN: Yes, go ahead.

19 NICHOLAS BUESS: Thank you. So I just
20 want to say that our work also involves in providing
21 SNAP assistance and rectification. Our own call
22 center is seeing a three to six-fold increase in
23 providing that service. We know that SNAP has
24 expanded temporarily, but that the cost of meals are
25 rising. So those SNAP dollars aren't going as far.

1 The average cost of a meal in New York City is over
2 four dollars and in Manhattan it's over six dollars,
3 which is double the national average. While Congress
4 has not taken final action to increase SNAP benefits,
5 we encourage them to do so, but we also know that the
6 City cannot wait for federal stalemate. Thanks for
7 the leadership of Speaker Johnson and the City
8 Council, emergency funds are now supporting over 700
9 agencies, including 226 which are being administered
10 directly by Food Bank of New York City. The City's
11 plan for long-term continued hunger relief should
12 include investments in food and infrastructure that
13 supports the operational cost of the emergency food
14 network. In addition to EFAP, an ongoing support for
15 City Council food initiatives, the City's PFRED [sic]
16 program for emergency food providers will provide
17 more produce for agencies and community members in
18 need. We encourage the continued transparency and
19 coordination with organizations who have the
20 experience in community connection to provide these
21 services. I'll stop there because my time has
22 expired. I'm happy to take questions.

24 COMMITTEE COUNSEL: Thank you, and I
25 apologize for not saying your name correctly,

1
2 Nicholas Buess. And next we're going to call on
3 Rachel Sabella.

4 SERGEANT AT ARMS: You may begin.

5 RACHEL SABELLA: Good afternoon Chair
6 Levin and members of the City Council. My name is
7 Rachel Sabella, and I'm the Director of the No Kid
8 Hungry New York Campaign for Share our Strength. Our
9 organization is working to address and end childhood
10 hunger in the U.S., and I have the honor and
11 privilege of representing the organization in the
12 state of New York. We have worked together for many
13 years on this issue, Chair. We have addressed
14 breakfast in the classroom, universal school meals.
15 It was the advocacy of this Council that led to the
16 EFAP baseline increase and combined efforts made real
17 change, but we're now in the battle of our lives
18 against hunger, and it's going to take a monumental
19 effort of all partners, all of us working together to
20 address this issue. First, I want to thank the
21 Council. I want to thank the Department of
22 Education, office of Food Nutrition Services, HRA,
23 the Food Czar's team, the emergency food providers
24 for all coming together to address this issue. We've
25 heard it throughout the hearing so far. New York

1 City was in a position to work quickly because of all
2 of these combined efforts, and we are grateful for
3 that. My written testimony will be submitted, but
4 there's a few themes I wanted to cover, especially
5 based on earlier testimony. One is, it is incredibly
6 important for New York City to continue to work with
7 the State and the Federal Government to address food
8 insecurity. I was thrilled to hear HRA continue to
9 talk about the importance of waivers. We want to
10 make sure HRA continues to be proactive with OTDA
11 looking for New York State to apply for all waivers
12 that are available. We want to make sure that the
13 Council and the Administration are continuing to
14 advocate to Congress for increased SNAP funds or
15 waivers for PEBT extension. We want to make sure
16 that all parties are here raising their voice
17 together. I also want to call out some important
18 pieces of legislation being discussed at the state
19 level right now which is tied to SNAP. One is making
20 online SNAP purchasing permanent. Another is
21 establishing a restaurant meal fund for people to use
22 with their SNAP benefits. These would take
23 significant steps to help New Yorkers struggling
24 right now, and we really urge you raise your voice to
25

1 work with the state to establish these programs. I
2 also think it's really important for New York City to
3 engage in awareness campaign on these programs. We
4 need the City to be proactive to promote and enroll
5 eligible New Yorkers in SNAP. There's likely
6 thousands of newly eligible New Yorkers who don't
7 even realize they are. So we encourage HRA to work
8 with other city agencies to get the word out to make
9 sure people have an understanding of these benefits
10 and they take advantage of that. Again, we know it's
11 going to take a monumental effort to address this,
12 but we need to take advantage of every program, every
13 resource, and make sure no New Yorker goes to bed
14 hungry. I know my time is ending, and again, I just
15 want to thank you for the opportunity to testify
16 today. Myself, No Kid Hungry, all of our partners
17 stand at the ready to continue to work with the
18 Council to work with the de Blasio Administration to
19 address food insecurity. Thank you.

21 COMMITTEE COUNSEL: Thank you so much,
22 Rachel. I'll now call on Joel Berg.

23 SERGEANT AT ARMS: Your time will begin.

24 JOEL BERG: Thank you, Mr. Chair, for
25 having this vital hearing. Personally, I oppose term

1 limits for City Council Members, but let me say it's
2 done wonders for Member Hair [sic] Freedom. So let
3 me just say that. On a more serious note, we have--
4 two things are true at once, the City has done
5 actually a remarkable job of responding to the food
6 needs in this pandemic. They've done a far better
7 job than the state of New York, and it goes without
8 saying, a far better job than the Federal Government,
9 but that's a pretty low bar. On the other hand, the
10 response is wholly inadequate. The City must do
11 more, but particularly the state must do more, and
12 the Federal Government needs an entirely new set of
13 policies. You had asked about the increase March
14 versus June in SNAP participation. It was actually a
15 twelve percent increase in participation, but 81
16 percent increase in benefit dollars spent, because of
17 the federal dollars boosted by the Federal
18 Government. So, the increase alone over just those
19 months was 185,000 people, and 177 million dollar
20 boost. So, in June, the Federal Government was
21 spending 1.67 billion-- I'm sorry, 395 million
22 dollars on 1.67 million recipients in New York City.
23 So, I want to just use my remaining time to highlight
24 the importance of SNAP and the importance of the City
25

1 not-- keeping its eye on the ball regarding that.
2
3 When the Council give significant funding to
4 emergency food providers, we and others weighed in
5 and said, hey, make sure there's significant
6 resources for benefits access, and I really
7 appreciate the leadership of the Council and the
8 leadership of the Mayor's office, making sure that
9 that was done. Like Hunger Free America, for
10 instance, got half a million dollars, which allowed
11 us to open an office in the Bronx and dramatically
12 increase our benefit access. I hope that-- I know
13 these are tough budget times, but that those efforts
14 are continued and expanded. Our contract runs out in
15 November. We've gotten some significant generous
16 matching funds from the Robin Hood Foundation, but
17 the problem is not going to run out in a few months.
18 I really loathe to give any credit to the Bloomberg
19 Administration or the previous HRA Commissioner Door
20 [sp?] whatsoever, because they were so wrong on so
21 many things, but I must give them a little credit on
22 the online applications. Some of the efforts we have
23 today were started by Commissioner Door and HRA under
24 the previous Administration, and that's one of the
25 reasons we were able to make so much progress today.

1
2 There's still very significant online application
3 hurdles. We push very strongly for SNAP to be
4 combined with WIC applications, along with the state
5 and with Section 8 and many other applications,
6 unemployment insurance applications, but the truth of
7 the matter is the City of New York, as many problems
8 as it has now is doing far better than the rest of
9 the state because of these applications. We still
10 have a hunger crisis. We need to do far more, but
11 thank goodness our previous investments put us in
12 slightly better place with the rest of the failing
13 country.

14 COMMITTEE COUNSEL: Thank you. Thank you,
15 Joel. I don't know if the-- does the Chair have any
16 questions or comments at this time?

17 CHAIRPERSON LEVIN: No, I just want to
18 thank-- thank you, Joel, for the testimony, and yes,
19 thank you for correcting the record that the previous
20 Administration did do good work on online access.

21 JOEL BERG: Of course, they were hampered
22 by their contradictory policies on finger imaging, on
23 ABAWDS, but give credit where credit is due--

24 CHAIRPERSON LEVIN: [interposing] Right.
25

1
2 JOEL BERG: [interposing] in the minimal
3 sense.

4 CHAIRPERSON LEVIN: I lost it in the mix
5 of all of the bad policies [inaudible] but thank you
6 very much for your testimony and all the work you do.

7 COMMITTEE COUNSEL: Thank you to this
8 entire panel. We're now going to proceed to call the
9 next panel. The next panel in this order will be
10 Craig Willingham, Doctor Charles Platkin and Eliza
11 Peralta, and we will begin with Craig Willingham.

12 SERGEANT AT ARMS: Time will begin.

13 CRAIG WILLINGHAM: Thank you. Thank you.
14 Good afternoon, Council Members. My name is Craig
15 Willingham, and I'm testifying on behalf of the CUNY
16 Urban Food Polity Institute. At the institute we
17 recognize that food assistance programs are essential
18 to helping those in need. Now, during COVID-19
19 pandemic these programs are more critical than ever.
20 As our city attempts to support this work, I ask that
21 we keep in mind a few things. So much of what
22 happens in the sphere of food assistance is
23 determined by federal policy. I urge the City Council
24 to be proactive in supporting advocacy efforts aimed
25 at the Federal Government. Your voice would be a

1 welcome addition to the current campaigns like the
2 efforts to protect and improve snap, and those to
3 extend school food waivers through the school year.
4 Also, before the pandemic, many immigrants were
5 hesitant to apply for government benefits due to the
6 chilling effect of the proposed change to the public
7 charge rule. Given that immigrant New Yorkers are
8 among the groups hardest hit in terms of health, job
9 loss, and food insecurity due to COVID, ensuring that
10 the access to benefits that they're eligible for is
11 more urgent than ever. Next, it's important to note
12 that a looming threat for administering SNAP in the
13 near term comes from the USDA Food Nutrition Service
14 recent notice indicating that administrative waivers
15 for initial recertification interviews for extended
16 certification periods and for other similar tasks are
17 unlikely to be extended beyond September. This
18 continues their recent trend of limiting or ending
19 approvals of some of these types of crucial
20 flexibilities. A key question is whether USDA will
21 relent and continue these waivers, or if not, will
22 New York City and State be able to manage the
23 caseloads so that individuals in households are not
24 removed from the rolls. Being prepared for the
25

1 impact of these possible changes is something the
2 Council and other elected officials should be
3 planning for now. As we continue to navigate our way
4 through this pandemic, we must stay vigilant in our
5 efforts to guarantee that no New Yorker goes hungry.
6 The CUNY Urban Food Policy Institute in partnership
7 with colleagues at the Hunter College New York City
8 Food Policy Center, and the Laurie M. Tisch [sp?]
9 Center for Food Education and Policy at Columbia are
10 working to monitor and assess the City, state, or
11 regional food system response to COVID-19. Our work
12 provides governments and the public with information
13 and recommendations intended to support and ensure
14 that we survive this pandemic and come out stronger
15 on the end. We applaud the City for its efforts to
16 mitigate the impact of COVID-19 on food security and
17 other food system issues and are committed to
18 supporting efforts to make the City even more
19 resilient now and in the future. Thank you.

21 COMMITTEE COUNSEL: Thank you so much for
22 your testimony. I will now call on Doctor Charles
23 Platkin.

24 DOCTOR CHARLES PLATKIN: [inaudible] this
25 testimony on behalf of the College of New York City

1 Food Policy Center which I'm the Executive Director.
2 Not surprisingly, 74 percent of food pantries and
3 soup kitchens reported an increase in visitors
4 compared to last year, but unfortunately, with this
5 increased need came many closures, low food supply,
6 long lines and crowds, and furthermore, there was a
7 lack of any centralized or comprehensive information
8 for community food resources. At the suggestion of
9 the Council and CBOs, the Hunter College New York
10 City Food Policy Center and its strategic partners,
11 including Hunger Free America Share Meals, developed
12 59 New York City neighborhood food resource guides.
13 Each of the 59 guides included updated information on
14 all food pantry soup kitchens meals for students,
15 meals for seniors, delivery services as well as many
16 other important food resources. The guides are
17 updated daily. Volunteers trained by the center made
18 more than 32,000 calls. The guides are
19 nycfoodpolicy.org/food. The Hunter College New York
20 City Food Policy Center in collaboration with the
21 CUNY Urban Food Policy Institute and Columbia's Tisch
22 Center for Food education and Policy are currently
23 researching the impact of COVID-19 on food systems in
24 New York City. In addition to looking at food pantry
25

1 closings, which by the way were disproportionately
2 high in under resourced communities compared to the
3 rest of New York City. We also conducted in-depth
4 interviews with individuals from the Bronx, Queens,
5 and Brooklyn as part of phase one. Here's some of
6 the preliminary findings that reveal that number one,
7 minority communities describe fear of going outside
8 because of vulnerability of catching the virus,
9 especially if they are a member or had [inaudible]
10 medical conditions. Two, those in need experienced
11 long lines at food pantries, soup kitchens, and
12 grocery stores, which also experiences shortages and
13 outages of food. As one mother described, "I and to
14 be standing on a Tuesday it was raining. There were
15 storms, and that's how we had to wait. It didn't
16 matter, because we needed food." Three, in addition,
17 [inaudible] was limited number of days pantries were
18 open. In many instances, only once week and once a
19 month. The ID requirement for many food pantries and
20 soup kitchens deterred undocumented individuals and
21 families. Five, regarding SNAP, one interview said,
22 "I'm afraid because maybe they will take away our
23 Visa. This is why I've not asked for help from
24 anyone." Number six, food pantries and soup kitchens
25

1
2 experience widespread food shortages where some
3 pantries had to rely on donations from individuals or
4 neighborhood businesses, and here are just a few key
5 recommendations: One, implement effective outreach
6 and communication strategies to those in need of food
7 resources. Two, maintain a daily updated citywide
8 database all through pantries and soup kitchens with
9 live food inventory updates; and three, recruit and
10 train a healthy volunteer food workforce that's ready
11 to mobilize in times of need. We at the Hunter
12 College New York City Food Policy Center recognize
13 the importance of these issues and we stand ready and
14 willing to help, and we do applaud the City of New
15 York and the City Council for all the things they
16 have done to mitigate these issues. Thank you.

17 COMMITTEE COUNSEL: Thank you, Doctor
18 Platkin. I'll now call on Elizabeth Peralta.

19 SERGEANT AT ARMS: Your time will begin
20 now.

21 ELIZABETH PERALTA: Chair Levin, Council
22 Members, staff, good morning and thank you for the
23 opportunity to let me testify today about the impact
24 of COVID-19 impact on SNAP administration, food
25 pantries, and soup kitchens. My name is Liz Peralta,

1 and I'm the Director of External Relations at Rethink
2 Food, which is a nonprofit that envisions a nourished
3 and thriving world. We believe that access to food is
4 essential to human dignity and our ability to
5 contribute to society. Current food systems allow
6 for nutritious food to go under-utilized every day
7 while nearby populations suffer from food insecurity.
8 Enough is enough. We aim to combat these issues by
9 designing and implementing programs that use surplus
10 food to prepare healthy, delicious meals to
11 distribute to those in need. I'm also a proud Latina
12 that has lived through poverty, hunger, and
13 homelessness which is why I'm so dedicated to
14 speaking up about hunger. When we first started
15 working on problems of food insecurity, we partnered
16 with restaurants that had surplus food and used that
17 food to make meals for people who needed good healthy
18 food. During COVID, however, as the pandemic tore
19 through New York City triggering record unemployment
20 and driving already catastrophic food insecurity
21 levels up by 67 percent, we shifted some of our
22 operations, because many of our restaurants
23 temporarily closed and could no longer provide us
24 with their surplus food. In turn, the increased need
25

1
2 for food among the communities we serve afflicted
3 both the capacity and need for food pantries and soup
4 kitchens across New York City. Nearly one in four
5 New Yorkers are facing food inadequate-- facing
6 inadequate food which translates to about two million
7 of our neighbors. Forty-four percent of New Yorkers
8 are worried about running out of food before their
9 next paycheck. Fifty-four percent of city residents
10 say that their diets are less healthy now than pre-
11 COVID. I do want to get to the point of all this.
12 So I just want to explain-- furthermore, COVID has
13 shown us that food insecurity may not always look
14 like what we thought. For example, food insecurity
15 often affects working people. In just the last month
16 Rethink has partnered with the Ready Center in
17 Brooklyn as a part of a Cool Street initiative in Red
18 Hook, because the trees the community relied on for
19 shade were cut down. Multitudes of people lost their
20 jobs during the pandemic, which means little money
21 for high electrical bills to cool down. I just
22 wanted to talk about this. I know I have about 30
23 seconds. One of the things at Rethink we recommend
24 is that we're seeing that although we're giving out
25 food, people who are homeless or don't have a place

1
2 to store it, cannot store something they buy with EBT
3 and SNAP. And so one of the things that we recommend
4 is that we support efforts to allow SNAP recipients
5 to use their food stamps to try to buy hot food at
6 restaurants, like someone else suggested earlier, and
7 I thank you for that suggestion, because I think that
8 often times when we think about food we think about a
9 can of food, and that does not feed a family,
10 especially if as we see every single day, more and
11 more people are getting kicked out, we need to think
12 about solutions that will feed people who have homes
13 and who do not. Thank you.

14 COMMITTEE COUNSEL: Thank you, Liz.
15 Chair Levin?

16 CHAIRPERSON LEVIN: Thank you very much,
17 Liz, and I want to thank you. Rethink Food has
18 partnered with public housing developments in my
19 district, and that's been essential in keeping people
20 fed with nutritious foods. So I just want to thank
21 Rethink Food for their efforts. I want to thank this
22 entire panel for the resources that you are providing
23 and, you know, while the efforts have been
24 extraordinary from the City over the last six months,
25 you know, there's still work to be done, and so I'm

1
2 hopeful that we kind of work towards, you know, a
3 series of recommendations that can be adopted by the
4 Administration moving forward. But I do appreciate
5 all the work that you all have been doing. Thank
6 you.

7 COMMITTEE COUNSEL: Thank you to this
8 entire panel. I'm now going to call our next panel,
9 and the following panelists will speak in this order:
10 Ravi Reddi, Caroline Cohen, Jeehae Fischer, and Carol
11 Daly. We will begin with Ravi Reddy.

12 RAVI REDDI: I want to thank the
13 committee for holding this important conversation
14 that is of immediate concern to our community. I'm
15 Ravi Reddi and I'm the Associate Director for
16 Advocacy and Policy at the Asian American Federation.
17 And to be very honest, it's hard to exaggerate the
18 needs of the moment when it comes to food insecurity.
19 Right now, the Asian American Community is dealing
20 with a 35 percent increase in deaths compared to the
21 five-year average, and a 6,000 percent jump in
22 unemployment compared to this time last year. Our
23 seniors are afraid to go outside because of rising
24 anti-Asian violence and harassment, and amidst a
25 pandemic, unprecedented challenges are facing our

1 community-based service providers in reaching them.

2 And with the pre-pandemic Asian state poverty rate 14

3 percent and a 33 percent limited English proficiency

4 rate. This crisis has us fighting on multiple

5 fronts. In particular, as previously mentioned, this

6 administration's assault on our immigrant population

7 are contributing to the food access crisis. Only a

8 third of Asians who meet the income guidelines

9 receive food stamps, but because of Trump's cruel and

10 oppressive public charge rule, the false choice

11 between staying in this country and getting their

12 next meal is a real once for immigrant families. By

13 our own analysis, the use of SNAP benefits by Asian

14 non-citizens declined at twice the rate of non-Asian,

15 non-citizens from 2017 to 2018, and our seniors, one

16 in five of whom live in poverty and-- one in five of

17 whom live in poverty, and four in five of whom are

18 LEP utilize services that reflect their cultural

19 identities and meet them where they are. But the

20 City's food delivery plan still has serious flaws

21 relating to community-wide difficulty using 311,

22 systemic inadequacies regarding LEP information

23 access, and inconsistent deployment of meals.

24 Nonetheless, our partners some of whom will speak

25

1
2 shortly are showing innovation in sourcing culturally
3 appropriate meals while umbrella organizations have
4 been able to coordinate services. For example, while
5 many seniors' centers are not able to meet the volume
6 of need, they can ally with local restaurants to
7 deliver meals and stock food pantry culturally
8 competent meals. The entire ecosystem of our
9 community service providers is making the most of
10 every penny, but one wouldn't know the significance
11 of community service providers' worth based on the
12 funding numbers. From Fiscal Year 2002 to 2014, the
13 Asian American community received a mere 1.4 percent
14 of the total dollar value of city social service
15 contracts. In that time period they Asian American
16 share of the total contract that was awarded by DOHMH
17 was .02 percent. In the context of the hard work
18 being done, it's clear that city and state support is
19 the only piece of this puzzle that's missing. We can
20 do better, and here's a start: a dedicated language
21 line can help increase language access for food
22 services. Much as our partners in modeling, food
23 access can also be addressed alongside other
24 immediate community issues like mental health in a
25 culturally competent way. Forty percent of Asian

1 seniors report experiencing depression and senior
2 Asian women have the highest suicide rate across all
3 racial and ethnic groups. And when it comes to
4 funding the city and state must acknowledge and
5 reinforce what's already been working in our
6 communities. We need increased investment safety net
7 programs such as community health centers, clinics,
8 and food pantries with funds going directly to
9 impacting--
10

11 SERGEANT AT ARMS: [interposing] Your time
12 is up.

13 RAVI REDDI: [inaudible] conflict and
14 relationship. This pandemic has also shown the need
15 for an emergency network of linguistically and
16 culturally competent food service programs that can
17 help, in particular, Asian seniors who need
18 alternative food benefits due to disenrollment
19 related to the public charge rule. And finally, the
20 city and state should partner with and invest in
21 trusted community partners and ethnic media to
22 disseminate accurate and up-to-date information about
23 federal immigration policies and how to access legal
24 assistance, healthy food, and quality medical care.
25 So on behalf of AAF, I want to thank you for giving

1 me the opportunity to speak on this important issue.

2 We must find solutions to this continuing crisis, and

3 we look forward to working with the committee and

4 individual Council Members to make sure every New

5 Yorker knows where their next meal is coming from.

6 Thank you.

7 COMMITTEE COUNSEL: Thank you so much,

8 Ravi. And I just want to remind our panelists for

9 today to wait for the que from the Sergeant at Arms

10 before you begin speaking just so that we can start

11 the timer on our end. I'll now call on Carlyn Cowen.

12 SERGEANT AT ARMS: Your time will begin

13 now.

14 CARLYN COWEN: Good afternoon and thank

15 you so much Chair Levin and the members of the City

16 Council for the opportunity to testify today. My

17 name is Carlyn Cowen, pronouns they, them, and she,

18 her, and I'm testifying on behalf of Chinese American

19 Planning Council, CPC. CPC is the nation's largest

20 Asian-American social services agency and since the

21 beginning of the pandemic in March we've continued to

22 provide in-person and remote services over 60,000

23 community members from meal delivery to home care to

24 daily wellness checks. We have delivered 108,000

1
2 pounds of meals between mid-March and mid-June and
3 the quantity of our deliveries have only continued to
4 grow, as have the food needs in our community. I
5 want to uplift and support the recommendations that
6 Ravi and our partners at Asian American Federation
7 and add a few additional notes from what we've seen
8 as direct service providers within our communities.
9 As Ravi mentioned, unemployment has grown in the
10 Asian American community by 6,900 percent since
11 March. Through our wellness checks that we do daily
12 and weekly with community members, we've learned that
13 half of our community members surveyed reported that
14 they're out of work and income and will run out of
15 money in the coming weeks. Families have reported
16 skipping and rationing meals. Some of our young
17 people have told us that they are in charge of
18 rationing meals for their family to make it to the
19 next time that they're able to get a delivery or go
20 to a food pantry. We're grateful to the City and
21 particularly HRA for springing into action to meet
22 urgent food needs and recognize that it's been a
23 challenge to meet growing needs. However, we're
24 seeing a lot of unique challenges within the Asian
25 American and Immigrant community that I want to touch

1 on. Public charge concerns have been a huge
2 deterrent for our community members to apply for and
3 stay enrolled in benefits like SNAP. The uncertainty
4 of the injunction being granted and then removed has
5 only increased each year, which means that there are
6 many community members that need this program and are
7 not participating in it because they would rather
8 skip a meal or go hungry than worry that their family
9 members are going to get deported. Community-based
10 organizations like CPC have been scrambling to help
11 community members get accurate information and access
12 benefits. Language access and cultural competency
13 has only exacerbated this issue, because language
14 barriers have made it even more difficult to navigate
15 issues like public charge and navigate city resources
16 and supports. The need for dedicated language support
17 not only through a language line but by continuing to
18 support community-based organizations that already
19 have deep relationships within the communities and
20 are able to provide language access is a huge need.
21 As far as culturally competent meals we've noticed
22 that a lot of our seniors in particular have not been
23 able to get their culturally competent meals or meals
24 that they recognize or meet their dietary needs, and
25

1 for this we really recommend continuing to partner
2 with community-based organizations with local
3 restaurants to provide people the dignity of getting
4 meals that actually match their own culture and their
5 own dietary needs. To that note, it is critical to
6 continue to support community-based organizations to
7 serve our communities throughout this crisis. WE are
8 seeing the needs in our communities grow on a weekly
9 basis while our funding gets cut, while we are forced
10 to lay off staff and while we are--

12 SERGEANT AT ARMS: [interposing] Time is
13 up.

14 CARLYN COWEN: being asked [inaudible].
15 We urge you to continue to fully fund and push to
16 fully fund our community-based organizations. And
17 lastly, I just want to quickly mention that food
18 security is not just about getting food to people,
19 but rather addressing the root causes of insecurity
20 within our communities. We have seen that immigrant
21 New Yorkers have made up the core essential
22 workforce, yet many have been left out of federal
23 pandemic assistance, state unemployment assistance,
24 because of their work type, because of their
25 immigration status. There is a huge need to actually

1 meet the basic needs, not just food, but also housing
2 and paying other bills, and we urge the city to
3 continue to push for programs that will do this to
4 push the state to provide an excluded workers' fund
5 to raise revenue to provide support to our
6 communities, and to do the same at the federal level.
7 Thank you, and I'm happy to answer any questions.

8
9 COMMITTEE COUNSEL: Thank you, Carlyn. I
10 will now call on Jeehae Fisher.

11 SERGEANT AT ARMS: Your time will begin.

12 JEEHAE FISCHER: I would like to thank
13 the City Council and the Committee on General Welfare
14 for the opportunity to testify. My name is Jeehae
15 Fischer, and I'm the Executive Director at the Korean
16 American Family Service Center. KAFSC provides
17 social services to the immigrant survivors and their
18 children who are affected by domestic violence,
19 sexual assault, and child abuse. All of our programs
20 and services are offered in a culturally and
21 linguistically appropriate setting. Our clients,
22 immigrant survivors of domestic violence, sexual
23 assault, trafficking, and child abuse are among the
24 most vulnerable in crisis like the one we're facing
25 right now. In response to the COVID-19 pandemic,

1 social distancing guidelines, and other safety
2 measures such as shutting down schools and businesses
3 are being enforced. This means that our survivors
4 and their children are trapped at home and face
5 additional violence and challenges. Financial
6 difficulties compounded with social isolation
7 exacerbates [sic] existing abusive relationships. In
8 fact, we're experiencing heightened call volume and
9 our bilingual 24-hour hotline in the last four months
10 and expect this number to continue to grow. Many of
11 our survivors are undocumented and are excluded from
12 accessing public benefits and other welfare
13 assistance and other income supports. They lost
14 financial means, some temporarily, others
15 permanently, resulting in loss of livelihood and
16 unable to support themselves and their children.
17 These consequences are heightened as they are
18 ineligible for unemployment benefits and other labor
19 protection by law from which they are excluded. Many
20 in our community and their loved ones have contracted
21 the virus and passed away. Without financial means,
22 our immigrant survivors can't afford food, other
23 basic necessities, personal protective equipment and
24 supplies, Medicare, phone, internet, utility bills.
25

1 I would like to share one of our client's stories.
2 Ms. K stayed our shelter one year ago after escaping
3 an abusive relationship. With KAFSC's support she
4 secured a job as a nail technician. She felt
5 empowered to lead an independent life and raise her
6 two children as a single mother. However, the recent
7 COVID-19 pandemic changed her life. Unemployed,
8 distressed by her financial hardship, she felt
9 hopeless. She literally didn't have food to put on
10 the table for her children. As an undocumented
11 immigrant, she is afraid to apply for public benefits
12 that are available due to public charge. She called
13 us, and we were able to provide her and her children
14 with food, cash assistance, as well as other basic
15 necessity. This is one of many daunting stories
16 we're--

17
18 SERGEANT AT ARMS: [interposing] Time's
19 up.

20 JEEHAE FISCHER: encountering daily.
21 KFASC saw a 300 percent increase in call volume on
22 our 24-hour hotline. Eighty-eight percent were DV,
23 SA, and child abuse related. The remaining were all
24 COVID-19 related, especially around food insecurity.
25 Callers would ask if we had food to note or simply to

1 say, "I'm hungry." Ms. K, who was mentioned earlier,
2 started crying on the 24-hour hotline, so we urgently
3 ask-- and there's so many more of these survivors and
4 their children. So we urgently ask the committee on
5 General Welfare to take proactive measures to support
6 the immigrant community and to continue providing
7 support including food and other public benefits to
8 ensure that our survivors and their children find
9 hope to sustain them past this time of uncertainty
10 and back on a road economically empowered and free
11 from violence. Thank you.

12
13 COMMITTEE COUNSEL: Thank you, Jeehae.

14 I'll now call on Carol Daly.

15 SERGEANT AT ARMS: Your time will begin
16 now.

17 CAROL DALY: Good afternoon Chair Levin,
18 Council Members, and fellow advocates. I'm so
19 humbled to be able to share among such beautiful
20 stories and experiences and determination to be able
21 to help our precious seniors and others during this
22 difficult times. My name is Carol Daly, and I am a
23 Program Director representing [inaudible]

24

25

2 COMMITTEE COUNSEL: [interposing] Carol,
3 we're having some difficulty-- Carol, we're having
4 some [inaudible] hearing you.

5 CAROL DALY: Can you hear me?

6 COMMITTEE COUNSEL: Your service is going
7 in--

8 CAROL DALY: [interposing] Can you hear
9 me?

10 COMMITTEE COUNSEL: Yes, we can hear you.
11 We can hear you now?

12 CAROL DALY: You can hear me. Should I
13 start again?

14 COMMITTEE COUNSEL: Yes. Yes, you can
15 start again.

16 CAROL DALY: My name is Carol Daly and I
17 am a Program Director representing the YWSDA of
18 Queens. I'm so honored to be able to share among
19 this beautiful group today, this beautiful panel.
20 Thank you so much Chair Levin and everyone else. We
21 currently run a robust food pantry serving hundreds
22 of seniors and liaising with dozens of community
23 organizations [sic] in Queens each week. We also
24 offer a beautiful love-sharing box which has ethnic
25 and culturally appropriate food items for our

1 seniors. I love that name, love-sharing box. In
2 many years working as the director, creator, and
3 teacher of adult programming in over a dozen senior
4 facilities, providing food is a central, basic and
5 vital service of our precious seniors. When I ask
6 seniors what they're most proud of, they will
7 inevitably say their children and grandchildren.
8 When I ask seniors what they're most grateful for,
9 they will say the senior centers, and to be able to
10 gather for a meal, and for meaningful social
11 engagement. While we have limited choices for
12 seniors to engage in-person, we cannot and must not
13 diminish their opportunity for nutritious food.
14 Doing so could very well contribute to further loss
15 of life in this incredibly [inaudible] yet fragile
16 [inaudible]. I'm confident that we will prioritize
17 wisely, placing the protection and support of human
18 life central to the decision-making regarding the
19 allocation of funds coming in the future. Thank you
20 so much for the opportunity to share today.

22 COMMITTEE COUNSEL: Thank you so much
23 Carol. I'm now going to call on our next panel, and
24 the panelists will be in the following order:
25 Emanuel Negron, Maria Melchor, Abby Biberman, and

1 hardship caused by the pandemic. Clients who contact
2 the HRA benefit-- HRA info line continue to
3 experience long wait times, and calls have dropped
4 due to thousands of New Yorkers seeking help and
5 flooding the phone bank system. While HRA SNAP
6 offices have been consolidated to just one in every
7 borough to focus on processing to help thousands of
8 new applications, the Access HRA online client portal
9 has been the client's main entry-point to access SNAP
10 and emergency food assistance. Thousands who are not
11 capable or lack access to technology are not able to
12 navigate the Access HRA online SNAP application
13 portal to seek assistance, pushing the most
14 vulnerable New Yorkers to rely on not-for-profit
15 organizations like Met Council for SNAP assistance
16 and emergency food assistance, which we see first-
17 hand due to the increase in request received by our
18 benefit helpline staffed by 14 bi-lingual SNAP
19 specialists, and the increase in supply of food to
20 our network of 140 emergency food distribution sites.
21 As of March, Met Council's benefit assistance
22 helpline has seen a 53 percent increase in clients
23 seeking SNAP assistance from across the five
24 boroughs. For this reason, it has expanded its SNAP
25

1 operations to hire additional six SNAP specialists
2 that speak Russian, Urdu, Mandarin, Cantonese,
3 Haitian-Creole, and Arabic. Our emergency food
4 program has seen triple the number of clients and the
5 increase the amount of food distribution by 310
6 percent, and yet, the need continues to grow while
7 our resources don't allow us to keep pace. The
8 recovery will require a collaborative impact model
9 where community-based organizations like Met Council
10 and HRA and DSS partner together to connect all needy
11 New Yorkers to food assistance. Report [sic] for
12 not-for-profits--

14 SERGEANT AT ARMS: [interposing] Your time
15 is up.

16 EMANUEL NEGRON: to the recovery from the
17 pandemic. Thank you for your time.

18 COMMITTEE COUNSEL: Thank you, Emanuel. I
19 will now call on Maria Melchor.

20 SERGEANT AT ARMS: Your time will begin
21 now.

22 MARIA MELCHOR: Thank you to Chair Levin
23 and the General Welfare Committee for the opportunity
24 to testify today, and thank you to everyone who has
25 come before me. I echo your testimonies about the

1 gravity of this crisis. My name is Maria Melchor,
2 and I will be delivering the Legal Aid Society's
3 testimony today. I represent clients who are seeking
4 access to SNAP and other benefits such as cash
5 assistance, which also play a critical role in
6 keeping families fed. I help New Yorkers apply for
7 benefits for the first time, or update their cases so
8 that they are receiving the full benefits that they
9 are entitled to. We are making five recommendations,
10 but I will be making three of those now. So, number
11 one, we recommend that HRA give its staff phones that
12 clients can call back and not reject any application
13 or close any cases for failing to recertify until
14 this option is in place. Currently, all cash
15 assistance clients and most SNAP clients must have a
16 telephone interview to have their application
17 approved. If the client misses HRA's phone call for
18 this interview, even by a second, or because it went
19 straight to voicemail, they cannot immediately call
20 back that number. The client must call info line or
21 another indirect phone number and wait for HRA's
22 call. After two failed attempts to reach the client
23 by phone for their mandatory interview, HRA denied
24 the application. Since HRA shifted to phone
25

1 interview, the number of cash assistance applications
2 rejected for failure to keep or complete and
3 interview has increased ten times. From April to
4 June 2020, 13,000 applications were rejected compared
5 to 1,300 from January to March. This is a huge
6 problem, and it's only going to get worse as
7 recertifications restart. About 50,000 clients will
8 need to be recertified for SNAP and cash assistance
9 with phone interviews per month, just to keep their
10 benefits. Number two, we recommend that HRA provide
11 realistic alternatives to applying for benefits
12 online. Due to COVID, HRA closed most of its SNAP
13 and job centers. Currently, clients are encouraged
14 to apply using Access HRA or by phone. Many New
15 Yorkers can now access online services due to an
16 array of reasons. HRA will continue to miss thousands
17 of clients if they make access to benefits to reliant
18 on access to online platforms. HRA must improve
19 access to phone applications by fixing the phone
20 system and spreading information about the
21 availability of these phone applications--

22
23 SERGEANT AT ARMS: [interposing] Your time
24 is up.

1
2 MARIA MELCHOR: to clients and HRA staff.
3 I'm just going to wrap up. HRA must also improve its
4 paper application process and continue creating
5 community partnerships with nonprofits to help New
6 Yorkers apply for cash assistance in addition to
7 SNAP. Finally, we recommend that HRA replace info
8 line with a more accessible phone line system as soon
9 as possible since info line is so complex, unwieldy
10 and just lack adequate capacity right now. We urge
11 the Council to fix HRA's phone problems so that
12 clients who can't get online or want to avoid
13 visiting the center can get their SNAP and other
14 benefits. Thank you.

15 COMMITTEE COUNSEL: Thank you so much,
16 Maria, and I apologize for getting your name, your
17 last name incorrect. I'll now call on Abby Biberman.

18 ABBY BIBERMAN: Chair Levin--

19 SERGEANT AT ARMS: [interposing] Your time
20 will begin now.

21 ABBY BIBERMAN: Chair Levin, Council
22 Members and staff, good morning, and thank you for
23 the opportunities to speak on the impact of the
24 COVID-19 pandemic on SNAP administration. My name is
25 Abby Biberman. I'm a Senior Supervising Attorney of

1 the Public Assistance and SNAP Practice in the Public
2 Benefits Unit of the New York Legal Assistance Group.
3 Our practice is a team of dedicated attorneys and
4 paralegals who represent clients having trouble
5 accessing or maintaining public assistance and SNAP
6 benefits in addition to shelter advocacy. We
7 represent clients at administrative fair hearings,
8 conduct advocacy with Department of Social Services,
9 job and SNAP centers and bring impact litigation to
10 ensure that our clients are obtaining and maintaining
11 an adequate level of benefits and shelter services.
12 So, in March, as advocates were working closely with
13 HRA, pursuant to Local Law 169, right when the
14 pandemic hit, and we quickly pivoted as a group to
15 figure out how HRA was going to continue to provide
16 benefits to our clients and address the inevitable
17 influx, all while providing their services almost
18 entirely remotely. So, while many of the changes
19 during COVID have been tremendously helpful for our
20 clients, there are some areas that still need
21 improvement. We do think HRA's continued and
22 expanded use of Access HRA has been beneficial for
23 many of our clients as well as NYLAG advocacy
24 provider portal. We would also like to see further
25

1 expansion of Access HRA for rental assistance
2 programs. But regarding SNAP, there are a few
3 recommendations we have. First, I'm going to echo
4 what others have said, HRA must increase info line's
5 capacity. Clients have benefitted from the signature
6 and interview waivers and the emergency allotments
7 that people have spoken about during this hearing,
8 but without increased capacity of info line, some of
9 these are not-- some of these waivers really have no
10 impact. So, for example, the signature waiver has
11 made it possible for our clients without internet
12 access to complete the SNAP application over the
13 phone, and these are clients, many of whom may have
14 gone into the center or had a friend assist them with
15 a paper application, and then they may have submitted
16 that signed application at a center, but with the job
17 centers closed, these clients have no way of
18 accessing benefits. So, assuming a person could
19 leave their home safely, there was no place for them
20 to obtain an application. Many people aren't able to
21 fill them out on their own, mail them in, and so the
22 interview waiver-- sorry, the signature waiver
23 allowed clients to complete this over the phone, but
24 the disadvantage of this option is that its causing
25

1
2 more traffic on info line, a number that so many
3 clients are relying on for questions relating to
4 their benefits, especially now that they can't visit
5 SNAP centers. So, in addition to that, attention
6 must be allocated to processing upcoming
7 recertifications. A lot of people have spoken about
8 this, and I'm going to wrap up quickly, but there's
9 going to be a huge influx, and even though HRA is
10 saying that they're going to be handle, with
11 interview waivers, this influx, we're very concerned
12 about the processing of recertification--

13 SERGEANT AT ARMS: [interposing] Your time
14 is up.

15 ABBY BIBERMAN: May I have one-- 30
16 seconds to say just one--

17 CHAIRPERSON LEVIN: [interposing] Yes, of
18 course.

19 ABBY BIBERMAN: final recommendation? We
20 do think that HRA must reopen job and SNAP centers as
21 soon as possible. The reliance on info line and
22 Access HRA is causing too many clients to fall
23 through the cracks, and these are our most vulnerable
24 clients including seniors and the homeless who are
25 not able to utilize these platforms. I just wanted

1
2 to note one thing that Lisa Fitzpatrick said, which
3 was that they would like-- it sounded like there was
4 maybe going to be a move toward keeping some of the
5 centers closed, even after the pandemic and
6 increasing reliance on some of these other methods. I
7 have a lot of concerns about that, but one thing I
8 just wanted to remind everyone is that prior to the
9 pandemic, centers were over-crowded. So, if HRA is
10 able to achieve some of what they need to without
11 foot traffic at the centers, that's great, but that
12 should reduce the number of people going into the
13 already over-crowded centers. Those centers should
14 all reopen as soon as possible, and then maybe there
15 will be levels, members of clients in those centers
16 at a time. Thank you.

17 COMMITTEE COUNSEL: Thank you, Abby.
18 I'll now call on Beatrous Diaz Teveras [sp?].

19 SERGEANT AT ARMS: Your time will begin
20 now.

21 COMMITTEE COUNSEL: It appears we're
22 having some technical difficulties hearing Beatrous
23 [sp?], so I am going to circle back and call on
24 Beatrous later if we're able to have her on this
25 call. At this point I'm going to call up our next

1
2 panelists in the following order: Natosha McCray and
3 Abraham Grosse [sp?]. And I want to remind panelists
4 to please wait for the que from the Sergeant at Arms
5 before you being speaking so that we can start the
6 timer.

7 CHAIRPERSON LEVIN: And I'd just like to
8 let this past panel know, all of these
9 recommendations are, you know, incredibly important,
10 and the value of having your perspective on the
11 ground on what's actually happening with clients is
12 totally invaluable to us here at the Council. So, we
13 will keep taking all of these suggestions and
14 ensuring that the Administration is hearing them and
15 putting them into, you know,-- they're responding to
16 it, that they're putting it into practice. So, I
17 just want to thank all of you for these very
18 practical and constructive suggestions.

19 COMMITTEE COUNSEL: Thank you, Chair
20 Levin. I'm now going to call on Natosha McCray
21 [sp?].

22 SERGEANT AT ARMS: Your time will begin
23 now.

24 NATOSHA MCCRAY: Thank you. My name is
25 Natosha McCray and I live in the Bronx with my two

1 children. I'm a member of Hunger Free America's Food
2 Action Board which helps advocate for the needs of
3 low income families in New York City. I just came to
4 the hearing to discuss how the City has been doing in
5 helping us as individuals get food. I'm a single
6 mother, and when COVID first started it took months
7 before unemployment hit, getting \$509 a month in SNAP
8 benefits which was not nearly enough to cover the
9 cost of food costs while my children were at home
10 from school. But school being closed for three and a
11 half months, we used the school grab-and-go sites
12 that helped supplement meals, but literally it was
13 the same meals day in and out, peanut butter and
14 jelly sandwiches, turkey or beef and baloney, milk.
15 Even worse, at the beginning of the pandemic, we
16 would go to the schools and they would tell us that
17 there were no more food available, and this was
18 multiple times in the week. The pandemic EBT program
19 was a great help to get my children extra food, but
20 there were also issues with that. I received benefits
21 for my teenage son, but not for my daughter who is in
22 a preschool Pre-K for All program. The expansion of
23 the PEBT and the SNAP are important because low
24 income families get healthy food options and help
25

1 buying things at the supermarket, eggs, milk. Cheese
2 and meat products have been severely over-priced, and
3 I tried using the online SNAP shopping, and that too
4 was a nightmare. I was happy to see that the House
5 passed the HEROES Act back in May, but have been
6 disappointed and frustrated that the Senate hasn't
7 passed it, too. Through my work with Hunger Free
8 America I know that there had been a permanent
9 increase to my SNAP and an expansion of the PEBT
10 program, which would really help get food for my
11 children. Another problem is why is there so many
12 different offices to go to, so much trouble to get
13 these programs. I feel like there's always problems
14 when giving details about your family, your finances,
15 and it feels like people are being criminalized and
16 penalized for needing assistance from the government.
17 They are a form of income and resources, but it feels
18 like the government makes it as hard as possible to
19 get those services, and its shaming for people like
20 myself. A better job needs to be done giving
21 assistance expeditiously without shame and guilt. If
22 we're all Americans, then we should all be treated
23 equally, including when services are needed. The
24 widening separation of the poor and the rich just
25

1 continues to show how much further we have to go
2 until that becomes a reality. There should be a one-
3 step process for all of these programs and all these
4 different agencies, WIC, SNAP, Medicaid, Free School
5 Program, rental or utilities should all be combined
6 together into one application, and save people the
7 wasteful paperwork or having to go into offices and
8 save people their dignity. Also, working to
9 integrate the IT and software systems to better serve
10 the 21 century. These are some of the reasons that I
11 just hope that the bill introduced by Senator
12 Gillibrand gets passed, and that we aren't asking for
13 too much.

14
15 SERGEANT AT ARMS: Time is up.

16 NATOSHA MCCRAY: We're just hoping that
17 Congress just takes their action and the City can do
18 everything to make that a reality. Thank you.

19 CHAIRPERSON LEVIN: Thank you, Natosha.

20 COMMITTEE COUNSEL: I'm not going to call
21 on our next panelist, Abraham Grosse [sp?].

22 SERGEANT AT ARMS: Your time will begin
23 now.

24 ABRAHAM GROSSE: Good afternoon, Chair
25 Levin, and thanks for this opportunity. My name is

1
2 Abraham Grosse, and I am respectfully asking you,
3 Chair Levin, again, to recognize the troubling gap
4 between the information given by the Administration
5 and the reality. Just as one illustration, I'm
6 respectfully asking the honorable Chair to walk over
7 to the closest food dispensaries in your district and
8 see for yourself whether or not the food given is
9 nutritionally sufficient to sustain the wellbeing of
10 an adult. The discrepancy between the idea that this
11 food is sufficient, and the reality which is that
12 it's not, is compounded by the high cost that tax
13 payers are paying. It's hard to understand how the
14 food that is given amounts to the 11 dollars that is
15 allegedly costing tax payers. It would be much more
16 beneficial, as said by a previous panelists, to take
17 those 11 dollars in the form of a voucher to a fast-
18 food eatery where the person could receive more
19 nutritious hot meal. On a more personal note, "I
20 can't breathe" were the last words pleaded by George
21 Floyd before his life was callously deprived by
22 public servant acting in official capacity. Those
23 words were heard by other public officials in close
24 proximity with the authority to intervene, but who
25 took no meaningful measures to challenge the abuse of

1 authority that was threatening to deprive a human
2 being of his life. Instead, they stood by, they
3 watched, they heard, but they did nothing. Since
4 December 23rd, 2019 when I was forced by our city
5 agencies into homelessness for the first time despite
6 hundreds of apartments for which I was eligible,
7 through the challenge of surviving hunger, through
8 the challenge of being denied SNAP without any
9 explanation, and through the COVID-19 pandemic and my
10 mother's hospitalization, I've been begging the
11 words, "I can't breathe" with every public official
12 there is, including every member of City Council.
13 I've been pleading these words, "I can't breathe" to
14 no avail. The response ranges from indifference to
15 "We'll promise to get back to you and follow up" but
16 they never do, and the question I have, Chair Levin,
17 please, am I doing something wrong? What else is an
18 aggrieved citizen who's being tortured and abused
19 whose mother is suffering, who just because of pure
20 improper misconduct, greed, and corruption, what am I
21 doing wrong, Chair Levin, please?

22
23 CHAIRPERSON LEVIN: Thank you, Mr.
24 Grosse. I don't think you're doing anything wrong.
25 I think that, you know, our system needs to be better

1
2 at responding to the needs of clients, and so I know
3 that this is not sufficient, but we will follow up
4 with you and make sure that, you know, we're looking
5 through all of your interactions with city officials
6 and make sure that everything has been-- and
7 continues-- that needs to be done appropriately. I
8 appreciate you being here testifying, and we will
9 [inaudible] to look into it.

10 ABRAHAM GROSSE: Thank you.

11 CHAIRPERSON LEVIN: Appreciate it.

12 Thanks.

13 COMMITTEE COUNSEL: Thank you, Mr.

14 Grosse. At this point, if we had inadvertently
15 missed anyone who'd like to testify today, we're
16 asking that you please use the Zoom raise hand
17 function, and we will call on you in the order your
18 hand has been raised. Seeing no hands raised, Chair
19 Levin, we have concluded public testimony for this
20 hearing.

21 CHAIRPERSON LEVIN: I want to thank

22 everybody that testified today, members of the
23 public, members of the Administration. We, indeed,
24 have our work cut out for us, and we need to continue
25 to put pressure on the state and the federal, members

1 of Congress, and the Federal Administration to
2 continue to make sure that people are getting the
3 food that they need, that all the appropriate waivers
4 are extended. We're still in the middle of a
5 pandemic. We're not out of the woods yet, and so I
6 want to make sure that we're doing everything we can.
7 If anyone has any issues they want to make sure to
8 bring to our attention, feel free to send us a
9 follow-up email. You can send it to my email address
10 at slevin@council.nyc.gov, and again, I want to thank
11 Amenta Killawon [sp?], our Senior Counsel to the
12 Committee for conducting the hearing today. I want
13 to thank our Sergeants at Arms for putting this all
14 together and ensuring the effectiveness of the
15 hearing, and with that, this hearing is adjourned.
16 Thank you.

17 [gavel]

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COMMITTEE ON GENERAL WELFARE

C E R T I F I C A T E

World Wide Dictation certifies that the foregoing transcript is a true and accurate record of the proceedings. We further certify that there is no relation to any of the parties to this action by blood or marriage, and that there is interest in the outcome of this matter.



Date October 26, 2020