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The Next Farm Bill: SNAP Technology and Modernization
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Good morning. Thank you Chairperson Thompson and members of the House Agriculture Committee Subcommittee on Nutrition for giving us this opportunity to testify and respond to committee questions today.

My name is Lauren Aaronson and I am an Assistant Deputy Commissioner of the Office of Business Process Innovation at the New York City Human Resources Administration (HRA). I am pleased that you have invited me here today to testify and that you are recognizing the work that New York City Mayor Bill de Blasio and HRA have undertaken to modernize the way New York City administers the SNAP program. We believe we are well on our way to achieving the two primary and equal goals of our modernization efforts—improved customer experience and optimized operational efficiency. I will focus this testimony on the de Blasio Administration’s work to improve the client experience and the Agency’s ability to adapt to and incorporate new and emerging technology in its service delivery model while addressing the needs of the most vulnerable New Yorkers, including older New Yorkers and those with limited sight, mobility and technology and broadband access. These continuous efforts and reforms are helping the Administration to move towards its goal of eliminating hunger in New York City and ensuring that every New Yorker who is eligible for SNAP has unencumbered access to this critical nutrition support while utilizing fewer administrative resources.

As this Committee knows, SNAP is the nation’s most important anti-hunger program, assisting more than 45 million low-income Americans, 70 percent of whom are families with children and more than 1 in 4 are households with seniors or individuals with disabilities. Currently, nearly 1.7 million New York City residents receive SNAP, including nearly 600,000 children (35%) and 415,000 seniors (25%). Compared to one year ago, the SNAP caseload increased by 1,254 cases (0.1%), which was a decrease of 7,269 recipients (-0.4%). Since Mayor de Blasio took office in January 2014, we have worked to implement both immediate and long-term measures to combat economic inequality and to ensure that each New Yorker has access to, as well as, the resources and supports they need to thrive and avoid hunger.

Over the past three years, HRA has invested in the creation of a self-directed service model for our SNAP population. These self-service tools are available to all SNAP enrollees, and a large segment of our SNAP population is interested and able to take advantage of this model. In this day and age,

our clients are accustomed to using self-service tools at train stations, banks, airports and supermarkets. In addition to providing an enhanced customer experience, this lower-touch model frees up our eligibility workers' time and allows them to focus on those clients who truly need their support.

I will now spend a few minutes discussing some of these technology improvements and other initiatives aimed at reducing barriers to access and bringing our service delivery model further into the 21st century.

New and Improved Technology

The goal of our modernization effort is to create a self-directed service model that allows applicants and clients to transact with the Agency without the burden of having to physically come to an HRA location. Over time these investments will help the City to reduce our physical footprint and save on expensive lease costs while removing real barriers to access, and making it easier for clients to apply for and maintain their benefits. We know from national studies that the point of recertification is where many eligible clients across the country often lose their benefits.

Launched ACCESS HRA

To improve access to benefits and information on a pending or active case, NYC developed an online portal available to New Yorkers anywhere an internet connection is available. ACCESS HRA is an innovative tool that allows New York residents to retrieve benefit information and apply and recertify for SNAP and other benefits. This portal allows clients to create an ACCESS HRA account to gain access to over 100 case-specific points of information in real-time, including application and case statuses, upcoming appointments, account balances, and documents requested for eligibility determinations. Additionally, clients can make changes to contact information, view eligibility notices electronically, and opt into text message and email alerts. We continue to improve this tool to add new functionality and will soon allow recipients to submit their Periodic Report in addition to reporting changes in circumstances. As of May 31, 2017 there are more than 300,000 HRA online accounts for SNAP households, and we receive over 33,000 submissions each month.

ACCESS HRA also allows clients to:

- View E-notices that remain accessible for 365 days.
- Go Paperless! Clients are able to opt-in to reduce the number of paper notices sent from HRA.
- Request an electronic budget letter from the Case Details page, which will appear as an e-notice the next business day.
- Recertify SNAP and Cash Assistance cases.

- Document Reuse: Select documents on file at HRA for identity, age, and other eligibility documents to re-use when submitting an online application.
- Opt into text message and email alerts about their case. For example, a client can now receive a text when their SNAP recertification period begins.
- After submitting a recertification form, track the date it is received by HRA on the Case Details page.

HRA complies with NYC local laws by making ACCESS HRA available in seven languages (English, Arabic, Chinese, Haitian Creole, Korean, Russian and Spanish), and the tool was designed and tested to make its content more accessible to people with disabilities, which means it is compliant with WCAG 2.0 (Web Content Accessibility Guidelines), AA standard. We have taken great pains in ensuring that we perform User Acceptance Testing with a diverse cross section of users, including those with disabilities.

Launched HRA Mobile App

In an effort to decrease the digital divide, HRA was awarded a US Department of Agriculture grant to launch a self-service mobile app to give clients the ability to use their mobile device to better manage their cases. Implementing mobility as a tool is significantly different than designing an online web portal. Mobile devices are powerful tools in their own right, and taking advantage of a phone's innate capabilities is critical to successful implementation. Though the app allows clients to utilize their mobile device to get access to much of the same information that is available on the web portal, it also allows clients to use the camera to capture and submit images of SNAP and Cash Assistance eligibility documents to the Agency. In addition, it allows us to use push notifications to remind clients about important case milestones such as recertification, as well as access integrated functions such as mapping and calendaring.

Designing for a mobile device has certain challenges including the need to create a highly intuitive user interface. For this reason, HRA uses an iterative approach to design that puts the user first and allows us to optimize the functionality of the apps. Techniques such as A/B testing, where we go directly to our clients in the HRA Centers to test candidate designs to are utilized regularly. Since the application's launch, clients have downloaded the mobile app 112,000 times, and uploaded over 1 million images. Not needing to return documents at our centers saves clients and staff time, images are also of significantly better quality and already connected to the pending case action so that the eligibility worker does not have to waste time searching.

On-site self-service tool

For those clients that prefer to transact with us inside of our centers we have provided a suite of self-service tools. These tools include self-service check-in kiosks and PC Banks to utilize ACCESS HRA and self-service scanning.

The scale of our centers necessitates ticketing and routing for an efficient client flow. Self-service check-in allows clients to identify the purpose of their visit and automatically receive a ticket appropriately routing them within the center.

Across NYC almost 80 percent of applicants that come to our centers to apply for SNAP are interested in applying online in our PC Banks. In some cases, applicants do not have access to a computer or feel more comfortable submitting online with the assistance of a facilitator in our offices. We have also been able to use the PC banks as a forum to solicit client feedback on the usability of the ACCESS HRA tool, and identify improvements to the application questions, communications with clients, and efficiencies in our operation. This feedback loop allows us to hear the “voice of the client” and adjust our technology and processes to create a better overall client experience. The overall impact of these usability adjustments have impacted the foot-traffic in our centers, as close to 65% of our online applications are being submitted on computers and mobile devices outside of an HRA location.

There are currently 15 SNAP centers and 103 community-based organizations across the City where clients can quickly and easily scan and submit documents electronically. Clients are able to use the self-service areas to submit documentation in support of case changes such as the addition or removal of a family member, and change in rent or address. In addition, 12 Job Centers have scanners and 10 Job centers have self-service kiosks. The self-service document scanning option allows clients to submit documents at locations convenient to them, not only at our SNAP centers.

On-demand interviews

In an effort to simultaneously address improving the client experience and increasing worker efficiency, at the beginning of 2016, HRA implemented a new call center to handle recertification eligibility interviews for SNAP. This new operation takes advantage of a waiver from United States Department of Agriculture Food and Nutrition Services (FNS) and allows clients to conduct their SNAP Eligibility interviews on an On-demand basis at their convenience, rather than wait for a call during a four-hour window, or come into a center and wait for an in-person interview. This is an improvement for the client, as well as an efficiency improvement for the workers who no longer have to call to schedule and reschedule interviews. The clearest success indicator for On-Demand has been the channel shift of interviews taking place in-person at centers, to interviews being over the phone at the clients’ convenience. In October 2015, before the implementation of the On-Demand call center, only 52% of the completed SNAP recertification interviews were held via telephone. We now have reached as high as 76% of the interviews held by phone – a 24% increase. As we continue to increase our capacity, we will begin to introduce on-demand telephone interviews for new SNAP applicants by this Fall.

Each of these technological improvements alone represents a reduction or elimination of a significant barrier. Together they represent a wholesale change to the ways in which clients apply for and recertify for benefits – ultimately reducing the number of clients who do not receive this vital benefit because it is too hard to apply and recertify or the investment of their time is too great. By mitigating the barriers to access we can ensure clients maintain their benefits and reduce the churn of clients at recertification, which can tax resources across the system.

Behavioral based notification

Technology—from computers to mobile devices, to Facebook, Twitter and Snapchat, to text messages—has become an important way for New Yorkers to communicate with each other and institutions and to get the information that they need. This is precisely why the de Blasio Administration has committed to bringing every New Yorker affordable, high-speed internet access by 2025 and prompted the launch of LinkNYC, the world’s largest and fastest free municipal Wi-Fi network with more than one million users. Notwithstanding these incredible advances, the de Blasio Administration remains laser focused on helping New Yorkers overcome obstacles not necessarily related to technology and broadband access.

At HRA, we recognize that our work to improve client experience must not stop at optimizing our digital systems and improving our online communication efforts. Through data analyses, client interviews, and research, we were able to identify certain behavioral patterns that lead to churn of clients at recertification. For example, SNAP notices weren’t catching clients’ attention. In response to this, we crafted a behaviorally-informed reminder notice to clients that they’d lose their benefits if they didn’t act in a timely manner. What we found was that those clients who received the behaviorally-informed notice:

- Were 5.5% less likely to miss the form submission step than clients who did not;
- Were more likely to submit recertification forms and completed phone interviews earlier in the recertification period; and
- Were 12.9% more likely to have submitted a recertification form than the control group.

Now I would like to briefly discuss how these low and high tech innovations are allowing HRA to meet clients in the setting where they feel most comfortable, both online and offline.

SNAP Outreach

SNAP outreach online

In April 2015, HRA launched an advertising campaign to encourage New Yorkers struggling to afford food to seek help, especially targeting low-income seniors and immigrants. Through FoodHelp.nyc, potential clients are redirected to ACCESS HRA where they are able to determine if they qualify for SNAP and other City, State, and federal benefits. In addition to

the website, the campaign consists of print advertisements in English and the six New York City Local Law languages in locations throughout the City. The campaign also includes digital advertisements and video testimonials of past and current SNAP clients. Since the inception of the SNAP Helps campaign in April 2015, FoodHelp.nyc has seen approximately 131,000 lifetime users with roughly 74% being new users. Additionally, there were approximately 58,000 click-throughs from FoodHelp.nyc to ACCESS HRA, representing 44% of site visitors.

SNAP outreach in the community

HRA's SNAP Support Services unit manages out-stationed staff at three community-based "Paperless Office System" sites providing online access to benefits with an 88% approval rate for approved applications. SNAP Support Services staff also provides technical assistance to 103 community-based organizations that provide SNAP facilitated enrollment and recertification services. Over the past year, SNAP Support Services provided outreach services at more than 1,676 individual community events and prescreened more than 9,526 potentially eligible applicants.

Now I would like to briefly discuss how this Committee can help the City and State of New York continue to leverage technology in pursuit of improved program efficiencies and outcomes.

A-87 cost allocation waiver

Families in need often require assistance from more than one program, which can mean visiting multiple offices, completing multiple applications, and providing the same documents to more than one program. Improvements in technology can streamline the delivery of programs, making the process more efficient for service providers, and helping to ensure that families and individuals receive program services in a more holistic manner. The current A-87 cost allocation waiver provides incentives for States to streamline service delivery, efforts towards which have begun in many States. In New York, these efforts will create a "no-wrong-door" service system for families that will help to ensure that they receive all the help they need, no matter which program they approach first. This coordinated approach to service delivery, will help families get back on their feet and off of assistance more quickly. However, this work is not done, and the expiration on December 31, 2018, of the increased federal reimbursement available under the A-87 cost allocation waiver threatens to slow or halt this important work in New York and elsewhere. For this reason, New York strongly recommends that this Committee work with the United States Department of Health and Human Services' Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services and the US Department of Agriculture to extend or make permanent this waiver in order to incentivize states to continue to develop the types of technological advances and outcomes described in this testimony.

Conclusion

The Administration will continue to work to expand access and remove barriers to SNAP by using online tools and technology innovations. The results of these implementations have been multi-faceted. For clients, it has resulted in shorter wait times to complete their transaction, and a better customer experience for our low touch population as well as for our clients in need of a more in depth worker intervention. Our workers are spending time helping clients when needed, rather than completing the scanning tasks, routing clients manually, and data entry.

Modernization of client and worker facing tools and processes can only take us so far. We believe there is a need to review the underlying federal regulations that guide this program to help States and local jurisdictions take full advantage of the continuous technology advances, changes in our population needs, and shifts in the workforce. There is administrative burden on both the States and the Federal overights that could benefit from building more flexibility into the regulations so that every innovation does not require a waiver.

We would also like to take this opportunity to work with you to protect low-income and vulnerable Americans as well as Americans with disabilities against any proposed federal cuts to the SNAP program or other safety net programs. Not only would cuts to the SNAP program reverse years of gains that cities and states like New York have made in service delivery it would also harm local economies. In New York City, SNAP recipients purchase more than \$3 billion in food, generating about \$5.4 billion of economic activity largely within small businesses. We look forward to continued collaboration with you as we continue to innovate and test and learn from new technology and tools

I look forward to your questions.

Thank you