

CITY COUNCIL  
CITY OF NEW YORK

----- X

TRANSCRIPT OF THE MINUTES

Of the

COMMITTEE ON GENERAL WELFARE

----- X

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



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

UNIDENTIFIED: Cloud started.

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

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

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

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

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

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



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

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

LISA FITZPATRICK: Okay.

CHAIRPERSON LEVIN: There you are, okay.

LISA FITZPATRICK: Okay. Good morning.

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

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

EFAP which are aimed squarely at reducing hunger and tackling food insecurity. COVID-19 challenged our agency like never before resulting in moving to work swiftly and in lockstep with our partners in government and the not for profit community to alleviate the burden for so many New Yorkers having to worry about where their next meal is coming from. In March, recognizing the gravity and scale of the mobilization effort required to galvanize and marshal resources to address New York City's food needs during the pandemic, Kathryn Garcia, former Department of Sanitation Commissioner, was appointed as the COVID-19 Food Czar. Through a coordinated agency effort, the Food Czar's team spearheaded a citywide initiative that provided more than 135 million meals to hungry and food insecure New Yorkers. Further, under the Food Czar, the City took action to secure the City's food supply chain and support regional agriculture, intervened to keep food pantries and other vital emergency feeding charities open and equipped them to meet the surging demand for their services. Through these actions New York City responded, organized, and expanded food availability to our most vulnerable residents. Today, the City is

delivering approximately 400,000 meals each day through its Emergency Food Delivery program, which provides meals to low-income homebound New Yorkers, including seniors, in addition to serving another 450,000 grab and go meals at over 400 New York City schools. The sheer volume of applications received by the agency during the emergency is indicative of the heightened need for food security resources at this time. During the height of the pandemic, the agency received 84,000 SNAP applications in April 2020, the highest number of SNAP applications in modern history, and more than a 200 percent increase compared to the 27,000 applications received in April 2019. The vast majority of SNAP applications have been submitted electronically, outside of centers, through ACCESS HRA which has revolutionized the client experience in accessing services. Almost 99 percent of applications were received electronically by the agency using ACCESS HRA in May 2020, compared to 90 percent in February of 2020. The increased usage of the online portal and mobile app, coupled with the agency's longstanding efforts to provide clients with flexible case service options has significantly reduced in-center client traffic,

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

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

conduct by telephone the interview portion of the cash assistance application process for a number of years, given the efficiency and channel shift of applying and recertifying for SNAP. With federal and state approval, SNAP clients can apply, recertify, and submit documents online using ACCESS HRA. This was a reform that DSS successfully advocated for in 2015. During the pandemic, with the ACCESS HRA platform in place and operational, the agency was able to act swiftly in March 2020 to temporarily close most locations, but ensured services were still available in each borough, in order to protect the health and safety of staff and clients, while still meeting the needs of-- while still meeting the need for individuals who prefer to access services in person. Prior to COVID, as a result of the agency's proactive advocacy in December 2019, 96 percent of SNAP application interviews and 87 percent of recertification interviews were held via telephone and the percentage of SNAP applications submitted online had increased to 89 percent. Months later during the pandemic, families and individuals sought assistance through us from home, allowing us to prioritize public health, during that time 99 percent

of all SNAP business is conducted remotely and outside of centers. The goal of securing the same client access without the need to come into an office for Cash Assistance as we achieved for SNAP has and continues to be a priority of the agency. In fact, we built a system for online Cash Assistance applications before we had State approval to use it outside of our centers and in other than a limited pilot with 13 community partners, enabling us to go live once the pandemic waiver was obtained in a matter of days. As has been noted, we pushed for these changes in the days before the crisis hit. As a result, we quickly received OTDA approval to permit New York City residents to submit joint applications for Cash Assistance and SNAP online. Within four days of OTDA approval, the agency stood up the system to apply for Cash Assistance/SNAP online and provide telephone interviews as needed. As a result-- as of April, as a result of this critical reform, 85 percent of Cash Assistance applications are now submitted online. We also secured federal and OTDA approval through the end of December 2020 to waive the requirement for a client's physical or electronic signature on SNAP and Cash Assistance applications so



that an HRA employee may complete the application over the telephone with the client. This waiver allowed us to implement a process by which a Cash Assistance or SNAP application is completed over the phone for any applicant who lacks internet connectivity, internet-ready devices, the ability to complete and mail or fax applications, are homebound, or have challenges using ACCESS HRA for application submission. Clients who call HRA Infoline and indicate that they are unable to apply online are provided with alternatives, including the option to apply by telephone. Our waiver request to permit community-based organizations to provide this telephone application service was denied. However, it is worth noting that pre-COVID-19, Benefits Data Trust, because of their ability to record a telephonic signature, was able to submit SNAP only applications and recertifications for individuals unable to use ACCESS HRA. As mentioned, securing critical waivers is at the core of the agency's COVID-19 response. Currently, our work involves requesting extensions of important benefits-related waivers that were previously approved. Thankfully for New Yorkers who rely on our services, many of our

extension requests were recently granted for waivers under which we have been operating. The waivers and extensions enable DSS to meet the increased demand for benefits in a safe way to avoid, whenever possible, clients having to come in person to Centers. The below waivers have been extended through December 31, 2020: SNAP and Cash Assistance signature waiver for phone applications taken by HRA staff, Cash Assistance telephone interview waiver, Drug/alcohol and Domestic Violence screenings by telephone, Extension of DV waivers Partial extension of the SNAP interview adjustments for recertifications only but not applications). The interview adjustments for initial SNAP applications expired on August 31, 2020. All SNAP applicants must have an interview before any benefits may be issued in accordance with the partial SNAP interview adjustments from the federal government. We have asked OTDA to seek an extension of the interview adjustments for applications and are hopeful that it will be granted, but for now the application interview requirement is in effect. The federal government extended the SNAP recertification waiver through August 31, 2020. We encouraged clients with

SNAP cases that were due to recertify by August 31, 2020 to recertify. At the federal government's direction, we opened the recertification portal and processed a significant number of the August cases. There was no adverse action taken for not recertifying at that time. As required by the federal government, USDA, recertification for SNAP benefits resumed with those cases due to expire on September 30, 2020. Clients must now recertify to continue receiving SNAP benefits. Recertifications can be completed through ACCESS HRA and documentation submission can be conducted through the Mobile Document Upload feature of the ACCESS HRA Mobile app. It remains the case that there is no need for clients to visit an HRA SNAP office. Clients who are due to recertify by September 30, 2020, have had the ability to recertify now since the period was opened on August 1, 2020. We do not yet have a waiver on recertifications for this month, so as required by the federal government clients must recertify in order to continue receiving benefits. For SNAP cases due to recertify, because of the SNAP interview adjustments from the federal government, which expire December 31, 2020, only some SNAP cases will require

an interview. Those clients who do require an interview will receive a telephone call from HRA staff. As a reminder, based on the federal waiver, we can recertify the SNAP case without an interview, provided that both of the following conditions have been met: the applicant's identity has been verified; and, all other mandatory information and verification has been provided and is valid: Social Security number, as already required by federal law, residency, gross non-exempt income both earned and unearned, disability, "Alien eligibility" as already required by federal law. Pursuant to the federal waiver, if either of these conditions has not been met, then an interview will be required. Under the federal waiver, interviews will still be required if any of the information submitted is unclear or cannot be verified through separate data matches. The State also extended our recertification waiver for Cash Assistance until August 31, 2020. We encouraged clients with Cash Assistance cases that were due to recertify by August 31, 2020 to do so for the same reasons as above. There were no adverse actions for not doing so at that time. Cash Assistance clients who are due to recertify by September 30, 2020, have

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

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

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

pantries have been vital partners. Particularly at this difficult time, supporting them was a priority as a part of our urgent response to keeping New Yorkers fed. We shared pandemic related safety guidance with all of our EFAP food pantry partners, encouraging them to continue operations to provide critical services to food insecure New Yorkers in a way that is safe for everyone. Food distribution to those in need remains our most important objective. DSS Emergency Intervention Services developed and shared informational guidance on best practices for EFAP food providers, including: the need for expanded pick-up hours to decrease the number of clients that visit at a given time; discouraging lines and mass groups congregating by offering, where appropriate diverse pre-bagged items, for example family size/demographic, dietary restrictions, etc.; increase emergency packages to last up to 14 days to reduce the frequency of visits; and provide shelf/long-term stable food options with sample food item categories for vegetables, fruits, proteins, grains and dairy, and both perishable or non-perishable. For any New Yorker in need of food, you can get help today at one of New York City's food



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

CHAIRPERSON LEVIN: Thank you very much.

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

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

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

19  
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.

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

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

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

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

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

COUNCIL MEMBER GRODENCHIK: [interposing]  
Thank you.

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

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

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

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

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

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

COUNCIL MEMBER GRODENCHIK: Thank you.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

-

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

COUNCIL MEMBER GRODENCHIK: Thank you.

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

COUNCIL MEMBER GRODENCHIK: Thank you.

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



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

KATE MACKENZIE: Sure.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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?



LISA FITZPATRICK: The current number of SNAP recipients as of--

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

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

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

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

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

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

CHAIRPERSON LEVIN: [interposing] Okay.

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

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

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

CHAIRPERSON LEVIN: [interposing] Oh, okay.

LISA FITZPATRICK: other component for period.

CHAIRPERSON LEVIN: Okay, got it.

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

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

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

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

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

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

LISA FITZPATRICK: Okay.

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

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

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

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

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

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

possible to verify earned income. So we're continuing to use collateral context as much as possible to get the information that's needed in order to verify information in order to make a determination on the case. If all of the information is presented by the household prior to September, if all the information was provided by the household as a new applicant, then HRA did not have to have a telephone interview with the household, and any household that did not have all that verification would have had a conversation with an employee or a redeployed worker in order to gain as much information as possible to see how we could assist that individual with getting that information. Now, with the expiration of the interview waiver, all application cases require an interview, and it's in those conversations that we get an understanding with clients as to how we can best help them to get that documentation that they need to verify their eligibility for assistance. But some households, there is an ability for us to reach out to employers, but as you can imagine, many employers when they get information-- when they get telephone calls from 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                   recertifications are required, are you tracking the  
2                   day to day or week to week to see how many  
3                   recertifications are being completed and making sure  
4                   that that is on-track with what you need-- what your  
5                   expectation would be in terms of the number of  
6                   recerts? So knowing that how many cases would be up  
7                   for recertification in September, and making sure  
8                   that we're kind of on-track for that. And then kind  
9                   of as a related question, I'm concerned because the  
10                  on-demand system was, you know, was very useful and  
11                  would be useful in this case, I'm sure, but because  
12                  our understanding is that there are a lot of dropped  
13                  calls on the info line and people are not-- you know,  
14                  if there's a call-back, they're getting a call-back  
15                  on an unidentified number and maybe not picking up  
16                  the phone. So if you could speak a little bit to the  
17                  on-demand system, and what we we're doing to ensure  
18                  that we're not dropping cases because of  
19                  recertification?  
20

21                  LISA FITZPATRICK: We currently have a  
22                  partial interview waiver until December of this year,  
23                  and with that partial interview waiver, we do not  
24                  have to interview 100 percent of the SNAP-- 100  
25                  percent of the SNAP recertificaitons, and that's why

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

done through a smart phone, through AccessHRA at this point?

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

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

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

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

LISA FITZPATRICK: Okay, prior to COVID-19, 96 percent of SNAP applications and 87 percent of recertification interviews were held over the 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 1<sup>st</sup>, 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

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

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

LISA FITZPATRICK: For recertification's, absolutely.

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

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

CHAIRPERSON LEVIN: [interposing] Oh.

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

CHAIRPERSON LEVIN: I see, okay.

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

CHAIRPERSON LEVIN: Okay. The partial waivers until?

LISA FITZPATRICK: Until December 30<sup>th</sup>,  
31<sup>st</sup>.

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

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

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

LISA FITZPATRICK: That is correct.

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

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



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

LISA FITZPATRICK: [interposing] Yeah, right.

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

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

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

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

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

COMMITTEE COUNSEL: Council Member Lander no longer has questions.

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

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

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

CHAIRPERSON LEVIN: How are you encouraging them?

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

LISA FITZPATRICK: They are still getting the--

CHAIRPERSON LEVIN: [interposing]  
[inaudible]

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

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

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

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

LISA FITZPATRICK: [interposing] Yeah.

CHAIRPERSON LEVIN: for SNAP recipients?

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

CHAIRPERSON LEVIN: [interposing] 118 a piece?

LISA FITZPATRICK: No, for the household.

CHAIRPERSON LEVIN: Oh, oh.

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

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

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

LISA FITZPATRICK: [interposing] Yes.

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

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

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

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

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

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



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

1 five percent who prefer to go into in person,  
2 particularly elderly people or seniors or those  
3 people that are not proficient with technology. How  
4 are we making sure that services are available? What  
5 are the-- what-- maybe explain a little bit about  
6 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 call back, and so they have to wait for that call,  
2 but you know, for a second call. But if it's coming  
3 up as unknown, a lot of people-- I know a lot of  
4 people that don't pick up unknown numbers ever.  
5 There's no way to tag those numbers as HRA or some  
6 kind of-- or have a call-back number available or  
7 some other way to address that so that that's not  
8 getting-- people aren't getting lost in the shuffle  
9 because of that specific reason. I've heard that  
10 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--

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

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



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

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

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

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

9                   CHAIRPERSON LEVIN: [interposing] This  
10                  morning.

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

21                 CHAIRPERSON LEVIN: Well then--

22                 LISA FITZPATRICK: [interposing]  
23                 Something--

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

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

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

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

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

CHAIRPERSON LEVIN: [interposing] Yeah.

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

CHAIRPERSON LEVIN: Okay, okay.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

LISA FITZPATRICK: That's a great question.

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

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

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

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



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

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

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

CHAIRPERSON LEVIN: Okay.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

LISA FITZPATRICK: Thank you.

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

LISA FITZPATRICK: Thank you.

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

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

SERGEANT AT ARMS: You may begin.

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

behalf of Food Bank for New York City. I'm Nick Buess. I'm the Associate Director of Mobilization at Food Bank. Our organization represents nearly 1,000 member charities across the five boroughs, including food pantries, soup kitchens, shelters, senior centers, and schools, and others providing emergency food, income support, and nutrition education to New Yorkers in need. Food Bank distributes 80 million free meals per year for New Yorkers in need, and our work would not be possible without the support of City Council and our partnership with city agencies. We're the distribution partner for New York's EFAP program which is, of course, the City's baseline support for food pantries and soup kitchens, supporting over 500 organizations. Additionally, the City Council provides food initiatives that support over 200 emergency food providers, as well as 25 school-based food pantries. This Council's Food Act Benefits Initiative is essential to our income support services which help New Yorkers apply and recertify for SNAP to provide free [inaudible] systems. Combined, these income support services put nearly 38 million dollars into the pockets of low-income New Yorkers last year. Before the pandemic,

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

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

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

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

CHAIRPERSON LEVIN: Yes, go ahead.

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

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

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



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

SERGEANT AT ARMS: You may begin.

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

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

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

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

SERGEANT AT ARMS: Your time will begin.

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

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

not-- keeping its eye on the ball regarding that.

When the Council give significant funding to

emergency food providers, we and others weighed in

and said, hey, make sure there's significant

resources for benefits access, and I really

appreciate the leadership of the Council and the

leadership of the Mayor's office, making sure that

that was done. Like Hunger Free America, for

instance, got half a million dollars, which allowed

us to open an office in the Bronx and dramatically

increase our benefit access. I hope that-- I know

these are tough budget times, but that those efforts

are continued and expanded. Our contract runs out in

November. We've gotten some significant generous

matching funds from the Robin Hood Foundation, but

the problem is not going to run out in a few months.

I really loathe to give any credit to the Bloomberg

Administration or the previous HRA Commissioner Door

[sp?] whatsoever, because they were so wrong on so

many things, but I must give them a little credit on

the online applications. Some of the efforts we have

today were started by Commissioner Door and HRA under

the previous Administration, and that's one of the

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

JOEL BERG: [interposing] in the minimal sense.

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

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

SERGEANT AT ARMS: Time will begin.

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

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



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

Food Policy Center which I'm the Executive Director.

Not surprisingly, 74 percent of food pantries and

soup kitchens reported an increase in visitors

compared to last year, but unfortunately, with this

increased need came many closures, low food supply,

long lines and crowds, and furthermore, there was a

lack of any centralized or comprehensive information

for community food resources. At the suggestion of

the Council and CBOs, the Hunter College New York

City Food Policy Center and its strategic partners,

including Hunger Free America Share Meals, developed

59 New York City neighborhood food resource guides.

Each of the 59 guides included updated information on

all food pantry soup kitchens meals for students,

meals for seniors, delivery services as well as many

other important food resources. The guides are

updated daily. Volunteers trained by the center made

more than 32,000 calls. The guides are

[nycfoodpolicy.org/food](http://nycfoodpolicy.org/food). The Hunter College New York

City Food Policy Center in collaboration with the

CUNY Urban Food Policy Institute and Columbia's Tisch

Center for Food education and Policy are currently

researching the impact of COVID-19 on food systems in

New York City. In addition to looking at food pantry

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



community-based service providers in reaching them.

And with the pre-pandemic Asian state poverty rate 14

percent and a 33 percent limited English proficiency

rate. This crisis has us fighting on multiple

fronts. In particular, as previously mentioned, this

administration's assault on our immigrant population

are contributing to the food access crisis. Only a

third of Asians who meet the income guidelines

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

oppressive public charge rule, the false choice

between staying in this country and getting their

next meal is a real once for immigrant families. By

our own analysis, the use of SNAP benefits by Asian

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

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

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

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

LEP utilize services that reflect their cultural

identities and meet them where they are. But the

City's food delivery plan still has serious flaws

relating to community-wide difficulty using 311,

systemic inadequacies regarding LEP information

access, and inconsistent deployment of meals.

Nonetheless, our partners some of whom will speak

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

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

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

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

me the opportunity to speak on this important issue.

We must find solutions to this continuing crisis, and

we look forward to working with the committee and

individual Council Members to make sure every New

Yorker knows where their next meal is coming from.

Thank you.

COMMITTEE COUNSEL: Thank you so much,

Ravi. And I just want to remind our panelists for

today to wait for the cue from the Sergeant at Arms

before you begin speaking just so that we can start

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

SERGEANT AT ARMS: Your time will begin

now.

CARLYN COWEN: Good afternoon and thank

you so much Chair Levin and the members of the City

Council for the opportunity to testify today. My

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

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

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

Asian-American social services agency and since the

beginning of the pandemic in March we've continued to

provide in-person and remote services over 60,000

community members from meal delivery to home care to

daily wellness checks. We have delivered 108,000

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

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

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

SERGEANT AT ARMS: [interposing] Time is up.

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

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

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

SERGEANT AT ARMS: Your time will begin.

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



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

I would like to share one of our client's stories.

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

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

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

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

COMMITTEE COUNSEL: Thank you, Jeehae.

I'll now call on Carol Daly.

SERGEANT AT ARMS: Your time will begin now.

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

1 COMMITTEE ON GENERAL WELFARE 116

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

Beatrous Diaz Terveras [sp?], and we are going to begin with Emanuel.

SERGEANT AT ARMS: Your time will start now.

EMANUEL NEGRON: good afternoon Chair and Committee Members. My name is Emanuel Negrón, Senior Director of Benefit Access at Met Council, responsible for leading our citywide SNAP outreach and application assistance in neediest [sic] communities. The response to the economic impact of the pandemic, HRA and BSS has executed business processes allowed by state waivers to keep up with the citywide demand for SNAP assistance. This has included everything from extended recertification periods, waiving client telephone interviews, using emergency allotments to bring households to the maximum allotments, waiving ABAWD work requirements, and allowing clients verbal consent over telephone to file applications with HRA. In addition, the Commissioner Banks weekly conference call has provided important updates and community partners of HRA's response to the pandemic. More is needed to address the ever-increasing demand for food assistance as New Yorkers recover from the economic

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

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

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

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

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

SERGEANT AT ARMS: Your time will begin now.

MARIA MELCHOR: Thank you to Chair Levin and the General Welfare Committee for the opportunity to testify today, and thank you to everyone who has 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

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

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

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

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

ABBY BIBERMAN: Chair Levin--

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

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

the Public Assistance and SNAP Practice in the Public Benefits Unit of the New York Legal Assistance Group.

Our practice is a team of dedicated attorneys and paralegals who represent clients having trouble accessing or maintaining public assistance and SNAP benefits in addition to shelter advocacy. We represent clients at administrative fair hearings, conduct advocacy with Department of Social Services, job and SNAP centers and bring impact litigation to ensure that our clients are obtaining and maintaining an adequate level of benefits and shelter services.

So, in March, as advocates were working closely with HRA, pursuant to Local Law 169, right when the pandemic hit, and we quickly pivoted as a group to figure out how HRA was going to continue to provide benefits to our clients and address the inevitable influx, all while providing their services almost entirely remotely. So, while many of the changes during COVID have been tremendously helpful for our clients, there are some areas that still need improvement. We do think HRA's continued and expanded use of Access HRA has been beneficial for many of our clients as well as NYLAG advocacy provider portal. We would also like to see further

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

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

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

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

CHAIRPERSON LEVIN: [interposing] Yes, of course.

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

1 to note one thing that Lisa Fitzpatrick said, which  
2 was that they would like-- it sounded like there was  
3 maybe going to be a move toward keeping some of the  
4 centers closed, even after the pandemic and  
5 increasing reliance on some of these other methods. I  
6 have a lot of concerns about that, but one thing I  
7 just wanted to remind everyone is that prior to the  
8 pandemic, centers were over-crowded. So, if HRA is  
9 able to achieve some of what they need to without  
10 foot traffic at the centers, that's great, but that  
11 should reduce the number of people going into the  
12 already over-crowded centers. Those centers should  
13 all reopen as soon as possible, and then maybe there  
14 will be levels, members of clients in those centers  
15 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 panelists in the following order: Natosha McCray and  
2 Abraham Grosse [sp?]. And I want to remind panelists  
3 to please wait for the cue from the Sergeant at Arms  
4 before you begin speaking so that we can start the  
5 timer.  
6

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



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

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

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

SERGEANT AT ARMS: Time is up.

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

CHAIRPERSON LEVIN: Thank you, Natosha.

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

SERGEANT AT ARMS: Your time will begin now.

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

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

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 23<sup>rd</sup>, 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?

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

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

ABRAHAM GROSSE: Thank you.

CHAIRPERSON LEVIN: Appreciate it.

Thanks.

COMMITTEE COUNSEL: Thank you, Mr.

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

CHAIRPERSON LEVIN: I want to thank everybody that testified today, members of the public, members of the Administration. We, indeed, have our work cut out for us, and we need to continue to put pressure on the state and the federal, members

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

[gavel]

1  
2  
3  
4  
5  
6  
7  
8  
9  
10  
11  
12  
13  
14  
15  
16  
17  
18  
19  
20  
21  
22  
23  
24  
25

COMMITTEE ON GENERAL WELFARE

136



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