



Fingerprinting For Food Stamps Under Scrutiny

by Kaomi Goetz

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The Obama administration may be trying to mount a case against digital finger-imaging of federal food assistance applicants, a practice four states are implementing in order to combat fraud.

Anti-hunger workers say it discriminates against the country's poor and treats them like criminals when they are entitled to benefits.

New York City is one of the places that uses finger-imaging.

Angel Jean Seymore, a New York City resident, says she felt degraded when she had to give her digital fingerprint as part of her application to buy food under the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP). A severe back injury forced her to stop working as a home health aide.

"They treated me in a disgusting way. They did not care that I had a disability," says Seymore. "I'm a U.S. citizen, born and raised in the Bronx all my life. I have my identity in the health department and Social Security. And yet I'm being treated like a criminal."

If she lived elsewhere in the state, it wouldn't have happened. That's because the rest of the state has opted out of the finger-imaging requirement. Advocates who work with many of the city's poor are frustrated.

"It's as if the mayor is saying his own constituents are more criminal," says Joel Berg, executive director of the New York City Coalition Against Hunger.

Berg says finger-imaging discriminates against people who can't physically come to an office to have it done, either because of work or disabilities. People often feel like it's a tracking system or they've done something wrong. And he says there are other ways to detect fraud, such as computer matching with Social Security numbers.

"There's only one kind of fraud potentially captured by finger-imaging. That's when a person actually creates a duplicate identity, like they're in James Bond. It's preposterous," says Berg. "It's hard enough for an eligible person on the program to get the benefits."

An Urban Institute study found that finger-imaging deterred 4 percent from completing their application. Critics say that's tens of thousands of people. But New York City counters that the practice has been one of the best weapons against fraud over the past decade.

Robert Doar, commissioner of the city's Human Resources Administration, has not seen the study, but he says people aren't being discouraged from applying. He points to the nearly 300,000 more New Yorkers who received SNAP benefits in the past year.

"It's not an ink process, like what would take place in some criminal justice situation. It's easy, it's simple and fast, and the numbers prove our point," Doar says.

Yet it puts New York City at odds with most of the rest of the country. Just three other states — Texas, California and Arizona — also use finger-imaging. But a few weeks ago, Agriculture Department Undersecretary Kevin Concannon was in New York City, where he said the practice is under scrutiny.

"We are examining that whole question of the efficacy of it. Does it really do what it's alleged to do? My biggest concern: Does it have an unintended consequence of dissuading people from coming forward who need the benefits?"

Concannon added that if a state wanted to start the finger-imaging today, the Obama administration wouldn't approve it. Anti-hunger workers say they're hopeful a rollback is coming. After all, they say, President Obama is the first president to have grown up in a household where food stamps meant food on the table.