



For Immediate Release:  
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## **Obama Official Urges NYC to Drop Food Stamp Finger Imaging: Letter Says Practice is “Barrier to Participation” and “Not Cost Effective”**

**New Data Shows States That Use It Have More Errors, Less Participation;  
Advocates, Elected Officials Urge Mayor Bloomberg to Drop Practice;  
Finger Imaging Is a “Lose-Lose-Lose Situation”**

The Obama Administration’s top domestic anti-hunger official urged an end to the practice, in New York City and three states (AZ, CA, TX), under which food stamp applicants are required to provide electronic finger prints in order to receive benefits, calling the practice a “barrier to participation” that is “not cost effective.”

Writing to the State of New York, which has allowed the practice to continue in New York City even after it was banned in the rest of the state, USDA Under Secretary Kevin Concannon stated “More cost-effective alternatives to finger imaging should be actively considered both as a cost savings and as a means of program simplification.”

Saying that finger imaging was a “prominent and continuing area of concern,” Concannon’s letter also read: “Most States satisfy the requirement to establish a system to prevent duplicate participation by matching names with social security numbers, which is far less costly than finger imaging yet is equally effective at detecting duplicate participation.”

Commented Joel Berg, Executive Director of the New York City Coalition Against Hunger, “While Undersecretary Concannon has previously expressed concerns about finger imaging, this letter is his most direct request to date for New York and the other three states to end this counter-productive requirement. Given that Concannon was previously the statewide social services administrator in three different states (IA, ME, OR) – all of which declined to use finger imaging but had high rates of participation and low rates of program fraud – he is extraordinarily qualified to make the reasoned judgment that the practice is a waste of taxpayer money that restricts access to eligible families and thus increases hunger. Since advocates, social policy researchers, leading federal, state, and local officials, and even the State of New York have all previously concluded that finger imaging is disadvantageous, now that the Obama Administration has said the same thing, it is the perfect time to end this harmful procedure.”

Today the New York City Coalition Against Hunger released an analysis of federal data which proves that the four states that require finger imaging have lower rates of overall Food Stamp Program (recently renamed SNAP) participation, particularly among working families. And in the four states that finger image, the number of eligible working families who receive food stamp

benefits is a full 24 percentage points lower than in the next four largest states that don't finger image. The Coalition's analysis also shows that these states have higher rates of administrative error than the 46 states that do not demand the measure. (See chart on next page.)

Said Berg, "Not only does finger imaging increase stigma for families needing food in these tough times, the practice also forces many heads of families to take time off work and lose wages in order to travel to city offices and then be forced to wait for hours to provide finger images. Most of those families would otherwise be able to submit their applications and have follow-up interviews by mail, fax, Internet, and/or phone."

"This new data," continued Berg, "proves that finger imaging is a lose-lose-lose situation. It fails to reduce fraud, it wastes tax dollars and costs workers wages, and it increases hunger by making it more difficult for working parents to access the food they need for themselves and their children. Given that our hard data proves that this practice disproportionately harms working poor families, and that Mayor Bloomberg has consistently claimed that is a population he wants to help the most, this new data should provide the Mayor the extra impetus he needs to finally end the practice. But given that finger imaging was eliminated a few years ago in the rest of the state with no apparent increase in fraud, if the Mayor does not end the requirement in New York City, the Governor should use his authority to ending finger imaging in the city as well."

Said Congressman Anthony Weiner, "Surely in the 21st century there are better methods of fraud prevention. I urge an end to this misguided practice of fingerprinting applicants."

Christine Quinn, Speaker of the New York City Council, said: "As New Yorkers continue to feel the effects of the recession, many are having a hard time providing their families with enough to eat. We should be doing everything in our power to help them enroll for food stamps and make that application process easier. I believe finger imaging remains an unnecessary use of City resources and a real obstacle to food stamp enrollment."

Added New York City Public Advocate Bill deBlasio: "The USDA's letter reaffirms the same message we have been sending the city for the past eight years: finger imaging does more harm than good. We should be working to remove barriers to getting low income New Yorkers the food aid they need, not clinging to costly and unnecessary obstacles. I hope the administration will finally listen to reason and end this practice."

"Barriers should not exist for hungry New Yorkers seeking help," City Council General Welfare Chair Annabel Palma said. "As working families struggle to survive our tumultuous economic downturn and to make ends meet, we should increase access to food stamps which provide a vital and necessary safety net. The practice of finger imaging is not cost effective, increases the burden on applicants, and stigmatizes the process; it can cause those most in need to turn away from seeking assistance."

# States That Finger Image: Less Food, More Error

	SNAP Payment Error Rate Fiscal Year 2008	SNAP Overall Participation Rate Fiscal Year 2007	SNAP Working Poor Participation Rate Fiscal Year 2007
4 States That Finger Image (NY, AZ, CA, TX)	5.52	56%	46%
Largest 4 States that Don't Finger Image (FL, IL, MI, PA)	3.67	76%	70%
National Average	5.01	66%	56%

Source: USDA; averages for finger imaging and non-finger imaging states conducted by NYC Coalition Against Hunger



United States Department of Agriculture

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Washington, D.C. 20250

The Honorable Elizabeth R. Berlin  
Executive Deputy Commissioner  
Division of Operations and Program Support  
40 North Pearl Street, 16<sup>th</sup> Floor  
Albany, New York 12243

MAY 07 2010

Dear Commissioner Berlin:

Mindful of the responsibility to make sure that the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) properly serves all people who are eligible, we strongly believe that in all States SNAP must be accessible to all eligible households. In this challenging economy, governments must review program practices, devise and implement appropriate strategies based upon their resources, and do so in order to meet the growing needs of low income people.

A prominent and continuing area of concern to many regarding access to SNAP for eligible persons has become certain States' use of finger imaging systems as a method to deter duplicate participation. While the Food and Nutrition Act of 2008 does require States to implement systems that deter duplicate participation, there are serious concerns that finger imaging requirements may be a barrier to participation among many of the hard to reach eligible populations who wish to enroll in the Program. Furthermore, some government sponsored studies have shown these systems are not cost effective.

As States look for ways to provide needed public services in difficult fiscal times, the costs associated with finger imaging should be examined and reconsidered. Most States satisfy the requirement to establish a system to prevent duplicate participation by matching names with social security numbers, which is far less costly than finger imaging yet is equally effective at detecting duplicate participation.

We need to make every public dollar count by managing resources in the most efficient and effective manner possible. We must also ensure that we are not creating unnecessary and harmful barriers in the application process, so we can assure fair and reasonable access to this essential nutrition program.

I recognize the need for a critical balance between encouraging participation by all eligible households, ensuring program integrity, and being fiscally responsible. To that end, the United States Department of Agriculture continues to monitor and evaluate how finger imaging systems may impact cost and eligible client participation.

The Honorable Elizabeth R. Berlin  
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I encourage you to think of ways we can continue to work together to meet our common goals of improving program administration and increasing access to SNAP benefits for all of those who are eligible. More cost effective alternatives to finger imaging should be actively considered both as a cost savings and as a means of program simplification.

The Food and Nutrition Service is prepared to work with you to further our mutual goals and shared responsibilities for SNAP and the millions of eligible Americans who need and depend upon the program.

Sincerely,



Kevin W. Concannon  
Under Secretary  
Food, Nutrition, and Consumer Services