



OBAMA OFFICIAL SLAMS NY FOOD STAMP POLICY

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A USDA executive says the city and state policy of fingerprinting Food Stamp applicants costs too much and is ineffective.

[Neil deMause](#)

The Obama administration has waded into the running [debate over New York's practice of fingerprinting food stamp applicants](#), with a top Agriculture Department official urging the state to discontinue a practice he deems costly and ineffective.

"More cost-effective alternatives to finger imaging [an electronic fingerprinting method] should be actively considered both as a cost savings and as a means of program simplification," wrote USDA Under Secretary Kevin Concannon in a letter to state Office of Temporary and Disability Assistance deputy commissioner Elizabeth Berlin that was sent on May 7, but first made public on Friday. Simply matching applicants' names with Social Security numbers, he said, would be "far less costly than finger imaging yet is equally effective at detecting duplicate participation."

Advocates for the poor have long argued that requiring applicants to have their fingers scanned before they can receive food stamps—a process that often requires an extra office visit—has helped keep the share of eligible New Yorkers who get food benefits (61 percent as of 2007, the most recent data) well below the national average. An [Urban Institute study](#) in 2007 found that finger imaging can repress food stamp receipt rates by as much as 4.3 percent.

USDA officials have expressed concern about imaging in the past, but never in such strong terms. New York City Coalition Against Hunger director Joel Berg, who has been finger imaging's harshest critic, issued a press release Friday touting Concannon's concerns and pointing to a [new chart](#) showing that large states with finger imaging have lower food-stamp rates and higher error rates than those that don't.

"This new data proves that finger imaging is a lose-lose-lose situation," said Berg. "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."

Anthony Farmer, a spokesperson for the state Office of Temporary and Disability Assistance, said Concannon's letter is "under review," and noted that the state has [expanded its food-stamp outreach to working families](#).

The city Human Resource Administration, which is even more aggressive in conducting finger imaging than the state (when the state eliminated finger scanning for employed heads of households in 2007, the city asked for and received a waiver to continue the practice) issued a statement asserting that "all evidence disproves that finger imaging is a barrier to access."

Agency spokesperson Barbara Brancaccio tells *City Limits* that the agency believes Social Security card checks alone are not sufficient, and that "finger imaging is the most reliable form of identification for the prevention of duplicate cases." Brancaccio also notes that the number of New Yorkers receiving food stamps but not cash assistance has grown by 370 percent since Mayor Bloomberg took office in 2002.

The battle over finger imaging for food stamps is only likely to heat up in coming months. In a March interview, Concannon said he would investigate whether [the feds have the power to ban the practice nationwide](#).