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PA Gotbaum: Chronic Computer Problems, Overworked Staff Create Obstacles for New Yorkers Seeking Public Benefits

Survey finds new evidence of barriers to benefits as recession deepens

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MANHATTAN – A new survey released today by Public Advocate Betsy Gotbaum finds that an automated system launched as a pilot in 1997 by the city’s Human Resources Administration (HRA) is unreliable, and may be causing unnecessary delays for New Yorkers accessing public benefits. With unemployment rising and demand for public benefits expected to increase, HRA eligibility specialists report that unreliable technology, insufficient staff, and language barriers prevent them from effectively serving clients.

Public Advocate Betsy Gotbaum said, “We have surveyed HRA clients, and now we have surveyed HRA employees. The results are clear: Low-income New Yorkers continue to face unnecessary and avoidable obstacles accessing public benefits that help put food on the table. Problems like non-working computers and scanners, long wait times, and lack of interpreters are unacceptable. HRA needs to address these problems and make sure the process runs as smoothly as possible. In this time of crisis, families cannot afford to wait for improvements any longer.”

Councilman Bill de Blasio said, “At a time when low income New Yorkers need help the most, HRA is falling down on the job. Lackluster equipment makes the already difficult process of obtaining public benefits nearly impossible. I applaud Public Advocate Betsy Gotbaum for pulling back the curtain on these problems and demanding real results.”

Eddie Rodriguez, President Local 1549, AFSCME, DC 37, said, “I would like to take this opportunity to thank the Honorable Betsy Gotbaum and her staff at the Office of the New York City Public Advocate for their efforts on behalf of the Eligibility Specialists of Local 1549 employed at the NYC Human Resources Administration. We urge policy makers at all levels of government to seriously consider Public Advocate Betsy Gotbaum's Recommendations so that enrollment barriers and obstacles can be eliminated.”

Joel Berg, Executive Director of the New York City Coalition Against Hunger, “Considering that 18,000 more New Yorkers received Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) benefits in January 2009 than in December 2008, it is now more important than ever that HRA staff members have all the resources they need to deal with the increased demand for these vital programs. We urge HRA to implement the changes that the Public Advocate’s report recommends – especially simplifying the application procedure and providing appropriate support to HRA staff – so that HRA staff members have all the resources they need to assist low-income families in this difficult economic time.”

The automated system, or Paperless Office System (POS), which automated the application and recertification process and eliminated paper record-keeping, was launched by HRA to address inefficiencies and inaccuracies in its benefits application process. In 2005, however, an audit of POS by the Office of the Comptroller concluded that the system did not meet HRA’s “initial business and operating requirements.” And in November 2008, a survey of HRA clients conducted by the Office of the Public Advocate found that clients face excessively long wait times and workflow problems such as misplaced documents and inoperative computers.

Concerned by these findings, the Office of the Public Advocate decided to investigate whether eligibility specialists have the resources, specifically the technology and equipment, needed to effectively serve their clients. The results of the survey of HRA eligibility specialists, released today, appear to be consistent with the findings of the earlier reports by the Comptroller and Public Advocate.

The Office of the Public Advocate conducted a survey of HRA eligibility specialists at Job Centers, Food Stamp and Medicaid Offices. A total of 148 surveys were collected. Survey findings include:

- Of those obstacles respondents rated “most difficult,” “not enough staff” was the most frequently cited, followed by both “computers are not reliable” and “clients do not bring the necessary documents when applying for benefits.” The third most frequently cited problem rated “most difficult” was “interpreters not available to translate for clients.”
- Seventy-three percent of respondents reported that the computer system for processing intake applications electronically was non-operational either “some of the time” (39.3 percent) or “occasionally” (33.3 percent) during working hours in the last year.
- Sixty-one percent of respondents reported that scanners, which are used to make electronic records of clients’ documents, were non-operational either “some of the time” (27.9 percent) or “occasionally” (32.9 percent) in the last year.
- More than half of eligibility specialists surveyed (55 percent) said it takes between 1 and 4 days for the computer system or scanners to be repaired after they report a problem.

·Seventy-five percent of eligibility specialists surveyed said HRA had not instructed them to tell clients they have a legal right to bring an attorney or other representative to assist them with their public benefits case.

The Public Advocate recommends that HRA:

- Hire and/or reassign eligibility specialists to high-traffic centers and offices.
- Improve and regularly assess maintenance of all technology and equipment necessary for processing public benefit applications.
- Simplify materials (e.g. pamphlets, frequently asked questions) on public benefits application procedures and requirements.
- Develop a system for regularly obtaining feedback from staff.
- Ensure that interpreters and bilingual staff are available at all HRA centers and offices.
- Instruct staff to inform clients they have the right to bring a third party to assist them with their public benefits case.

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