

Print this page

City Limits WEEKLY
Week of: **May 4, 2009**
Number: 685

NO THANK YOU, UNCLE SAM: NYC KEEPS 'SNAP' STANCE

The Bloomberg administration confirms that it will not extend food stamp benefits for as many as 60,000 residents. > *By Chloe Tribich*

Among the various groups of people who are qualified by the federal government to receive Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program benefits – SNAP, formerly known as food stamps – there are those who have jobs and those who don't, those who are on welfare and those who aren't, those with and without children, disabled and able-bodied.

Nationwide rules for the SNAP program say that for one group using benefits, able bodied adults without dependents or ABAWDs, only three months' worth of food stamps are allowed in any three-year period. As a provision of the federal stimulus package (the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act, or ARRA), however, ABAWDs can receive food benefits through Oct. 2010.

But not in New York City.

In February, the Bloomberg administration said it would not take advantage of the stimulus provision, continuing a city policy from Mayor Rudy Giuliani's administration of requiring ABAWDs to be involved in a city workfare program in order to receive food stamp benefits. Last week, the administration reiterated its position despite lobbying from Public Advocate Betsy Gotbaum, Comptroller William Thompson, and other elected officials and advocates. The state Office of Temporary and Disability Assistance told all of New York state's social services districts that unless it heard affirmatively from each district by last Wednesday, April 29, it would assume the district had accepted the extended benefit. Only the city's welfare agency, the Human Resources Administration, gave OTDA that affirmation.

"This decision is consistent with our work focused welfare program and supports New York City's longstanding policy that able bodied individuals between 18 and 50 years old who do not have children are required to work in order to receive food stamp benefits," HRA Commissioner Robert Doar said in a press statement.

Advocates for the poor, who have been protesting the Bloomberg administration's stance for months, are baffled by the position. They see it as counterproductive to helping ABAWDs at a time when jobs are hard to come by, and to helping the economy – especially when the benefits are federally funded and cost the city very little.

"Food stamps are good because the money is spent immediately on groceries," which stimulates the economy, said Doreen Wohl, director of the West Side Campaign Against Hunger. "It's hard to understand why you'd turn down this federal money."

Along with joblessness – the city's unemployment rate stands at 8.1 percent – hunger is up in New York City. According to a 2008 report from the Food Bank for New York City, the number of city residents experiencing difficulty affording needed food doubled from approximately 2 million in 2003 to approximately 4 million in 2008.

Advocates say acceptance of the waiver could potentially benefit the 47,000 current SNAP recipients in the ABAWD category and an additional 14,000 who could start receiving benefits if the time limits were extended.

Additionally, some say SNAP benefits – especially when allocated without workfare requirements – provide the stability and nutrition necessary to finding long-term higher-wage employment.

"I attribute my success in finding a job to food stamps," said Veda Myers, who received SNAP benefits as an ABAWD when she moved to New York City in 2006 and is now on staff at the Hunger Action Network. "It's harder to find job when you don't have enough food."

On that note, advocates point to a Moody's analysis showing that every dollar spent on food stamps produces \$1.73 in the gross domestic product.

They also acknowledge that Mayor Bloomberg and Gov. Paterson have been supportive of some benefits for low-income New Yorkers. A new report from the Federation of Protestant Welfare Agencies points to increased city outreach to families who might qualify for SNAP, and related efforts such as expansion of publicity around the Earned Income Tax Credit for low wage earners. A variety of efforts from the public and private sectors in recent years have increased the receipt of food stamps by city residents.

Still, Bloomberg's rejection of the ABAWD waiver – ostensibly rooted in a belief in work-focused solutions to poverty – remains a major sticking point. "The national consensus has been to relax these provisions to avoid economic freefall. Bloomberg is so opposed that he has taken a position more conservative than the Bush administration," which granted ABAWD waivers in areas of high unemployment, says NYC Coalition Against Hunger Executive Director Joel Berg.

Manhattan State Senator Liz Krueger, who calls the Bloomberg policy "this strange atonal chord," has introduced legislation (S2369) aimed at requiring the city to accept the ABAWD benefit. "The federal government's intention was to make life easier for the states to get more people on food stamps," said Krueger, who also calculates that creating a work program for ABAWDs to qualify for SNAP benefits would cost the city money.

Short of legislation, Comptroller Thompson's office is holding out hope that the administration will reverse course. "The governor could still implement the provision statewide. Furthermore, since this is an entitlement program, our understanding is that the city could still change its mind at some point in the future and avail themselves of the funds," said spokeswoman Kristin McMahon.

Meanwhile, the state will be following the city's actions. "HRA said that NYC would continue to implement ABAWD provisions. HRA must ensure that no person affected by their decision to implement ABAWD will lose SNAP benefits because they were not provided with an appropriate work or training opportunity to comply with the requirement. OTDA will vigorously oversee this compliance by HRA," Office of Temporary and Disability Assistance spokesman Michael Hayes wrote in an e-mail.

For some, the issue is clear-cut. Ernestine, who is 48 and preferred not to give her last name, maintains an unpaid government job to keep her SNAP benefits, which she supplements with food from West Side Campaign Against Hunger's pantry. Told of the city's rejection of the waiver, she scoffed. "They don't care about poor people," she said.

- Chloe Tribich