

SHARING A COMMON GOAL:

A qualitative study on the challenges faced by New York City's Human Resources Administration (HRA) and the possible role of advocacy organizations in helping to overcome them

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Executive Summary

New York City's Human Resources Administration (HRA), which is in charge of administering the Food Stamp Program within the city, continues to face many challenges despite significant recent accomplishments. Advocacy groups, such as the Community Food Resource Center (CFRC), provide outreach and assistance to potentially eligible food stamp clients by pre-screening them to determine whether they may be eligible and for how much. Both CFRC and HRA are partners with other advocacy, private, and community-based organizations in a larger effort, called the Food Card Access Project (FCAP), led by the non-profit United Way to promote food stamp awareness and access.

Using nine interviews with HRA administrators, food stamp center managers and workers, as well as several interviews with CFRC pre-screeners, clients, one non-CFRC anti-hunger advocate, and field visit observations, this paper explores the administrative practices of HRA, its willingness to work with community-based and advocacy organizations in order to achieve similar goals, and the ways that advocacy groups can best assist HRA in helping clients. This research experienced limitations such as short time-frame and limited access to a larger sample of clients, advocates, and HRA employees. Findings are described under three main topics, each broken down further into specific sections, some even further into subsections:

- Common Perceptions of HRA: Outside View
Attitude of food stamp workers, Barriers to food stamp access
- HRA's Perceptions and Response to Outside View
Lack of communication between part of HRA's administration level and ground management level, Perception of advocates, Factors and issues affecting HRA: Overall challenges: bureaucracy, resources, staffing, Funding and politics
- Discussion and Recommendations: How can HRA and advocates work together to resolve the issues?
Changing perspectives, What advocates should not do, What advocates can do, Improving communication between HRA administrators and center workers

The sections under the last finding topic offer relevant recommendations based on suggestions given during interviews, other literature on food stamp best practices and barriers, and field site visits to food stamp centers.

Possible recommendations explore how to dispel misperceptions and miscommunication between and among advocates and HRA workers, and they suggest what other active and innovative approaches advocates like CFRC can take in order to redefine their role as effective partners with HRA in the overall anti-hunger movement.

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Introduction

Over the past several years in New York City, community-based and advocacy organizations have criticized the local government's Human Resources Administration (HRA) for its administration of the federal Food Stamp Program (FSP). HRA has faced lawsuits accusing the organization of wrongfully denying and misinforming food stamp recipients on a consistent basis and regularly presenting barriers to potentially eligible clients. Most research on food stamp access investigates the barriers that impede people from receiving the food stamp benefits to which they are entitled. Oftentimes these studies present a list of recommendations, mostly targeted at changing HRA practices. Conversations with food stamp advocates and food stamp clients as well as observations of food stamp centers further support many of these common, negative perceptions. However, there seems to be very little information regarding HRA's perspective on the challenges faced and accomplishments made. As of July 2004, there were currently over one million New Yorkers receiving food stamps, which is a significant accomplishment achieved gradually over the last few years.¹ Yet approximately 700,000 New Yorkers are potentially eligible for food stamps, but are not enrolled in the FSP.² In order to explore HRA's administrative practices, specifically the particular issues and struggles that the organization must face each day, and to gain a clearer, more balanced perspective on the Food Stamp Program in NYC³, interviews were conducted with several HRA employees, both at the upper administrative level and the local management level. Emerging from this study are two separate pictures: the advocate and client's opinion of HRA as an inefficient and ineffective bureaucracy and HRA's defense of itself as an organization that has recently made substantial improvements in program delivery. The overall topic examined was how the advocacy community and HRA can work together to bridge this disconnect, while establishing clear roles and guidelines that will lead to increased food stamp participation and greater service.

First, however, it is important to note certain limitations that affect the scope and research of this paper. Due to the nature of the Bill Emerson National Hunger Fellows Program, this research was conducted under a short time constraint. Through this program—managed by the Congressional Hunger Center in D.C.—fellows are assigned to field placements, (in this case with the Community Food Resource Center (CFRC) in NYC), for five months as part of a year-long fellowship where they learn about local hunger and poverty issues before furthering their knowledge and understanding of these issues at a national level in Washington, D.C. The initial motivation for the focus of this research originated from a desire to learn more about anti-hunger workers, their community and the Food Stamp Program that links them. Again, due to time constraints

¹ *Food Stamp Participation Hits One Million*—See References

² *Id.*

³ In this paper, “NYC or New York” refers to New York City unless otherwise specified.

as well as limited resources and access given the political nature of coordinating interviews with a government entity, the findings presented in this paper represent only a small sample of employees from CFRC and HRA. A total of nine HRA employees, ranging from frontline food stamp workers to administrators, twelve CFRC pre-screeners, one long-standing anti-hunger advocate (non-CFRC), and ten CFRC clients (all food stamp recipients) were interviewed. Data is also included from field visits to six different food stamp centers throughout New York: two in Brooklyn, two in the Bronx, and two in Manhattan. This research is qualitative in nature and the comments, ideas, and thoughts used from the interviews are not official statements that represent the views of each organization as a whole; rather, they represent the perspectives of individuals within these organizations, and hence some statements may be factually wrong. The reason for this method of presenting information is to offer a picture of people's opinions instead of an organization's prescribed viewpoint. There is still much to learn from the comments presented hereon, whether or not they are factually correct, because they show how and what different people are thinking with respect to their work, their organization, and the Food Stamp Program. The sample of clients and food stamp centers is also very small, and thus the experiences and opinions extracted from these interviews and visits should not be assumed to represent the practices of all food stamp centers nor the views of all HRA clients.

According to a United Way article on their programs and initiatives, "20,166 potentially eligible individuals" were successfully pre-screened in NYC, and "since June 2003, 17,771 people have received food stamps" using a "sophisticated data analysis tool to track results" under the Food Card Access Project (FCAP).⁴ With the FCAP project, United Way collaborated with community-based organizations, non-profits, HRA, CFRC, and other private organizations to learn from their expertise and assist them with funding, technical resources, management and program development in order to "ensure effectiveness" and "strengthen their capacity to deliver services."⁵ The fact that CFRC plays an important role in this ongoing partnership involving HRA should be kept in mind when reading this paper and the different issues presented.

What assistance does HRA need from the advocacy community, specifically from CFRC, in order to increase food stamp access and guarantee improved customer service citywide? Based on interviews with several HRA employees, there is much support for the type of direct service that CFRC offers its clients. Despite some misperceptions of each other and some miscommunication within parts of each entity, both HRA employees and CFRC food stamp advocates who were interviewed expressed a seemingly equal desire for a community-based and advocacy role in the food stamp enrollment initiative. While it has achieved considerable and commendable accomplishments in improving access to the Food Stamp Program, HRA continues to face internal frustrations and barriers to providing better service. Community advocates, such as CFRC, are in a unique position to develop stronger relations with HRA to help overcome these barriers. The purpose of this paper is to present some of the major problems found, mainly a lack of communication, and propose solutions for overcoming the disconnect between HRA and CFRC with the intent of also appealing to other relevant anti-hunger advocacy organizations. The proposals aim to help the involved organizations better achieve the

⁴ *United Way of New York City, Our Programs and Initiatives*—See References

⁵ *Id.*

common goal of providing efficient, timely and flexible service to those individuals who need access to food stamps. Rather than just criticize or implement initiatives on their own, many advocacy groups could assume greater responsibility and take an active role in collaborating with HRA. This, in turn, would help eliminate many of the barriers HRA is criticized for creating and alleviate the burden of other external, systemic challenges.

The following section presents the general findings divided into three main topics:

- Common Perceptions of HRA: Outside View
- HRA's Perceptions and Response to Outside View
- Discussion and Recommendations: How can HRA and advocates work together to resolve the issues?

Each topic is further split into sections that discuss these findings and explore connections. The Discussion and Recommendations topic offers possible solutions based on interviews, field visits, and literature on food stamp barriers and best practices.

Finding #1: Common Perceptions of HRA: Outside view

Attitude of food stamp workers

Interviews revealed that many of CFRC's pre-screeners doubt the genuineness of HRA's food stamp workers' commitment to ensuring that clients receive their food stamp benefits as well as their appreciation for the role advocates can play in food stamp access. Most of the pre-screener's comments result either from their own personal experiences with food stamp workers or from their clients' experiences. One pre-screener believes that many food stamp workers misinform and "purposely shoo people away." Further comments on the attitudes and indifference of some food stamp workers include that they lack customer service skills and do not like their jobs, which, as one pre-screener noted, affects the morale of workers and the clients' application experience. In fact, one pre-screener strongly believes that "they are the rudest bunch of people," and another stated that they're looking for reasons to disqualify clients. This overall frustration indicates that many pre-screeners feel like they are working hard to help clients, while food stamp workers are not. In other words, the general perception is that food stamp workers do not share the pre-screener's goal of ensuring proper food stamp access.

All of the pre-screeners showed great interest in being able to "chaperone" clients to food stamp centers or assume a more active role at the centers, but many were skeptical of HRA being open to these ideas. One pre-screener felt a need to accompany clients because despite preparing clients ahead of time, once they go "see the true realities of the center," then they get discouraged, "turned off," and disillusioned. Also, despite their negative perception of most food stamp workers, some pre-screeners acknowledge that these workers are most likely overworked, underpaid, under-trained, and even undereducated, as one pre-screener added. The pre-screeners' comments indicate that they or other advocates could potentially ease a burden on food stamp workers by assisting clients during interviews.

Interviews with food stamp clients who had run into complications with HRA and relied on assistance from CFRC pre-screeners exposed different complications encountered at food stamp centers when trying to apply. Complaints from some clients included that center workers don't care, they wrongly deny a person of food stamps, and

sometimes hang up the phone. One client said that center workers tell you to sit as soon as you come in without letting you explain the reason for your visit first and “they treat you like an animal” making you have to wait all day to then be told you need an appointment for another day. On a positive note, one client did mention having a great caseworker who went out of his way to help and even called on a Saturday to update her on her case. Nevertheless, it is clear that the majority of pre-screeners and clients sampled all share a very negative perception of the attitude of food stamp workers.

Barriers to food stamp access

In 2003, New York’s Public Advocate Office completed an investigation into food stamp access throughout the city and issued their findings in a report entitled *Locked Out: New York City Working Families Unlawfully Denied Access to Food Stamps*. The major barriers found contradicted HRA’s and the Bloomberg administration’s claim to have increased food stamp accessibility to working people and showed, among other things, that three out of ten food stamp centers were closed one hour early during extended office hours, that the option to mail or fax in applications was often denied, and that, in all other visits to food stamp centers, the investigators were refused evening appointments and instead told to come on Saturday or during the day.⁶ In a September 2004 update, the Public Advocate’s Office found some remaining barriers, but acknowledged that many improvements were made in citywide food stamp centers. These findings included the following: appointments up to or after 5 p.m. are readily available in extended hours centers, and mailing, faxing, or using a proxy to submit food stamp applications is acceptable.⁷

Recent visits (January 2005) conducted for this research study found barriers to food stamp access in several food stamp centers in New York similar to those found in the 2003 Public Advocate’s study. Five out of six centers misstated that an interested applicant could not fax or mail in the food stamp application, even though the applications they distributed said otherwise. Even though talking to one worker each in six food stamp centers is not a representative sample of all of HRA’s workers and centers, the fact remains that having five different workers in five different centers give out the same wrong information indicates that clients are potentially being misinformed on a broad scale. Three out of these five centers also stated that an applicant could not have another person drop off his/her application, and two out of the total of six visited said that applicants could not call the center to schedule an appointment (again contrary to the information on the application). These findings are discouraging considering that these options are supposed to be encouraged for working people.

A receptionist at one of the centers said that applicants had to come in during the day, regardless of their work schedule, and that “no exceptions” could be made. The other five centers gave more options, but similar to the Public Advocate’s 2003 findings, most of them encouraged visiting on Saturday rather than during extended hours on a weekday. Some centers said that visiting later in the afternoon during extended hours makes it unlikely that the applicant will be seen by a worker. Only one site promoted Saturday visits. Fortunately, when asked whether one could submit an application at a

⁶ Gotbaum, B. (2003)—See References

⁷ Gotbaum, B. (2004)—See References

center in a different zip code, workers at five of the centers who were asked all correctly responded in the affirmative. However, these overall findings are troubling because they confirm the continued existence of some of the barriers that HRA and the Public Advocate's Office claim have been overcome. Based on the interview comments and these site findings, one wonders why some people had negative customer service experiences and were misinformed. The next topic will explore possible reasons or factors, such as training, communication issues within parts of HRA, and other challenges HRA must face.

Finding #2: HRA's Perception and Response to Outside View

Lack of communication between part of HRA's administration level and ground management level

In contrast to the field visit findings, interviews with two of HRA's upper administrative staff portrayed a picture of improved service and access to working people, which has led to the city's recent increase in overall FSP enrollment. According to these administrators, program improvements include staff training on accessibility and offering extended business and Saturday hours in one site per region. They also added that clients do not have to go to a specific center to submit food stamp applications and now they're allowed to mail or even fax them in as well as to have others call in to make appointments for them and turn in applications.

Clearly, the findings from the site visits do not correspond with the abovementioned statements, which suggests a clear disconnect between part of the administrative level's perception of ground level operations and what is actually happening at some food stamp centers. The various accounts of center workers misinforming clients about how to apply indicate that some of the staff trainings on accessibility are not as effective as some of HRA's upper management perceive them to be.

It is important to note in this section that during the HRA interviews, a few food stamp center managers and HRA administrators claimed that customer service skills were a main component of HRA staff trainings—a few even mentioned a cultural awareness training that educates each food stamp center about its own surrounding community. Previously, a food stamp manager explained, "New York had a more rude reputation," but now customer service is much better and if a client wants to file a civil rights complaint, then they must be able to do it immediately. A couple of HRA administrators and center managers mentioned a "Back to Basics training" to refresh food stamp workers, and one administrator added that if an audit shows a deficiency in "a, b, or c," then that specific center must be trained in that again. The aforementioned claims of proper customer service and awareness trainings, however, contradict the interviewed clients' negative experiences with HRA, much like the previous findings on food stamp center barriers question the actual effectiveness and frequency of the current training methods. One food stamp worker claimed to not know anything about cultural awareness or diversity training, and another said training did not focus much on customer service skills. These workers' responses support the finding of a lack of communication between

part of HRA's administration and some of the frontline food stamp workers, and also points to the possible need for more effective customer service training.

Perception of advocates

One common misperception held by the interviewed food stamp workers and a center manager is that advocacy groups are mainly a resource for clients. While it is true that many of these organizations are client-driven, the reality is that advocates can and should be possible resources in providing assistance to food stamp workers. The belief that they don't help the workers with their work, but help clients more can stem from situations in which advocates or community representatives call a lot to find out information to verify about their clients and they "think they know the job and the rules," as a food stamp worker explained. This idea of advocates mainly serving clients' interests is a misperception of anti-hunger advocates' goal to increase and facilitate food stamp access much like HRA intends to do. In other words, while facilitating food stamp access does involve assisting clients, it also incorporates assisting HRA food stamp workers with the application and interview process.

Factors and issues affecting HRA

As much administrative progress as HRA achieved, there is no doubt that challenges continue to affect their daily work in servicing clients and trying to improve program delivery. In this section, some HRA administrators, center managers and workers, and even a non-CFRC anti-hunger advocate shed light on how understaffing, resources, funding and politics hinder HRA from making further progress in Food Stamp Program services and access as well as in increasing community partnerships.

- *Overall challenges: bureaucracy, resources, staffing*

An interview with an HRA administrator, a food stamp center director and a manager revealed that there is a big push within HRA to work on greater staff and budgetary issues, but there is a need for funding. A food stamp center manager shared his struggle to continue in the attempt to service a large volume of clients, and to direct people to the services they need because many people spend time in line to then find out that they are in the wrong place. At another food stamp center, for instance, if one worker is out or a worker feels overwhelmed, then workers from another unit come to help, explained a food stamp center manager and worker. Sometimes, this center manager added, even the supervisor or center manager sits in and does interviews too. This indicates a high level of commitment to helping clients on behalf of some HRA staff. The problem with bringing workers in from another unit, such as the MPU phone unit, as a center manager illustrated, is that it limits the amount of staff available for other tasks, such as answering phones. Hence, it can affect customer service. Even though a center worker said that the training for newly hired staff involves learning a little bit about each unit, she also said that she learned the most not from her HRA manual training, but from "hands-on" experiences. This implies that workers taken from another unit may be even less trained and obviously less experienced to do the eligibility specialist's work, which

could lead to more errors and misinformation. These comments illustrate the existing problem of insufficient staffing to meet the caseload that exists within HRA and that prevents some food stamp workers from providing a more efficient service.

Some of the major frustrations two food stamp center managers listed are that making changes is difficult because “you need to answer to a big system,” so bureaucracy is a problem, and that the number of clients coming in is a “never-ending feeling.” A case in point is one specific food stamp center in which “there are about 1400-1500 recertification cases per month and around nine, and later twelve, workers to see that many clients.” As an HRA administrator explained, that there is a very high number of people because when clients are eventually taken off public assistance, their food stamp benefits may continue and they need recertification, so recertification cases go up in all areas. In addition to recertification cases, centers must juggle the new applicant cases, including those who are “walk-ins” without an appointment or those who qualify as expedited cases. This issue refers to a concern (further discussed under the Recommendations topic) over advocacy outreach efforts bringing in large numbers of people, many of whom may be unprepared or even ineligible – thus creating a greater challenges for the already overwhelmed and overcrowded food stamp centers. This reality of workers and centers overwhelmed by cases needs to be considered when devising feasible partnerships or ideas ways in which the advocacy community can support HRA.

The fact that clients often have to wait long hours before being seen by a worker is another problem endemic at food stamp centers. One of the biggest complaints heard about the food stamp centers is not about mistakes being made with client’s cases, but about the wait time to apply, explained a food stamp center manager and director. This is an issue brought up by clients as well that HRA seems aware of but unable to eliminate. Reasons that HRA has been ineffective at decreasing wait time for clients again include the huge influx of people and lack of staff as well as inadequate technology. The issues that plague HRA goes beyond food stamp workers’ “people skills” and, in fact, may even help explain any negative attitudes among some workers due to frustration. It is important for advocates to be aware of all the factors that impact HRA and understand how other problems, such as poor customer service, can arise due to lack of direction, resources, funding, and staff among many others.

A food stamp center’s productivity is also affected by the state being “hampered with an outdated computer system,” causing workers to do written work to then pass it on to someone else who can process it into a computer because, unfortunately, the computer system is not interactive and can’t function easily as part of the caseworker interview process.⁸ Currently, a food stamp worker described, it takes “about 45 minutes to an hour for an interview” with an applicant and then “more than 30 minutes” afterwards are spent writing to finish up a case. HRA’s, “having to keep more papers” suggests that the organization’s bureaucratic nature can hinder its performance, as an anti-hunger advocate pointed out. Another problem is that if the computers are down all day, then the workers “can’t do anything,” which is why “the union, HRA and the city have to do something,” pleads a food stamp worker. One administrator explained how HRA placed an outreach request to get mobile offices and do case processing in vans in neighborhoods by going to

⁸ This quote is from a non-CFRC anti-hunger advocate during an interview with an HRA administrator. Nov. 29, 2004

people and trying to get past any technology barriers, but they did not get funded by the USDA, so they are trying again. Thus, HRA's concerns not only revolve around the daily management routine but also implicate policies enacted at the state level. Unfortunately, these system-wide issues trickle down and negatively affect individual workers' productivity, efficiency, and customer service.

- *Funding and politics*

During an interview with an HRA administrator, he explained that the state is responsible for a lot of HRA's outreach money. The way the outreach decisions work, he added, is that the HRA administration looks at changes like staying open later and other suggestions and decides if they are good ideas (not all of them are considered to be so) and if funding them is a problem, then they decide against them. An initiative such as keeping food stamp center offices open even later, for instance, would mean more administrative costs from city funding yet again. These comments begin to paint a picture of yet another factor that impacts the management of the Food Stamp Program at a local level and suggests that not all administrative, management, federal, state, and local levels necessarily share the same values or priorities regarding the allocation of funds.

An anti-hunger advocate and an HRA administrator explained that the Food Stamp Program's administrative costs are distributed so that "the state gives 50% and the federal government gives 50%," but in NYC "the federal government is not giving 50%" or "totally matching up" the state contribution, according to an anti-hunger advocate and an HRA administrator. Even though food stamp benefits are funded 100% by the federal government and states are supposed to cover 50% of the administrative costs, "cost allocation rules enacted in 1998, and renewed through 2007 in the Farm Bill, reduce the federal funds reimbursed to many states below 50%."⁹ The administrative costs for the Food Stamp Program are so high that together the "federal and state governments paid...over \$3 billion, compared to \$15.547 billion in benefits for the [Fiscal Year 2001]."¹⁰ Funding for staff is complicated because if a food stamp worker deals with Medicaid, food stamps, and public assistance, then the federal government is very specific about knowing what percentage of the day's work is actually going just to food stamps, another HRA administrator explained. That same administrator added that the problem becomes greater when the "state is doing more than 50%, [because it is] pushing more [of the responsibility] to the city." The city puts in a lot that is not reimbursed, and it has to "have a caseload increase [to get more funding], and deal with the associated costs a year or two later after feeling the impact on the ground."¹¹ Therefore, administrative reimbursement is a barrier as well because there is "full reimbursement for services to people, but not for the program administration."¹² Even though there are "no state requirements on the number of workers [HRA] can hire and it's left up to city," leaving high administrative costs up to the city impacts how much staff can be hired, so it does not matter much if there is no cap placed on the number of workers, an HRA

⁹ *Opportunities for Collaboration Across Human Services Programs*—See References

¹⁰ *Id.*

¹¹ This quote is from an HRA administrator. Nov. 29, 2004.

¹² *Id.*

administrator commented.¹³ As far as budgeting for food stamp centers, their funding depends on their sizes and how many people they are serving to try to allocate money proportionally. If the claims of several top administrators are accurate, then the funding distribution can certainly be viewed as another factor contributing to the continued existence of HRA's staffing and technological problems.

An anti-hunger advocate claimed that yet another political problem is that the mayor himself has not spoken publicly about the Food Stamp Program, but has publicly advocated for child nutrition programs, saying that children cannot learn if they are not well-fed. Ideally, this advocate proposed, the mayor could also say that "in the same manner that children can't learn if they're not well-fed, adults can't work if they're not well-fed." This advocate noted the significance of political leverage in drawing attention to the Food Stamp Program: if the mayor "says a public statement, it's heard a lot more by the press and everyone than if other advocates do." Another argument that could support the mayor's concern is that, much like child nutrition programs, food stamps can likewise help ensure that children are well-fed in order to learn better. A different example given by this anti-hunger advocate describing how politics intersect with the anti-hunger movement is that the "city spends funding from city revenues for emergency aids given to 'emergency' systems like food drives, [so in reality the] mayor is treating his firefighters and policemen as *the* hunger relief system." This advocate expressed his desire to first validate his research before writing a letter to the mayor on behalf of his organization informing him that "if food stamp participation increased just 1%, this [may] equal about 27 of these massive food drives" that the city helps fund. If true, this is an astounding statement and one that other advocates could use in advocating on behalf of the Food Stamp Program and HRA's need to administer food stamps more effectively. Another point this advocate chose to raise is that the "average food pantry allotment is \$30 to \$40 per family each month, whereas with food stamps it is more like \$200 per family each month," which again, clearly indicates a misguided view from the government on the need to effectively promote food stamps. The examples above are not problems specific to HRA nor can HRA be expected to focus on them because they are clearly out of HRA's control. Yet political coverage and opinion of the Food Stamp Program can impact the number of enrollees and can especially draw focus to the many challenges, especially funding allocation that could be better managed at a federal, state and city-wide policy level. Under the following Discussion and Recommendations topic, there will be a section that explores what role advocates could play in influencing politics in order to further improve food stamp administration.

Finding #3: Discussion and Recommendations: How can HRA and advocates work together to resolve the issues?

This topic is the most extensive, for it offers further analysis of all the issues, comments, and ideas that emerged from the interviews and site visits. There are different sections that relate to the previous findings and they incorporate other relevant quotes and suggestions from all of the interviewees as well as literature. The main focus of this section is to show how advocates can play a role in assisting HRA with many of the previously mentioned challenges it faces regarding food stamp administration.

¹³ Id.

Changing perspectives

Overall, it is clear that most of the CFRC pre-screeners recognize the disconnect between themselves and HRA food stamp centers and workers, and some even expressed a desire to work more closely together. One pre-screener suggested that having more regular meetings with HRA itself to see how to assist them would be helpful because “establish[ing] a partnership...would benefit the client.” This comment sheds light on the true issue here, which is that both CFRC and HRA share a common goal, and there should be greater communication and interaction between workers on both ends.

The perceived lack of communication between HRA and CFRC frustrated several pre-screeners, one of whom stated that, “we need a connection between Food Force and HRA workers; we’d need a rapport with them so we’re not seen as enemies.” Due to this perceived “enemy status,” one pre-screener suggested allowing pre-screeners to go apply at a center incognito to have data available on what each center requires when directing clients to individual centers. This suggestion indicates a desire to establish greater contact with the food stamp centers and to learn more about how they function. Initiating this direct contact and achieving a better understanding will allow pre-screeners to offer their clients better assistance and information of the way HRA operates. Another important observation to make about pre-screeners’ misperceptions is that they may indicate a lack of communication within CFRC’s Food Force unit because pre-screeners’ negative perception of HRA centers and its workers may not match the perception from the management and administration level, which has more direct contact with other HRA administrators through partnerships like FCAP, for instance. If CFRC’s Food Force management’s perspective on HRA centers and workers differs from most of the pre-screeners’ perspectives, then the management should address these differences. In such a case, they could share HRA’s perspective and possible interest in any partnerships with the pre-screeners more often to make them aware of the existing connection and regular communication between both organizations.

While some HRA workers misperceive advocates as being mainly client resources, some food stamp workers acknowledged that it is best to go to different community houses or organizations for assistance and that community agencies will help translate and sometimes send clients with document copies already made, which “makes it easier for the worker, too.” HRA workers and advocates need to understand their own and each other’s roles in the effort to help more low-income New Yorkers access food stamps. The first step is the proposal of a clearly defined common goal, such as the facilitation of HRA’s work to help clients receive food stamps. While both HRA and anti-hunger advocates are likely to commit errors, each side can benefit from the other’s strengths and compensate for the other’s weaknesses through greater collaboration. A commitment to consistently attend and participate in regular meetings and brainstorming sessions, for example, can help ensure proper representation that will foster the implementation of new and improved initiatives.

What advocates should not do

Interviews with different HRA employees emphasized what *not* to do when trying to assist HRA with its delivery of the FSP. An interesting point to keep in mind from an HRA administrator is that food stamp “outreach is greater, which is great, but it also brings more people to the door which [creates more] pressure” on food stamp centers. Albeit not much of a misperception, this is an issue regarding the general role of advocates, which is to promote food stamp access. Advocates should first realize all of the possible impacts of their actions. This points to what may be an unforeseen problem among the rest of the anti-hunger advocacy community, for even though their outreach efforts may be helping more people gain food stamp access, they may also be preventing further progress within HRA. This creates a Catch-22 for both the advocates and HRA, in that food stamp-eligible people should continue to apply as much as possible because it is their right to do so and eating is a basic necessity, but that in doing so, they make it harder for HRA to process them by taxing their limited resources. Thus, it is necessary to view all the factors that are truly causing HRA to feel rather *stuck*, or unable to efficiently handle such a large number of clients.

Several HRA workers displayed apprehension about the role of advocates and pointed out that their advocacy work may not always be helpful. As one administrator noted, it is unfair to HRA and clients when some advocates “delude people into thinking they’re eligible, but they’re actually not,” making clients waste a whole day. To illustrate, if an advocacy group hands out flyers and other materials promoting food stamps without really explaining the FSP, then many people will go to food stamp centers unprepared for the application process and time. Another example brought up by an administrator relates to an issue with having advocates make appointments for their clients or groups of clients because the “no-show rate is high for people who make appointments.” Lastly, having advocates who are not well-informed present at food stamp centers can also “hinder the food stamp process” or if advocates appear to just come in to observe or “serve as watchdogs” who sit across from a worker’s desk, then they are not helpful.¹⁴ This is an important point for advocates to keep in mind, particularly CFRC’s pre-screeners, who expressed interest in working at food stamp centers.

What advocates can do

This section offers plenty of recommendations because it showcases HRA’s appreciation for anti-hunger advocacy. Interest in advocates’ potential contribution to HRA’s proposed goal is clearly not a problem, but the lack of communication between some advocates and HRA is. Again, most pre-screeners believe that HRA’s workers do not exhibit much interest in their jobs nor in working together with community organizations and that they do not appreciate the value of their work nor the efforts of the advocates. In reality, HRA’s workers hinted at only a small degree of skepticism of the advocates’ intentions and offered ideas about what advocacy groups *can* or should continue doing that would be most helpful to HRA and its clients.

¹⁴ This quote is from a non-CFRC anti-hunger advocate during an interview with an HRA administrator. Nov. 29, 2004.

HRA's "goal is to make sure that anyone who's eligible who wants food stamps should be able to apply, and if they're eligible, then they should get those benefits," explained an HRA administrator. This same HRA administrator pointed out that over the years, HRA has tried to ensure that anyone who's eligible can apply, especially through community partnerships such as with the FCAP project that does outreach through pre-screening potentially eligible individuals. HRA has reached out to everyone out there through such initiatives, an HRA administrator explained. She added that even food stamp center directors go to community board meetings and they review information. For instance, in the Bronx, every group has an advocate and HRA has learned to work with them.¹⁵ The Fordham Hill area, the same HRA administrator pointed out, has a settlement house where they assist and reach out to bring people here; such community establishments teach the immigrants about their eligibility and HRA is aware of a potential influx of people when there are major problems abroad. This comment hints at successful advocacy/HRA communication in which well-informed advocates make sure they prepare clients and HRA knows that they should anticipate higher numbers of clients as a result.

The best assistance that advocacy groups can offer is to train their advocates, and perhaps other advocates or smaller community-based organizations, to understand state and local criteria and regulations and to assist in clients' preparation for documentation, application, and understanding of guidelines before sending clients to food stamp centers.¹⁶ This is very much in line with FCAP and CFRC's direct service work, as previously mentioned. In terms of assisting HRA, an administrator recommended, an ideal organization is one where clients can get documents together, fill out an application, get pre-screened, and then have a representative create packets to bring to the food stamp center with the rent letter, and every necessary detail. This same administrator also pointed out that there are grants for outreach organizations, and "if they could do more work like this, then great." This suggestion also supports some of the pre-screeners' ideas regarding what they would ideally like to do if they had the chance to work more closely with food stamp workers and centers.

With regard to advocates making appointments for groups of clients, one CFRC pre-screener suggested selecting a day of the week to pick certain clients with the most problems or who are in greater need and make appointments with them. The pre-screeners must realize that those who are picked must be reliable and "must really want the help." By explaining the importance of these appointments to their clients, and possibly even offering resources to help with any problems like child care needs, advocates would be helping to maintain the reputation of their own organization while maintaining good relations with HRA. They would also be saving time for advocates, clients, and food stamp workers by making sure that clients have all their documents together before meeting at the food stamp center, thereby streamlining the application process by preemptively removing possible delays.

One pre-screener recommended that it would be great for an organization like CFRC to provide a letter for clients to take on their first day to apply and inform food stamp workers of what CFRC does as well as reassure them that the client has been

¹⁵ Quoting an HRA administrator on Dec. 15, 2004.

¹⁶ Comment made during an interview with an HRA administrator, a food stamp center director, and manager on Dec. 15, 2004

properly pre-screened and well-informed about food stamps. If they could hire more staff, another pre-screener suggested, HRA could have specific “go-to” workers who could deal with CFRC clients and simplify communication. Perhaps, posited yet another pre-screener, pre-screeners could be allowed to pre-screen at food stamp centers to help eliminate those people who are ineligible and prepare those who are eligible as they wait.

Again, there is a need to define the advocates’ role and inform food stamp workers of the advocates’ purpose and the true value of their work. The services that an organization like CFRC offers, for instance, in which pre-screeners properly prepare, assist, and follow up with clients, should make food stamp workers happy to receive pre-screened clients because it can help ease the pressure on their caseload. Also, clients may trust pre-screeners or advocates better, which, as long as they are well informed, can help ensure that clients cooperate more with the HRA staff. The important issue raised here, though, is that community representatives need to adopt a partnership view and not an “enemy” view. When the advocates accuse HRA’s workers of being rude or misinformed, distrust rather than collaboration is fostered. Through a coalition of HRA, CFRC, and other community partners, a consensus could be reached on the requirements that are necessary to determine “coalition-approved” pre-screenings and other services that advocacy organizations can encourage.

Some HRA workers agreed that advocates can also be more successful than HRA at effective community outreach. Outreach suggestions included advertising in ethnic radio stations and newspapers because it can create “word of mouth, which brings a lot of people.” As one food stamp worker mentioned, anti-hunger or food stamp advocates can conduct outreach in churches, helping to inform their congregations about food stamps three times per month. Providing ways for members of the congregation to contact well-informed advocates would ensure that individuals are encouraged to seek proper pre-screening before assuming they are eligible. One HRA administrator claimed that advocacy and community-based organizations “have a whole level of entrée into the community that the government can’t have...having both HRA and the advocacy community working together is ideal.” In forming partnerships between HRA and the advocacy community, this same HRA administrator believes that “both sides have to be honest and realistic.” This points to ensuring that each other’s roles are clearly defined and that any new goals or initiatives should be feasible and must consider all possible factors such as politics and funding. The 2002 Farm Bill provides federal funds to states to help implement a food stamp outreach program that uses media sources like radio and TV, offers food stamp information in many languages, and assists applicants through pre-screening and explaining document requirements.¹⁷ This is a great example of how advocates can unite to assist HRA, much like with the FCAP project, and help states “increase enrollment [and] reduce administrative burdens by preparing applicants before they enter food stamp offices.”¹⁸ CFRC’s Food Card media campaign is also an example, for it receives HRA funding. The fact that many families have to adhere to many specific procedures when applying for food stamps and states must also follow detailed regulations for administering food stamps provides incentives for states, advocates, and other local agencies to work together and support reform initiatives, such as the farm bill reforms that were strongly supported by states and “helped to simplify many of these

¹⁷ *Opportunities for Collaboration Across Human Services Programs*—See References

¹⁸ *Id.*

complex policies.”¹⁹ Together, advocacy organizations can join efforts like these that aim to change policies that hurt the people meant to be helped.

CFRC and other advocacy groups should take immediate action to develop further conversation with HRA regarding their interest and support some of the new initiatives promoted above and together create others. Pre-screeners already exhibit a desire to partner with HRA food stamp centers and workers and even go to food stamp centers as “chaperones,” so there is enough interest and support on the advocates’ side to match HRA’s interest. It is also encouraging to know that while showing slight caution regarding initiatives like having pre-screeners be “chaperones,” HRA interviewees’ comments on what kind of advocacy work and community involvement they prefer reinforces the type of work CFRC does. HRA’s interest in and need for assistance from the advocacy community indicates the potential for enhanced collaboration between the two. This cooperation needs to begin with an open and frank dialogue that addresses the needs on both sides, delineates the terms of the relationship, and builds trust as well as commitment to a common goal.

In a paper titled *Opportunities for Collaboration Across Human Services Programs* a coalition of national human service organizations reached out to other organizations with a focus on human services and reminded them that together they all “share the common goal of working to improve the social and economic well-being of the individuals and families they serve,” and that while their programs may differ as well as the specific populations they serve, they acknowledge that clients are often in need of multiple services, “[the human services organizations] must often supplement [clients] with services and programs from other agencies.”²⁰ This coalition raises an excellent point when it states that they “often deal with the same employers, providers, and community organizations...we are increasingly interdependent and can learn much from learning more about the opportunities to work together more closely.”²¹ One should add that these organizations also function under the same political administration and economy, which, depending on each administration, can add further challenges, such as bureaucracy, decreased funding and resources, and an increase in client intake. This paper sought to explore the state and local administration of some major human services program and how they are interdependent, have similar goals, and how they could work together.²² Clearly, this is the same idea being presented in this current paper, especially through the recommendations. First, the issues, common goals and interests of HRA and advocacy organizations like CFRC were discussed through interview and site visit findings, followed by suggestions as to how to get these two entities to perceive the scope of their interdependence even further and work more closely together. The coalition that wrote the above-quoted paper recognizes that these initiatives are challenging by nature and can suffer from “a lack of information on the roles and responsibilities of other programs and agencies.”²³ Once more, this supports the ideas presented in this paper regarding the need to clearly define the role of advocates and HRA workers and administrators when trying to work together.

¹⁹ Id.

²⁰ *Opportunities for Collaboration Across Human Services Programs*—See References

²¹ Id.

²² Id.

²³ Id.

“Political leaders, advocates, researchers, and public administrators are recognizing that social problems cannot always be solved within the constraints of individual programs and funding silos.”²⁴ Due to this new, increasing awareness, the success of these programs is recognized as being “dependent upon the ability of government to work with nonprofits and the private sector to create ready access to the comprehensive services needed.”²⁵ During their first meeting together, this coalition—composed of eleven human services organizations—achieved the tremendous task of identifying “the importance of collaboration at the service delivery level.”²⁶ One of the joint activities the coalition agreed on was publishing the abovementioned paper, defining opportunities for collaboration and cooperation, while keeping in mind that state and local program administrators “have great flexibility in the use of resources that are made available to them.”²⁷ The examples they give are also applicable to this current paper’s focus on HRA and advocacy organizations. For instance, centralizing and sharing information, simplifying application processes, creating and implementing “one-stop and no wrong door approaches,” providing greater flexibility in program operation, coordinating together between agencies, and ensuring that the agencies considered utilize accountability methods that “can supplement federal outcome measures [and] recognize and reward cooperation and shared outcomes.”²⁸ The final point presented is that states should not and cannot depend on the federal government, and instead *they* must take the initiative to lead. Fortunately, this coalition believes and proves that “collaboration can be initiated at any point in the process [and it] will only take place if [all] are willing to come to the table in a number of roles, both as initiators and as collaborators.”²⁹ This coalition proves that many of the ideas presented in this paper are possible and can be incredibly beneficial.

Improving communication between HRA administrators and center workers

Much of the progress achieved in HRA over the past few years includes greater access to food stamps, especially for those who are working individuals and families. Despite claims of specific outreach and new regulations targeted at working clients by the administrative level, field visit observations and interviews with clients support some of the barriers presented in food stamp barrier research, suggesting a lack of communication or awareness between some administrative and some frontline workers. The existing communication gap between some of HRA’s administrative staff and some of its caseworkers may hinder HRA from further helping more of the city’s low-income populations.

The most obvious problem pertains to several frontline food stamp workers’ lack of understanding about new directives and administrative or policy level regulations. There needs to be an increased communication within parts of HRA and more efficient training of all HRA staff to prevent any further propagation of misinformation. Since HRA is

²⁴ Id.

²⁵ Id.

²⁶ *Opportunities for Collaboration Across Human Services Programs*—See References

²⁷ Id.

²⁸ Id.

²⁹ Id.

such a large entity, CFRC and other partnering advocacy groups could conduct relevant qualitative and/or quantitative research and present their findings, as well as share clients' experiences in regular meetings and interactions with HRA representatives. This could help keep those at the administrative end, and even local management levels, informed of the actions occurring in centers at the ground level.

As a long established organization whose pre-screeners are well trained and informed regarding food stamp regulations and customer service skills, CFRC can and should take the lead among other local anti-hunger organizations to help inform and train them on how to offer accurate pre-screening and efficiently targeted outreach that will benefit both clients and HRA workers by facilitating food stamp access and case processing. United Way and the other FCAP-participating organizations could also assist CFRC in this endeavor since the success of FCAP proves that good ideas and initiatives can work in conjunction with HRA and multiple community partners.

The Public Advocate's report (2003) suggested that tracking the percentage of working people who use food stamps could help HRA determine which strategies would be most effective to better enroll them and how to use funding wisely in the areas that most need it. The report also pointed out that other cities like San Francisco, San Antonio, Houston, and Dallas use different methods to reach out to working people, such as sending food stamp workers to sites where people will be, like medical and cultural centers (the way some advocates do), or allowing people to schedule phone interviews instead of face to face interviews.

Possible solutions to bridging this disconnect between some HRA administrative and center workers include better training and stricter accountability measures. There should be more undercover HRA workers, perhaps even from the administrative level, who, as a food stamp manager said sometimes occurs, come to the food stamp centers to see if a worker gives the wrong information. The goal should not be to just observe undercover, but to implement positive changes as soon as something wrong is detected. In 2004, the USDA announced that \$18 million will be awarded to states for outstanding customer service in the Food Stamp Program and offered a \$30 million award program that recognizes improved and lower food stamp benefits error rates.³⁰ With the help of advocacy groups who can assist with training and nominate those centers who make progress, such initiatives, especially at a national level, may boost workers' stamina and aid centers. Centers that do not progress as much would also need representation in order to get sufficient resources to improve. For instance, with regards to measuring state performance, anti-hunger groups can play a large role, as occurred when the Food Research and Action Center (FRAC) recognized certain specific states for their high ratings in "'Rates of Household Hunger and Food Insecurity, 1997-1999,' based on census surveys."³¹ One food stamp center manager explained how managers can also take an active role by observing who is naturally good with customer service skills and who is not in order to send the latter to another unit or require more training. He added that if any workers are in a bad mood, then talking informally with them can help. This same center manager also had an interesting strategy where workers would have different days of the week assigned to different tasks so that no one task would become too repetitive or

³⁰ *USDA Awards \$30 Million to States for Exemplary Administration of the Food Stamp Program.* (2004)—See References.

³¹ *Opportunities for Collaboration Across Human Services Programs*—See References.

overwhelming. For example, some days of the week were meant for recertification cases, others for scheduled interviews, and others for paperwork. Clients who were “walk-ins” were always taken care of. These are the types of strategies that can be shared between HRA workers and between advocates and HRA workers in order to make positive changes.

Two Bill Emerson National Hunger Fellows, as part of a fellowship program through the Congressional Hunger Center, were assigned to Los Angeles for their field site placement in 2003, where they investigated the local Food Stamp Program practices and presented their ideas in their report, titled *Serving Up Solutions: A best practices guide to high-quality customer service in the Los Angeles County Food Stamp Program and policy recommendations to improve participation*. Much like New York, far too many low-income people in Los Angeles were not enrolled in the Food Stamp Program, so these Hunger Fellows tried to help local anti-hunger partners increase food stamp participation by recognizing the need to replicate best practices in food stamp service work, improve county procedures, and strengthen accountability.³² Two main barriers they found were a lack of accountability for processing mail-in applications and varying customer service at different centers. Recommendations ranged from targeting community-based organizations to partner for strategic outreach and help dispel food stamp myths to remodeling food stamp centers for greater customer comfort.³³ They also recommended hiring a “food stamps ambassador” who could facilitate training on food stamp regulations, customer service, spread “local best practices,” mentor staff, and reward food stamp leadership.³⁴ Based on their research, they saw a need to care about accountability for rewarding good service and timely application processing instead of just for keeping fraud cases down.³⁵ These suggestions can also apply to this current paper’s focus because they show how learning from other county and states’ best practices can assist partnerships formed between HRA and advocates.

Based on interviews with food stamp clients and comments that other clients have told CFRC pre-screeners, most seem to appreciate the detailed information and one-on-one attention they received from the CFRC representatives. They claimed to have felt supported, understood, and liked receiving follow up calls because they showed pre-screeners cared. Many said they received their food stamps due to an advocate’s help with their preparation, and that they would not have been able to undergo the application process, or in other cases, would still be wrongly denied from receiving food stamps without this assistance. Having a bilingual advocate also helped many clients to understand the application process and others appreciated arguments convincing them to apply.

With regards to effective training, one pre-screener suggested that it may also be helpful to implement a brief anonymous test or quiz once a month about technical issues and sample scenarios to see how well pre-screeners know the program and policies about once a month so that managers can see if and when people need training in specific areas. This same example can apply to food stamp center workers and managers, and also

³² López, R. & Sharp, M. (2004)—See References.

³³ Id.

³⁴ Id.

³⁵ Id.

further proves how interaction and communication between advocates and HRA workers can be beneficial in exchanging effective strategies and ideas.

CFRC and other advocacy organizations who offer services to clients probably experience frustrations similar to those of HRA. This provides opportunities for advocates and food stamp workers to participate and contribute in sharing successful customer service strategies and interpersonal skills through specialized community-based trainings. HRA is not devoid of organizational strengths, but it is a much larger organization and has many more clients, issues, regulations, and longer distances between sites and regions than other advocacy organizations. These factors can affect communication levels between employees, and, in turn, HRA workers may benefit from small, specialized, intense training from community organizations, free of charge. For example, CFRC's staff has extensive knowledge and awareness of how to assist clients of different backgrounds and regions, and they could share these useful skills and information with HRA workers. The same can apply to other advocates and community representatives who are well-informed regarding their specific region and community's needs. One of the clients interviewed mentioned that it is necessary for food stamp workers to be sensitive to clients' possible humiliation about receiving what is stigmatized as "free help" from the government. Trainings could also focus on such barriers like this stigma. Smaller organizations obviously do not face the same problems larger organizations like HRA do, and as such, CFRC has the opportunity to pay attention to detail, something that HRA may not have the luxury of doing; CFRC can be seen as helping HRA by taking care of the little things. and while they may serve a useful purpose in providing supplementary services like offering sensitivity trainings, they must be careful not to alienate HRA workers by projecting an attitude whereby it seems like they are presuming to teach HRA workers how to do their job. Help that is offered with the best of intentions may be counter-productive if delivered in a manner that appears off-putting to those to which it is offered.

The Advocate's role in working together to address other factors and challenges

The overall challenges mentioned earlier in the paper, such as funding, understaffing, resources, and politics, further support the need to have a greater partnership between HRA and advocacy organizations like CFRC, whose in-depth pre-screenings can save time for both clients and HRA staff. Once more, the HRA eligibility specialists and reception area workers would all need to be informed of such services offered by advocacy organizations, so that they can recognize and accept those clients who they service. Communication between advocates and HRA can help point out these specific problems in order to then determine if and how certain initiatives—such as allowing trained pre-screeners to conduct their in-depth pre-screening at food stamp centers, or allowing these advocates and trained specialists to "chaperone" clients—could be most useful.

There are many needs as well as factors to consider when administering the Food Stamp Program. Advocacy groups like CFRC can pool their resources and research capacity to exert political pressure by conducting letter-writing campaigns to local and national politicians and contacting the press to emphasize food stamp programs over food banks, charities, or typical "emergency food drives" because it constitutes a smarter

allocation of resources. An anti-hunger advocate, like the one who offered many of the examples regarding politics and food stamps, serves as a great example of how advocates can also try to see some of the issues affecting the Food Stamp Program as being beyond HRA. By educating HRA, other advocates, policy decision makers, and the public on the overall picture, advocates can provide helpful and strategic influence to ensure significant progress. Advocacy groups can also place political pressure on issues related to state and federal funding by targeting how and why not all of the promised funding is available to be used efficiently.

Working with community-based and other non-profit or advocacy organizations could help HRA determine any state or federal “loopholes” that could put pressure on the policy level and inform HRA of the need to redirect unused funding from other programs to their specific needs. Technology-focused organizations can play a key role in providing technical and training assistance to workers, and can also help specify which resources these partners should help push for. Also, working with other advocacy groups who conduct field site outreach activities like the one with mobile vans mentioned earlier by an HRA administrator, and who represent communities in need of such initiatives could help provide support for and prove others’ successes with these projects. A food stamp worker also suggested that updating Word 2000, providing a new system and installing computer programs that will allow workers not to have to do so many forms and paperwork would be very helpful in eliminating this poor technology problem.

If advocates question certain standard practices that they deem to be unproductive the way the previously mentioned anti-hunger advocate who was interviewed did, then it can be helpful when done in a constructive manner through regular communication with HRA. For instance, this anti-hunger advocate shared his doubts about the value of the somewhat controversial anti-fraud finger imaging process required for food stamps by pointing out that HRA can do computer matching instead to see if a client applied for something else like Medicaid. He further questioned “why aren’t people also fingerprinted when applying for federal school loans, for farm assistance, or other public services where many do commit fraud?” According to him, “there are no assets or income limits” when applying for USDA farm assistance and yet there are for food stamps. This type of critical and analytical thinking can assist advocates who are trying to promote positive, active change. Comparing best Food Stamp Program practices from other states is also a great start. For instance, New York is only one of four states that still conduct finger imaging.³⁶ Yet Texas, which is one of the other three, researched the issue and determined that it is actually a very costly program that is not serving much of a purpose. Even New York verified that finger imaging may be pointless “if a state or locality already has an aggressive anti-fraud program...especially if multiple case fraud is not a major problem compared to other types of welfare fraud.”³⁷ An anti-hunger advocate mentioned that “micromangement forces HRA to report on so many specific details,” that it becomes much less productive. Again, advocates who ask these hard questions can help promote re-thinking about bureaucratic practices that may cause more harm than good. Resources, unfortunately, are limited, and therefore, providing constructive, positive criticism is perhaps the most essential function that advocacy organizations can serve.

³⁶ *More Frequently Asked Questions: Finger imaging and the state budget*—See References.

³⁷ *Id.*

Conclusion

All of the findings presented and discussed in this paper led to recommendations, namely: greater staff and resources for HRA, more support and assistance from the advocacy community, and improved training targeting common Food Stamp Program myths and customer service skills. Interviews enabled food stamp center workers and managers to dispel misperceptions about their role, and instead revealed their true commitment to helping people and interest in advocates actively participating in the efforts to ensure better food stamp access. Some shared that their greatest frustration and disappointment on the job is when they have to “say no to poor people” because they have insufficient documentation or are otherwise ineligible. Advocates, mainly CFRC pre-screeners, also shared their frustration regarding their perceived “enemy” status, despite their stated interest in working with HRA centers. HRA employees, ranging from the ground level to the administration level, expressed their perspective regarding their role in administering food stamps and described the many issues they face, as well as delineated what type of assistance from the advocacy community would be most beneficial to them. Rather than advocates checking if HRA “knows the rules or not,” as one pre-screener commented, they are encouraged to seek greater collaboration with HRA, define each other’s roles, and achieve an understanding of the overall challenges and factors that prevent improved service and increased food stamp access. HRA is also encouraged to recognize the benefits of establishing stronger relations with the anti-hunger advocacy community and to gain awareness of how perceptions and food stamp knowledge can vary within different levels of the organization. Learning about the many challenges that HRA faces enables advocates and clients to understand some of the barriers that affect customer service. The lack of communication regarding the genuine needs of HRA’s administrators and food stamp centers and some of the actions taken by the general advocacy community must cease as soon as possible in order for the general community to benefit from their potential partnerships. In the end, the most important thing to remember in thinking about what kind of change to implement and what kind of collaborations to design is that all the people interviewed for the purposes of this paper, as well as all the organizations mentioned, share a common goal: to help people get access to food stamps in order to help improve the quality of their lives. The resources, in large part, are already in place: what remains to be done, then, is to determine where all the pieces fit best, thereby achieving that common goal more efficiently and effectively, to better help those who need that help.

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