



**Testimony of FPWA**

**Presented to:  
New York City Council  
Committee on General Welfare  
Preliminary Budget Hearing  
Hon. Chair Diana Ayala  
March 11, 2024**

**Jennifer Jones Austin  
Executive Director/CEO**

**Prepared By:  
Joseph Jones, Director of Policy, Advocacy, and Research  
Julia Casey, Policy Analyst  
Meg Espey, Policy Intern**

40 Broad Street, 5<sup>th</sup> Floor  
New York, New York 10004  
Phone: (212) 777-4800  
Fax: (212) 414-1328

We are grateful to the members of the Council Committee on General Welfare for holding this hearing, and to Chair Ayala for the opportunity to provide testimony on behalf of FPWA (Federation of Protestant Welfare Agencies).

FPWA is an anti-poverty policy and advocacy organization committed to advancing economic opportunity, justice, and upward mobility for New Yorkers with low incomes. Since 1922, FPWA has driven groundbreaking policy reforms to better serve those in need. We work to dismantle the systemic barriers that impede economic security and well-being, and we strengthen the capacity of human services agencies and faith organizations so New Yorkers with lower incomes can thrive and live with dignity.

FPWA also has a membership network of more than 170 faith and community-based organizations. We support our members by offering workshops and trainings on topics such as leadership development, organizational management, and trauma-informed approaches to service delivery. FPWA also provides a range of financial assistance grants through our member network, working to strengthen individuals and families at the ground level. These grants provide direct support to New Yorkers in the form of scholarships, financial assistance for aging adults, funding for organizations providing HIV/AIDS related services, and more.

### **FPWA Budget Asks**

- Increase HRA's budget to improve the management and administration of benefits and make the experience more dignified for individuals accessing benefits. This should include funding to:
  - Streamline application and recertification processes to reduce case closings/application denials caused by administrative barriers;
  - Address case backlog and increase turnaround time for case processing;
  - Implement people-centered, trauma-informed practices into the delivery of services;
  - Invest in improving technology used by HRA to manage cases;
  - Ensure HRA can engage community-based organizations (CBOs) in benefits outreach.
- Maintain funding for NYC Benefits.
- Increase and baseline funding to \$60 million for the Community Food Connection program.
- Maintain funding for and evaluate the Grocery to Go program.
- Restore funding for a number of City Council initiatives, including \$7.26 million for food pantries and \$2.134 million for Access to Healthy Food and Nutritional Education, which funds programs to expand the use of SNAP benefits.
- Invest in a 5% Cost of Living Adjustment (COLA) for Human Services Workers.

### **Vital Services Are at Risk**

Cash Assistance and SNAP programs provide critical assistance to New Yorkers; however, the agency that administers the program is currently at risk of further funding cuts. According to FPWA's [NYC Funds Tracker](#), which monitors New York City's revenue and the flow to budget expenditures, nominal budget expenditure for the Department of Social Services (DSS) increased by 1.9% in FY23, but its actual budget decreased by 3.9% (equivalent to a \$0.46 billion budget cut) after inflation adjustment. DSS has been facing covert budget cuts since FY2012. Compared to FY2012, although its nominal budget increased by

18.6%, its actual budget decreased by 10.4%. Further, in FY12, 15.68% of citywide budget expenditure was assigned to DSS, but this decreased to 11.08% in FY23. **Thus, it is critical that the FY25 budget not only reverse these funding trends but also make the meaningful investments that we outline above to improve the management and administration of benefits.**

### **Cash Assistance and SNAP Programs Benefit New Yorkers**

A core focus of our work to support New Yorkers with low incomes is ensuring that individuals and families have access to income supports like Cash Assistance and the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP). Cash Assistance provides direct cash aid to individuals and families with the lowest incomes for basic needs, like clothing, hygiene products, and household items. The Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) provides individuals and families with food assistance, which is of critical importance as New Yorkers continue to experience hunger and food insecurity. Income supports like these not only reduce poverty, but they also improve outcomes for individuals, families, and communities. For example:

- Research shows that recipients of direct cash experience improvements in their physical and mental health,<sup>1</sup> improved food security and nutrition,<sup>2</sup> and cash has also been shown to reduce violent crime, domestic violence,<sup>3</sup> and child maltreatment.<sup>4</sup>
- Cash income is also linked to increases in rates of employment,<sup>5</sup> and it is effective at reducing poverty because it promotes economic mobility and allows individuals to plan for the future.<sup>6</sup>
- SNAP helps improve food security, which has been shown to support physical, intellectual, and emotional health.<sup>7</sup> It is also linked to improved educational attainment and higher rates of school completion.<sup>8</sup>
- SNAP also stimulates local economies, as every dollar in new SNAP benefits increases GDP by \$1.50 in a weak economy.<sup>9</sup>

### **New Yorkers Face Barriers to Access and Maintain Critical Income Supports**

Benefits like Cash Assistance and SNAP play a key role in helping New Yorkers meet their basic needs. But too often, individuals and families seeking assistance often face challenges with the processes to apply for and retain benefits, which can be time-consuming and require divulging personal information and providing extensive documentation. Ultimately, many in need of assistance are denied benefits or lose benefits at recertification precisely because of these challenges.

This is a significant issue in the Cash Assistance program. For example, as discussed in FFWA's 2023 [report](#) on Cash Assistance, each year tens of thousands of New Yorkers are denied access to the

---

<sup>1</sup>[https://static1.squarespace.com/static/6039d612b17d055cac14070f/t/603ef1194c474b329f33c329/1614737690661/SEED\\_Primary+Analysis-SEEDs+First+Year\\_Final+Report\\_Individual+Pages+-2.pdf](https://static1.squarespace.com/static/6039d612b17d055cac14070f/t/603ef1194c474b329f33c329/1614737690661/SEED_Primary+Analysis-SEEDs+First+Year_Final+Report_Individual+Pages+-2.pdf)

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.povertylaw.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/04/ESP-Shriver-Center-Report-V7-040122-1.pdf>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/a-new-community-safety-blueprint-how-the-federal-government-can-address-violence-and-harm-through-a-public-health-approach/>

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.cbpp.org/research/income-security/research-reinforces-providing-cash-to-families-in-poverty-reduces-risk-of>

<sup>5</sup>[https://static1.squarespace.com/static/6039d612b17d055cac14070f/t/603ef1194c474b329f33c329/1614737690661/SEED\\_Primary+Analysis-SEEDs+First+Year\\_Final+Report\\_Individual+Pages+-2.pdf](https://static1.squarespace.com/static/6039d612b17d055cac14070f/t/603ef1194c474b329f33c329/1614737690661/SEED_Primary+Analysis-SEEDs+First+Year_Final+Report_Individual+Pages+-2.pdf)

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.povertylaw.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/04/ESP-Shriver-Center-Report-V7-040122-1.pdf>

<sup>7</sup> <https://www.cbpp.org/research/food-assistance/snap-is-linked-with-improved-health-outcomes-and-lower-health-care-costs>

<sup>8</sup> <https://www.cbpp.org/blog/snap-is-and-remains-our-most-effective-tool-to-combat-hunger>

<sup>9</sup> <https://www.cbpp.org/research/policy-basics-the-supplemental-nutrition-assistance-program-snap>

program due to administrative barriers.<sup>10</sup> Data from Fiscal Year 2023 from New York City shows that many faced challenges with the application process. More than 84,000 cases were denied because the applicant was unable to complete the interview, and another approximately 25,000 were denied because of “failure to provide verification.” Those two categories comprise 45% of all cases denied. Data from FY23 also shows that many faced challenges with the recertification process. More than 37,000 cases were closed because recipients were unable to complete the recertification; another nearly 9,000 were closed for not completing the interview; and an additional nearly 40,000 were denied because they were unable to provide the proper documentation/verification. These issues accounted for 67% of all cases closed in FY23.

In addition to the high number of application and recertification denials, applicants for Cash Assistance and SNAP have experienced severe processing delays, leaving thousands of New Yorkers waiting longer than 30 days. Just 14% of Cash Assistance applications were processed on time between July and October of last year. In the first four months of FY24, just 41% of SNAP applications were processed within 30 days.<sup>11</sup>

### **FPWA’s Cash Assistance Story Collection Series Reveals Challenges with HRA**

Beyond these issues, New Yorkers who are trying to access these benefits experience a host of other issues while interacting with the Human Resources Administration (HRA). To better understand these experiences, FPWA is currently conducting a Cash Assistance Story Collection Series in which we are interviewing recipients of the program (full report to be released later this year). So far, many participants have reported being treated poorly by HRA staff and describe the experience of going to a Benefits Access Center as “uncomfortable,” “intimidating,” even “humiliating. They also said they wait hours, sometimes the entire day, for an appointment. One participant said she has had to take time off from work several times to go to the office to resolve various issues, adding that maintaining Cash Assistance “is like an actual job.” Some participants mentioned that they were told their paperwork was “lost” after submitting it, and others spoke about receiving conflicting information from HRA staff and encountering issues recertifying, such as not knowing when to, or getting cut off for some reason related to this. Below are some quotes from participants about their experiences with HRA:

*“To go into the [HRA] office...and sit there for a bunch of hours...I feel like I’m being judged when I go into the office and I’m treated a certain way just because I need a certain thing... I’m being talked to in a certain way, or I’m sitting there for hours, or I’m not given all the information I need, or I’m probably misled; having to go home and come back, and to just wait.”*

This participant is a 28-year-old mom from Brooklyn, who is caring for her 3-year-old daughter who was diagnosed with autism. She was denied SSI for her daughter, so she started receiving Cash Assistance to help pay for basic needs.

*“I think everybody knows that if you go there, it’s gonna be at least 3 hours. One time, I was there for 10 hours...they sent me a message saying I had to reapply for shelter, they told me I’m not eligible, it was like 2 or 3 times, they said I’m not eligible I have to go back to reapply. Each time I go, it’s 3, 6, 10 hours.”*

---

<sup>10</sup> [https://www.fpwa.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/01/Caught-in-the-Gaps\\_2023-1.pdf](https://www.fpwa.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/01/Caught-in-the-Gaps_2023-1.pdf)

<sup>11</sup> [https://www.nyc.gov/assets/operations/downloads/pdf/pmmr2024/2024\\_pmmr.pdf](https://www.nyc.gov/assets/operations/downloads/pdf/pmmr2024/2024_pmmr.pdf)

*“I’m completely at the mercy of HRA. I can’t plan my life, I can’t control my life. It’s like, you never know what’s happening tomorrow...it’s taking way too long to process the documents. It’s going really slowly, and consider that every day we are waiting and surviving...you don’t know when it’s coming. It’s like living life on hold...It makes it difficult to keep hoping, or planning...and the most painful for me, I’m not creating anything...I’m a really creative person, I like big projects, I like communities, I like helping. But at this moment it feels like I’m just wasting my time waiting for this paperwork to get done.”*

This participant is a 53-year-old mom of two teenage girls from Queens. She is a domestic violence survivor and is living in an emergency shelter.

### **Recommendations to Improve Access to Cash Assistance and SNAP in the FY25 New York City Budget**

To address the challenges outlined above in both city data and testimony from benefits recipients, FPWA calls on the City Council to:

- **Increase HRA’s budget to improve the management and administration of benefits and make the experience more dignified for individuals accessing benefits. This should include funding to:**
  - **Streamline application and recertification processes to reduce case closings/application denials caused by administrative barriers.** HRA should hire staff to conduct a thorough review of these processes to determine if there are ways to waive certain documentation requirements or ease the paperwork burden on applicants/recipients in other ways. HRA should also develop resources and other protocols to mitigate these challenges, such as providing individuals with accessible, clear instructions on how to apply and recertify, and providing information about the specific programs they are eligible for and the requirements for maintaining benefits. In addition, because thousands of New Yorkers are denied or lose benefits because of the interview requirement, HRA should implement a tracking system to require relevant staff to confirm interview completion (or failure thereof) for all scheduled applicant interviews and ensure protocols are followed for contacting individuals who have missed the interview to offer support.
  - **Address case backlog and increase turnaround time for case processing.** While the city has made some progress in addressing this issue, more work needs to be done to ensure that all eligible applicants receive benefits promptly going forward, and HRA should be sufficiently staffed to have the capacity to process applications efficiently and prevent future backlogs. In addition, efforts to process applications more swiftly should ensure that applicants are still able to complete the interview and other requirements so that these efforts do not lead to more case closures.
  - **Implement people-centered, trauma-informed practices into the delivery of services.** FPWA, in partnership with graduate students from New York University’s Wagner School of Public Service, is in the process of conducting a thorough analysis of strategies to make the Cash Assistance program more people-centered and trauma-informed. Some recommendations to do so include revamping Benefits Access Centers to create a more welcoming, accessible environment, with clear signage, printed resources in multiple languages, a clear and uniform check-in process, and designated private areas for individuals to complete their application/recertification. Both in-person and remote services (i.e., telephone) should utilize trauma-informed language to facilitate more supportive communication with benefits applicants/recipients. This should also include

hiring more HRA staff to cut down wait time for individuals applying for benefits, and staff should receive additional training on trauma and the importance of people-centered approaches to service delivery.

- **Invest in improving technology used by HRA to manage cases.** This includes improving internal management systems and expanding features on ACCESS HRA app and on the website. For example, HRA could develop a chat box functionality and other simple assistance features (e.g., a regularly updated FAQ portal) to facilitate easy information access for applicants and recipients. In addition, applicants should receive automatic document confirmation to confirm receipt and acceptance of uploaded documents.
- **Ensure HRA can engage community-based organizations (CBOs) in benefits outreach and streamline benefits applications.** We recommend additional funding to facilitate a joint application system between the SNAP program (managed by NYC HRA) and the WIC program (managed by NYS DOH), aligning with Mayor Eric Adams' pledge to develop a MyCity portal for integrated applications. This system aims to simplify the application process, making it easier for applicants to receive the benefits they need.

### **Additional Recommendations to Enhance Cash Assistance, SNAP/Food Assistance, and Support the Human Services Workforce in the FY25 New York City Budget**

FPWA is a member of the NYC Food Policy Alliance, a multi-sector group of 70+ food system stakeholders from across New York who work together to identify and advocate for public policies and funding that not only respond to our current economic and hunger crises, but also address the ongoing vulnerabilities and injustices of the food system. In alignment with this coalition, FPWA supports the following measures to further enhance food access and fight hunger in the FY25 New York City Budget:

- **Maintain funding for NYC Benefits, a new program that enables CBOs to conduct benefits outreach and connect eligible New Yorkers to government benefits that are currently underutilized.** This helps to ensure that New Yorkers are aware of the supports available, that accessing those supports is easy and efficient and that New Yorkers enroll and stay enrolled in these support programs.
- **Increase and baseline funding to a total of \$60 Million for the Community Food Connection program (CFC), formerly known as the Emergency Food Assistance Program (EFAP).** This is especially urgent given inflation and increased demand at emergency food providers across the state. A moderate increase in funding for the CFC would accommodate the increased costs of adding fresh food into the program, rising cost of produce, and continued need, including serving asylum seekers and other migrants seeking refuge in New York City.
- **Maintain funding for and evaluate the Grocery to Go program.** This program emerged in the wake of the Covid-19 pandemic as food assistance for homebound New Yorkers and has since been redesigned to provide food insecure New Yorkers who also have hypertension and/or diabetes with monthly credit to purchase groceries through an online marketplace of local grocery stores. To make the program more impactful and ensure unspent credits do not go to waste, we strongly recommend: 1) increasing the monthly credits allotted to each household; 2) expanding the list for diet related conditions to widen the scale of the program, and 3) allow for the participation of young adults who meet the other eligibility criteria. Finally, we strongly encourage DOHMH not to apply additional limitations to eligible foods and to maintain that Grocery to Go credits can purchase SNAP-approved items.
- **Restore funding for the following City Council initiatives:**
  - \$2.8 million for the Anti-Poverty Initiative;

- \$7.26 million for food pantries;
- \$2.134 million for Access to Healthy Food and Nutritional Education, which funds farmers markets, urban farms, community gardens, and programs to expand the use of SNAP benefits;
- \$1.5 million for the Food Access and Benefits Initiative (HRA).

Finally, none of this work could be done without the human services sector, which provides vital public services to our city and stepped up to help New Yorkers during the Covid-19 pandemic. Paying human services workers fairly, at a rate that recognizes their contributions, is not only long-overdue but is also necessary to enable an equitable, just, and appropriately resourced human services sector that is responsive to the needs of New Yorkers. Thus, the FY25 New York City Budget must:

- **Invest in a 5% COLA for Human Services Workers.** Human service workers currently make between 20-35% less in median annual wages and benefits than workers in comparable positions in the public and private sector. Therefore, we ask that the city includes a 5% COLA (\$150 million) in the FY25 budget and 3% COLAs for the next two years.

Thank you for your time and your attention to these critical issues. FPWA looks forward to working with you to make meaningful investments in the economic security of New Yorkers with the lowest incomes in the FY25 budget. To do so, it is critical that the budget focuses on improving access to income supports such as Cash Assistance and SNAP and strengthening the human services sector with at 5% COLA. Rather than cutting critical programs and the agencies that administer them, the city should invest in improving these programs, which are essential to promoting economic security and protecting the dignity of all New Yorkers.