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Legal Advocates Urge Mayor de Blasio and HRA to Improve Application Process So New Yorkers Can Access Food, Health, and Cash Benefits During COVID-19

Thousands of low-income New Yorkers are currently unable to access vital public benefits due to lack of technology, HRA system and app failures, overburdened phone lines, and lack of alternative application methods

New York, NY – Today, legal service groups including Legal Services NYC, The Legal Aid Society, New York Legal Assistance Group (NYLAG), and the Safety Net Project at the Urban Justice Center, issued the following joint statement in response to mounting reports of Human Resources Administration (HRA) system failures, such as lack of access to technology and alternative application methods. This has effectively denied thousands of low-income New Yorkers access to critical public benefits, like SNAP, that they need to survive during the COVID-19 crisis:

“Access to food stamps, cash assistance, and health care is literally a matter of life or death for thousands of New Yorkers whose lives have been turned upside down by the COVID-19 crisis. Our clients and all families making low-income who are eligible and need these vital benefits must be able to obtain those benefits without technological barriers in the application process that only reinforce racial and economic disparities.

There are too many New Yorkers' lives on the line for HRA to refuse to provide alternative application methods and case management. We urge Mayor de Blasio and HRA to prioritize impacted communities and we look forward to partnering with HRA and the city as we continue to help our clients try to navigate the application process.”

BACKGROUND:

Thousands of low-income New Yorkers are eligible for and access vital public benefits through HRA's online portal, Access HRA. However, many eligible individuals live without smartphones, computers, or access to consistent wifi, or are unable to use such devices, and they are all currently confined to their homes due to public health guidelines during the COVID-19 pandemic.

It is often impossible for those who are elderly, extremely low-income, street homeless, disabled, or limited English speakers to apply for benefits online. Even those who are able to use Access HRA encounter error messages, frequent system outages, and other technological barriers, preventing them from completing the application process or submitting documents required to complete their applications. Meanwhile, HRA's central phone line (the HRA InfoLine) is overwhelmed with calls, and individuals trying to complete required interviews or get vital information about their applications or benefits are having their calls dropped before ever connecting with a worker.

The inability to submit these documents or complete these interviews can result in benefits being denied and an individual needing to complete the 30-45 day application process all over again. With the majority of HRA's centers closed as a result of the public health crisis, our clients are having difficulties even obtaining and submitting paper applications.

While HRA officials and New York City have attempted to address these problems by reassigning existing staff and adding more resources, these steps are simply not enough to ensure that all New Yorkers, regardless of ability, access to technology, and primary language, are able to apply for and access public assistance benefits. HRA must move beyond the online system to reach more people in need and to set up better systems to receive applications and documentation and address constituent questions and concerns.

Advocates have suggested common-sense solutions such as:

- HRA creating an email address to receive applications and client documentation, especially since HRA's fax machines repeatedly fail to receive documents;

- increase InfoLine staffing;
- increase staffing dedicated to processing applications;
- establishing contact persons located in Job Centers or elsewhere in the boroughs to answer questions and provide support for applications outside of the InfoLine; and
- making paper applications available at every DHS and HRA shelter and other client-facing service sites (such as the DOE's food distribution locations) with a postage-paid return envelope, or implementing a contactless way for applicants to submit applications.

Additionally, the City must address the center closures resulting from COVID-19, and assure impacted communities that all of the currently shuttered SNAP, Job, and Medicaid centers will be reopened as soon as this public health crisis has been resolved.

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