



Public Advocate for the City of New York

THE HUNGER HOTLINE: HELP'S OFTEN NOT ON THE MENU

**A REPORT BY PUBLIC ADVOCATE BETSY GOTBAUM
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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Since April 2003, the New York City Human Resources Administration (HRA) has operated the New York City Hunger Hotline (1-866-888-8777), a service meant to provide hungry New Yorkers with the information they need in order to access food at soup kitchens and food pantries, which are known as emergency food programs (EFPs). Prior to 2003, the hotline was operated by the non-profit organization City Harvest under a contract with HRA. Under City Harvest's administration, the hotline was staffed by operators who scheduled an appointment for each caller at an emergency food program in his/her neighborhood. When HRA took over, it changed the system from a live to an automated service and discontinued the practice of arranging appointments for callers.

In 2003, HRA promised to update the information on the system daily, operate the hotline in six languages, provide access to a live operator during regular business hours, and collaborate with private food providers to increase the number of participating programs.¹ This promise remains unfulfilled.

In May 2004, the Office of the Public Advocate released a report that examined the hotline's effectiveness in terms of accuracy and adequacy of information provided, and evaluated how the hotline responded to requests made during evening and weekend hours and in languages other than English and Spanish. The report indicated that one year after the City altered the service from a live to an automated hotline, much of the information it provided was inaccurate and insufficient, and included recommendations to improve the service.

In June 2006, the Office of the Public Advocate conducted a follow-up survey to determine whether the problems uncovered in the May 2004 report persist. The results from this follow-up survey are detailed below.

FINDINGS

Clients cannot depend on the hotline to list accurate hours of operation for emergency food programs. In 39% of total calls made, the hotline provided incorrect hours of operation for the emergency food programs.

The hotline does not provide information (i.e., types of documents required, residency restrictions, limited service) callers may need to have in order to obtain food at a pantry or soup kitchen. In 49% of total calls made, staff or volunteers at the food programs reported that clients needed to bring specific documents with them, call ahead, or have a referral. The Hunger Hotline does not provide any of this critical information to callers, nor does it recommend that callers contact food programs to obtain any necessary information.

¹ Office of the New York City Public Advocate, *New York City Hunger Hotline: Service Leaves Callers Empty Handed*, available at http://pubadvocate.nyc.gov/policy/pdfs/hungerhotline_report_final.pdf.

Hungry New Yorkers may not be able to access food during the evening and weekend hours. Of the 17 calls placed during evening and weekend hours, 5 calls (29%) to the hotline failed to identify programs available for the time and area selected.

Hungry New Yorkers with special dietary needs may have difficulty accessing food. 12 of the 16 calls placed requesting a kosher menu failed to identify an appropriate program.

- 5 calls (31%) did not identify any programs available for the time and area selected.
- 7 calls (44%) identified the same food program that does not serve a kosher menu and is at a different address than the one indicated on the automated hotline.

Of the 14 calls placed requesting an HIV/AIDS restrictive diet:

- 8 calls (57%) did not identify any programs available for the time and area selected.
- 5 calls (36%) identified programs which require either a referral letter or that potential clients register with the program.²

The automated hotline does not indicate how to access a live operator. The recording on the automated hotline states that operator assistance is available Monday to Friday from 9:00am to 5:00pm. However, it does not inform callers how to get to an operator.

The hotline does not serve well those who speak languages other than English and Spanish. The automated hotline only functions in English and Spanish. This means that the only way callers with limited English proficiency can obtain assistance is through an HRA operator. However, testing revealed that HRA operators were unable to connect four out of the five “other language calls.”

The websites of City agencies provide incorrect information about the Hunger Hotline. Currently, HRA’s website states that live operator assistance is available Monday to Friday from 7:30am-5:30pm.³ (The Hunger Hotline itself indicates that live operator assistance is available Monday to Friday from 9:00am to 5:00pm). Operator assistance is in fact provided to Hunger Hotline callers through the HRA Infoline, which offers operator assistance Monday to Friday from 8:00am to 5:00pm.

In addition, in a guide to social services published by the New York City Department of Health and Mental Hygiene (DOHMH), the first listing under food assistance programs is the outdated telephone number for the City Harvest Hunger Hotline.⁴ The online Community Resource Handbook compiled by the New York City Department of

² Registration is free, but callers may need to have proof of HIV status and fit some other criteria.

³ Human Resources Administration (HRA), *Emergency Food Assistance Program*, available at www.nyc.gov/html/hra/downloads/pdf/EFAP.

⁴ DOHMH, *A Guide to Social Services and Health Care in New York City - 2005 Referral Directory*, available at www.nyc.gov/html/doh/downloads/pdf/std/std-socialsvcs-guide-2005.pdf.

Homeless Services also lists the disconnected City Harvest Hunger Hotline under the section for Food Resources.⁵

While the Hunger Hotline informs callers about food stamps, it does not inform callers about expedited food stamps and other food assistance programs. The hotline fails to inform callers with children about the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants and Children (WIC), the National School Lunch Program, School Breakfast Program, and the Free Summer Food Service Program. Moreover, the Hotline does not inform callers about the availability of expedited food stamps, which may lead callers to believe that emergency food assistance is only available through soup kitchens and food pantries.

311 operators do not provide consistent information when callers ask a general question about assistance obtaining food.

Of the 50 calls placed to 311 regarding food, operators did not inform callers about:

- food stamps in 20 cases (40%)
- WIC in 46 cases (92%)
- National School Lunch Program, School Breakfast Program, and the Summer Food Service Program in all cases (100%)

RECOMMENDATIONS

HRA should restore the hotline to a live service during normal business hours (9:00am-5:00pm) and offer the automated service during nights and weekends. In addition, HRA should ensure that accurate information is available by creating a public centralized online database of all EFPs, and allowing all EFPs to update their information online, as is currently the case in Delaware (see Appendix B). HRA should also then utilize the information in such a database to coordinate the services of EFPs and should provide technical assistance to enable EFPs to communicate their program information to HRA regularly.

The Public Advocate makes the following recommendations to HRA to correct identified problems with the current automated system, many of which would also be applicable to a live service:

Provide Correct and Complete Program Information Through the Hotline

- Update information on food programs regularly.
- Advise callers to contact food programs to verify that they are open and that food is available.
- Encourage emergency food providers to play a recorded message with updated information when no one is available to answer the phone

⁵ New York City Department of Homeless Services, *Community Resource Handbook*, available at www.nyc.gov/html/dhs/html/atrisk/handbook.shtml.

- Inform callers of any appointments and documents they may need to gain access to specific food programs.

Ensure Access to Emergency Food Programs During Evening/Weekend Hours and for Those with Special Dietary Needs

- List the services of non-City-funded programs on the Hunger Hotline to expand the number of options available to callers.
- Coordinate the services of EFPs to ensure the availability of programs that provide food during evening and weekend hours as well as for those with special dietary needs.

Indicate on the Automated Hotline How to Access a Live Operator

- Inform callers at the beginning of each call how to reach a live operator.

Improve Service for Those Who Speak Languages Other than English and Spanish

- Increase the number of automated languages to at least six, as promised by HRA in 2003.
- Extend hours of operator availability so that those with limited proficiency in English may utilize the Hotline during evenings and weekends.
- Provide training to HRA operators so that they can better assist non-English speakers.

Provide Correct Information About the Hunger Hotline on Websites of City Agencies

- Update information on HRA's website and ensure that all City agencies provide the correct information on emergency food programs and the Hunger Hotline.

Inform callers to the Hunger Hotline About All Available Food Assistance Programs

- Advise callers that emergency food stamps are available within five calendar days.⁶
- Coordinate with the Department of Education and the New York City Housing Authority to advertise the Summer Food Program on the Hunger Hotline. Callers with children could either be linked to their closest site⁷ or could be connected to the School Food Line.
- Recommend hungry New Yorkers with children learn more about WIC and direct them to call the New York State Department of Health Growing Up Healthy Hotline.

⁶ HRA, *Emergency*, available at www.nyc.gov/html/hra/html/questions_answers/emergency.shtml#food.

⁷ Office of the Public Advocate, *Summer Meals Site List 2006*, available at http://pubadvocate.nyc.gov/documents/SummerMealsSiteList2006_001.pdf

In addition, the Public Advocate makes the following recommendation for 311:

311 Operators Should Consistently Provide Information About All Available Food Programs to Callers Requesting Information About Food

- 311 operators should inform callers about the Food Stamp Program, WIC, Summer Food Program, and other food assistance programs in addition to transferring people to the Hunger Hotline.
- 311 operators should inform callers that emergency food stamps are available within five calendar days.

INTRODUCTION

Overview of the Hunger Hotline

The Hunger Hotline was created in 1979 by the World Hunger Year to provide hungry New Yorkers with the information they needed to access food at emergency food programs in their neighborhoods. When HRA began to offer the hotline as a City service, it contracted with City Harvest to operate the hotline. For five years, a team of City Harvest operators, who were familiar with the different capacities of various soup kitchens and food pantries, helped hungry New Yorkers by making reservations for them at emergency food programs in their area. This way, those in need were assured that the program would be open, that food would be available when they arrived, and that they knew what documentation they would need in order to receive food. However, this all changed when HRA automated the live hotline service in April 2003.

HRA's automated hotline was supposed to improve upon and even expand the Hunger Hotline service. Specifically, HRA promised in 2003 to⁸:

- Operate the hotline in six languages;⁹
- Update the automated system daily;
- Provide access to a live operator during regular business hours;
- Collaborate with private food providers to increase the number of participating programs.

In May 2004, the Office of the Public Advocate released a report that examined the hotline's effectiveness in terms of accuracy and adequacy of information provided, and evaluated how the hotline responded to requests made during evening and weekend hours and in languages other than English and Spanish. The report indicated that one year after the City altered the service from a live to an automated hotline, much of the information it provided was inaccurate and insufficient, and included recommendations to improve the service.

Now, more than three years after the City created the automated hotline, HRA has yet to live up to its promise to improve the service. Much of the information provided by the automated system continues to be inaccurate and insufficient, and the Hotline continues to provide information only about programs that receive funding from the City. The Public Advocate encourages New Yorkers to continue using the hotline but once again asserts that HRA must improve the quality of service it provides.

The Bloomberg Administration has begun a \$14 million effort to expand the current 311 system to provide social service information to New York City residents, and it is

⁸ *See I.*

⁹ The following year, New York City Local Law 73 of 2003 took effect. This law, which is meant to ensure that non-English speakers are not discriminated against in their efforts to access social services, states that an individual with limited proficiency in English deserves prompt service and should not have to wait unreasonably longer to receive assistance than individuals who do not require language assistance services. www.nyc.gov/html/imm/downloads/pdf/language_access_law.pdf

possible that the Hunger Hotline will be subsumed by the expanded 311 service. However, the launch date for the expanded 311 service is not clear,¹⁰ and New Yorkers need access to accurate and complete information about emergency food assistance in the meantime. Furthermore, the findings and recommendations provided in this report may prove useful as the Administration moves forward in the creation of the new 311 service.

The Hunger Situation in New York City

In 2004, an estimated 1.2 million New York City residents, including 417,000 children, lived in households facing hunger or food insecurity, according to United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) statistics calculated by the New York City Coalition Against Hunger (NYCCAHA).¹¹ Since then there has been a rising need for soup kitchens and food pantries. According to a 2005 survey conducted by NYCCAHA, 73% of emergency food programs surveyed had experienced an increase in demand for their services in the past year.¹² In 2006, The Food Bank for New York City (Food Bank) and City Harvest reported that, on average, more than 300,000 people in New York City, many of them women and children, access emergency food programs (EFPs) each week.¹³

Certain populations in New York City have special dietary needs and require additional measures when utilizing EFPs. Twenty percent of the 1.1 million Jewish people in New York City live in poverty, with Orthodox households making up about 27% of the Jewish poor.¹⁴ While the Hunger Hotline database includes 20 food programs that serve a Kosher diet,¹⁵ the Food Bank reports that there are about 45 Kosher food programs in the City.¹⁶

New York City has over 10,000¹⁷ city residents known to be living with HIV/AIDS, and many of these are known to be living in poverty.¹⁸ Some individuals with HIV/AIDS

¹⁰ The New York Sun, *City is Forced to Scale Back 311 Projections After Delays*, August 4, 2006, available at www.nysun.com/article/37312.

¹¹ New York City Coalition Against Hunger, *The Hunger Squeeze: Skyrocketing Costs, Sinking Wages Increase Hunger in New York City*, available at www.nyccah.org/research/final_report.doc.

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ City Harvest and The Food Bank for New York City, *Hunger in America 2006: The NYC and NYS Report*, available at www.foodbanknyc.org. About half of EFP client household members are women and about 29% are children.

¹⁴ Metropolitan Council on Jewish Poverty and UJA-Federation of New York, *Report on Jewish Poverty, January 2004*, available at www.ujafedny.org/site/PageServer?pagename=publications.

¹⁵ Letter from HRA Deputy Commissioner Tim Mulligan to the Director of Intergovernmental and Community Affairs of the Office of the Public Advocate, July 25, 2006.

¹⁶ Telephone conversation with The Food Bank for New York City, July 18, 2006.

¹⁷ New York City Department of Health and Mental Hygiene (DOHMH), *Stop HIV in NYC*, available at www.nyc.gov/html/doh/downloads/pdf/ah/ah-summary.pdf.

¹⁸ A report by the Medical and Health Research Association of New York City (MHRA) revealed that of the 41,916 HIV/AIDS clients participating in the Ryan White Title I Program, which provides emergency assistance to the metropolitan areas most affected by HIV/AIDS, more than 80% reported a household annual income of less than \$10,000. MHRA, Inc., *Ryan White Title I Program Summary Report to the New York City Department of Health and Mental Hygiene – March 2004-February 2005*, available at www.hivcs.org/Docs/Ryan_White_Program_Summary_Report_2004.pdf.

require a special diet in order to meet their increased protein and energy needs.¹⁹ The Hunger Hotline database includes 26 EFPs that serve food tailored to meet the needs of certain individuals living with HIV/AIDS.²⁰

As the home of one of the largest immigrant populations in the nation, New York City hosts more than 1.7 millions residents (more than 21% of the entire city population) with limited English proficiency.²¹ The Urban Institute has estimated that more than one-third of residents with limited proficiency in English live below the poverty level²² and about 57% of families in which the adults speak no English at all are food insecure.²³

Unfortunately, as the need for food from emergency food programs has increased, resources have not increased to meet the demand. In a survey by NYCCAH, 41% of emergency food programs surveyed reported a decrease in their material resources, and 47% of respondents stated that they had to turn away hungry New Yorkers or cut portion sizes and/or cut their hours of operation in 2005.²⁴

These disturbing trends can be partially explained by the underutilization of other available food assistance programs. According to the 2006 City Harvest/Food Bank report:

- 54% of EFP client households do not participate in the Food Stamp Program.
- 56% of EFP client households with preschool children do not participate in the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants and Children (WIC).
- 36% of EFP client households with school-age children do not participate in the National School Lunch Program, 51% do not participate in the School Breakfast Program, and 64% do not participate in the Summer Food Service Program.

One of the most frequently cited reasons for individuals and families not participating in these valuable nutrition assistance programs is lack of awareness. Emergency food programs should function as a safety net that families turn to only in emergencies, and it is therefore especially important for hungry New Yorkers to know about all the food assistance programs available to them.

¹⁹ To maintain their proper weight and to keep their bodies healthy, people living with HIV/AIDS need to eat more protein to build and maintain muscle mass, and more carbohydrates and fat to offset their increased metabolic rate. The Momentum AIDS Project, *Why Nutrition Matters*, available at www.mometumaidsproject.org/.

²⁰ See 15.

²¹ New York City Department of City Planning (DCP), *NYC 2000 Results from the 2000 Census Socioeconomic Characteristics*, available at www.nyc.gov/html/dcp/pdf/census/sociopp.pdf.

²² Urban Institute, *Immigrant Well-Being in New York and Los Angeles*, August 2002, available at www.urban.org/UploadedPDF/310566_ImmigrantWellBeing.pdf.

²³ Urban Institute, *How Are Immigrants Faring after Welfare Reform*, March 4, 2002, available at www.urban.org/url.cfm?ID=410426.

²⁴ See 5. NYCCAH estimated that people may have been turned away from food programs as many as 4.9 million times in 2005 alone. About 41% of those turned away were children.

Various Food Assistance Programs Available

Emergency Food Programs provide free prepared meals (soup kitchen) or distribute food for preparing at home (food pantry). For Fiscal Year 2006, HRA's Emergency Food Assistance Program (EFAP) allocated \$8.3 million to 550 participating emergency food programs.²⁵ In Fiscal Year 2007, HRA reported that only 472 food programs were participating in EFAP.²⁶ However, there are many more EFPs across the city which are not funded through EFAP. The Food Bank and City Harvest reported in 2006 that there are as many as 1,300 non-profit emergency food programs in New York City.²⁷ This means that the Hunger Hotline only lists approximately 36% of the total number of emergency food programs available in its automated system.

The Food Stamp Program, a USDA program administered by HRA in New York City,²⁸ provides low-income families with the ability to buy nutritious food at authorized retail food stores.²⁹ The program is often considered the "first line of defense against hunger."³⁰ Despite all the benefits of participating in the program, New York City's participation rate is still quite low. Many hunger advocates attribute this to the bureaucratic barriers in the application process, the lack of food stamp applications at designated locations, the inaccuracy of the information provided by HRA, and so forth.³¹ If more eligible New Yorkers were to enroll in the program, they would be able to receive more food and at the same time boost the local economy. For every dollar spent by the federal government, the USDA estimates that \$1.84 goes back into the economy.³²

The Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants and Children (WIC) and the Summer Food Service Program are also important food assistance programs; women and children account for the majority of EFP users. WIC is a federally funded program that provides nutritious food, information on healthy eating, and health care referrals to low-income pregnant, postpartum, and breastfeeding women, and infants and children up to five years of age.³³

²⁵ HRA, *Testimony of Seth Diamond, Executive Deputy Commissioner of the Family Independence Administration of the Human Resources Administration/Department of Social Services Before the City Council General Welfare Committee*, November 21, 2005, available at www.nyc.gov/html/hra/downloads/pdf/food_stamp_testimony_112105.pdf.

²⁶ See 15.

²⁷ See 13.

²⁸ HRA, *Nutritional Programs- Food Stamps Overview*, available at www.nyc.gov/html/hra/html/family_independence/serv_nutritional_program.shtml. As of May 2006, there were 1,098,225 food stamp recipients in New York City. HRA, *Fact Sheet*, available at www.nyc.gov/html/hra/downloads/pdf/hrafacts_2006_05.pdf.

²⁹ USDA, *Food Stamp Program Electronic Benefits Transfer (EBT) Status Report*, available at www.fns.usda.gov/fsp/ebt/ebt_status_report.htm. As of March 2006, there are about 13,857 Food Stamp Program Authorized Food Retailers in New York State.

³⁰ USDA, *Food Stamp Program*, available at www.fns.usda.gov/fsp/.

³¹ Urban Justice Center, *A Better Recipe for New York City: Less Red Tape, More Food on the Table*, January 2006, available at www.urbanjustice.org/pdf/publications/better_recipe_full_rpt.pdf.

³² USDA, *Effects of Changes in Food Stamp Expenditures Across the United States*, August 2002, available at www.ers.usda.gov/publications/fanrr26/fanrr26-6/fanrr26-6.pdf.

³³ USDA, *WIC at a Glance*, available at www.fns.usda.gov/wic/aboutwic/wicatagance.htm.

The Summer Food Service Program provides free, nutritious meals and snacks to children throughout the summer months. All children under the age of 19 can participate and children are not required to provide identification or documentation in order to participate.³⁴ However, many families are unaware of this free service and turn to EFPs during the summer. This is evident in a Food Bank study in which as many as 47% of New York City soup kitchens and 37% of food pantries indicated that they serve more children during the summer.³⁵

³⁴ USDA, *Summer Food Service Program*, available at www.fns.usda.gov/cnd/summer/.

³⁵ See 13.

METHODOLOGY

Five staff members and interns from the Office of the Public Advocate called the New York City Food & Hunger Hotline between June 5 and June 30, 2006.³⁶ (See Appendix A for a transcript of the questions asked by the automated Hunger Hotline). After receiving contact information for the soup kitchens and food pantries from the automated hotline, callers spoke with staff or volunteers at the food programs directly to verify whether the information provided by the hotline was accurate.

The office placed 169 calls, with at least one call for every zip code in New York City in which there were at least 2,000 residents living in poverty.³⁷ Calls were randomly divided between requests for soup kitchens and requests for food pantries. Half of the calls to the food programs were made by pressing the appropriate key to transfer from the hotline to the food program, and the other half of the calls were made by directly dialing the food program using the phone number the hotline provided.

Seventeen of the calls were made throughout the test period to observe how the hotline responded to requests made during evenings and weekends. Five calls were made in languages other than English and Spanish. Operator assistance for these “other language calls” was obtained through the HRA Infoline. (Only after extensive trial and error did callers from the Public Advocate’s Office determine that one can reach an HRA Infoline operator by pressing a series of invalid entries into the Hunger Hotline’s automated system or by not pressing any keys at all when the system asks for information about the caller).

Sixteen additional calls were made to test the Hunger Hotline’s ability to serve hungry New Yorkers who required a kosher menu.³⁸ Fourteen additional calls were made to test the Hunger Hotline’s ability to serve hungry New Yorkers who require an HIV/AIDS diet.³⁹

The following criteria were used to measure hotline accuracy and adequacy:

³⁶ Callers consistently used the following profile: one-adult, three-child household requiring an emergency meal that day.

³⁷ All zip codes were taken from the Population Division of the Department of City Planning, www.nyc.gov/html/dcp/download/census/sf3_pov_p_z1.xls. Repeat calls were made to some zip codes if the automated system provided the same EFP options for more than one zip code on the same day.

³⁸ The breakdown of these calls was based on a study by UJA Federation of New York, which identified a total of 26 areas in New York with a high number of Jewish households. (UJA Federation of New York, *The Jewish Community Study of New York: 2002*, available at www.ujafedny.org). Sixteen of the 26 areas were in NYC. One zip code from each area was selected to test the Hunger Hotline.

³⁹ The breakdown of these calls was based on HIV diagnoses as reported by DOHMH. (DOHMH, *Rates of Reported HIV Diagnoses, PWHA, and Deaths among PWHA in New York City, 2001*, available at www.nyc.gov/html/doh/downloads/pdf/ah/surveillance2001_table4.2.pdf). The 12 neighborhoods with the largest number of reported cases were selected. However, since no area in Queens and Staten Island were among the top 12, the neighborhoods in those boroughs with the most cases reported were selected for inclusion.

- A match between the Hotline's recorded information and the actual food program hours of operation;
- The Hotline's ability to provide sufficient information to callers (i.e., the need to bring identification, proof of residence, proof of income, etc.).

Fifty additional calls to 311 were made to see where operators direct hungry New Yorkers who call seeking assistance obtaining food. Callers consistently made only a general statement indicating that they needed food for themselves and their children within no specific timeframe.

FINDINGS

Clients cannot depend on the hotline to list accurate hours of operation for emergency food programs. In 39% of total calls made, the hotline provided incorrect hours of operation for the emergency food programs.

- In 20% of the calls, information obtained on program hours was “grossly misleading.”⁴⁰
- In 19% of the calls, information obtained on programs hours was “slightly misleading.”⁴¹

The hotline does not provide information (i.e. types of documents required, residency restrictions, limited service) callers may need to have in order to obtain food at a pantry or soup kitchen.

- In 49% of total calls made, staff or volunteers at the food programs reported that clients needed to bring specific documents with them, call ahead, or have a referral.
- In 5% of the total calls made, programs reported that clients needed to live in certain zip codes in order for them to utilize the food services. This could be problematic since the Hunger Hotline only asks callers to enter the zip code for the area in which they would like to access food and not the zip code in which they reside.
- In 8% of the total calls made, programs reported limited service.⁴²

The Hunger Hotline does not provide any of this critical information to callers, nor does it recommend that callers contact food programs to obtain any necessary information.

Hungry New Yorkers may not be able to access food during the evening and weekend hours. Of the 17 calls placed during evening and weekend hours, 5 calls (29%) to the hotline failed to identify programs available for the time and area selected. (However, the Public Advocate’s Office was able to confirm the availability of food programs for 2 of those 5 times and areas selected).

Hungry New Yorkers with special dietary needs may have difficulty accessing food. 12 of the 16 calls placed requesting a kosher menu failed.

- 5 calls (31%) did not identify any programs available for the time and area selected.
- 7 calls (44%) identified the same food program that does not serve a kosher menu and is at a different address than the one indicated on the automated hotline.

Of the 14 calls placed requesting an HIV/AIDS restrictive diet:

⁴⁰ Calls are considered “grossly misleading” if the hours indicated on the hotline and the hours given by the program directly are off by more than one hour—for example, if the hotline stated that the program hours are from 9:30am-11:30am and the program staff said the hours are actually from 12:00pm to 2:00pm.

⁴¹ Calls are considered “slightly misleading” if the hours indicated on the hotline and the hours reported by program staff are off by no more than one hour. For example, if the hotline stated that the program hours are from 9:30am-11:30am and program staff reported that the hours are actually from 10:00am-11:30am.

⁴² “Limited service” means that the food program reported that they only serve a certain number of people each day or that the number they serve will depend on the availability of food. For example, Our Lady of Sorrows gives out 30 bags of groceries each time they are open.

- 8 calls (57%) did not identify any programs available for the time and area selected.
- 5 calls (36%) identified programs which require either a referral letter or that potential clients register with the program.⁴³

The automated hotline does not indicate how to access a live operator. The recording on the automated hotline states that operator assistance is available Monday to Friday from 9:00am to 5:00pm. However, it does not inform callers how to get to an operator.

The hotline does not serve well those who speak languages other than English and Spanish. The automated hotline only functions in English and Spanish. This means that the only way callers with limited English proficiency can obtain assistance is through an HRA Infoline operator. However, testing revealed that HRA Infoline operators were unable to connect four out of the five “other language calls” (conducted in Russian, Korean, Haitian Creole, and Hebrew) to a live translator. After the operator identified the language spoken by the caller, the operator asked the caller in English for a phone number so that someone could call them back.⁴⁴

The websites of City agencies provide incorrect information about the Hunger Hotline. Currently, HRA’s website states that live operator assistance is available Monday to Friday from 7:30am-5:30pm.⁴⁵ (The Hunger Hotline itself indicates that live operator assistance is available Monday to Friday from 9:00am to 5:00pm). Operator assistance is in fact provided to Hunger Hotline callers through the HRA Infoline, which offers operator assistance Monday to Friday from 8:00am to 5:00pm.

In addition, in a guide to social services published by DOHMH, the first listing under food assistance programs is the outdated telephone number for the City Harvest Hunger Hotline.⁴⁶ The online Community Resource Handbook compiled by the New York City Department of Homeless Services also lists the disconnected City Harvest Hunger Hotline under the section for Food Resources.⁴⁷

While the Hunger Hotline informs callers about food stamps, it does not inform callers about expedited food stamps and other food assistance programs. The hotline fails to inform callers with children about WIC, the National School Lunch Program, the School Breakfast Program, and the Free Summer Food Service Program. Moreover, the Hotline also does not inform callers about the availability of expedited food stamps, which may lead callers to believe that the only emergency food assistance available is through soup kitchens and food pantries.

⁴³ Registration is free, but callers may need to have proof of HIV status and meet some other criteria.

⁴⁴ The only “other language call” that was connected to a live translator was conducted in Chinese.

⁴⁵ HRA, *Emergency Food Assistance Program*, available at www.ci.nyc.ny.us/html/hra/downloads/pdf/EFAP.pdf.

⁴⁶ DOHMH, *A Guide to Social Services and Health Care in New York City - 2005 Referral Directory*, available at www.nyc.gov/html/doh/downloads/pdf/std/std-socialsvrc-guide-2005.pdf.

⁴⁷ New York City Department of Homeless Services, *Community Resource Handbook*, available at www.nyc.gov/html/dhs/html/atrisk/handbook.shtml.

311 operators do not provide consistent information when callers ask a general question about assistance obtaining food.

Of the 50 calls placed to 311 regarding food, operators did not inform callers about:

- food stamps in 20 cases (40%)
- WIC in 46 cases (92%)
- National School Lunch Program, School Breakfast Program, and Summer Food Service Program in all cases (100%)

RECOMMENDATIONS AND CONCLUSION

Hungry New Yorkers need a Hunger Hotline that provides the information necessary to obtain food assistance. Based on the findings of this survey, the Public Advocate makes the following recommendations for the Hunger Hotline:

HRA should restore the hotline to a live service during normal business hours (9:00am-5:00pm) and offer the automated service during nights and weekends. Because the majority of participating food programs open and close according to the availability of food, volunteers, and resources, information provided by the automated hotline quickly becomes outdated. If live Hunger Hotline operators were available to make appointments for callers in the way that City Harvest operators used to, it would be easier for hungry New Yorkers to obtain food when they most need it.

In addition, HRA should ensure that accurate information is available by creating a public centralized online database of all EFPs, and allowing all EFPs to update their information online, as is currently the case in Delaware (see Appendix B). HRA should also utilize the information in the database to coordinate the services of EFPs and should provide technical assistance to enable EFPs to communicate their program information to HRA regularly.

The Public Advocate makes the following recommendations to HRA to correct identified problems with the current automated system, many of which would also be applicable to a live service:

Provide Correct and Complete Program Information Through the Hotline

- Update information on food programs regularly.
- Advise callers to contact food programs to verify that they are open and that food is available.
- Encourage emergency food providers to play a recorded message with updated information when no one is available to answer the phone
- Inform callers of any appointments and documents they may need to gain access to specific food programs.

Ensure Access to Emergency Food Programs During Evening/Weekend Hours and for Those with Special Dietary Needs

- List the services of the approximately 800 non-City-funded programs currently not listed on the Hunger Hotline.
- Coordinate the services of EFPs to ensure the availability of programs that provide food during evening and weekend hours as well as for those with special dietary needs.

Indicate on the Automated Hotline How to Access a Live Operator

- Inform callers at the beginning of each call how to reach a live operator.

Improve Service for Those Who Speak Languages Other than English and Spanish

- Increase the number of automated languages to at least six, as promised by HRA in 2003.
- Extend hours of operator availability so that those with limited proficiency in English may utilize the Hotline during evenings and weekends.
- Provide training to HRA operators so that they can better assist non-English speakers.

Provide Correct Information About the Hunger Hotline on Websites of City Agencies

- Update information on HRA's website and ensure that all City agencies provide the correct information on emergency food programs and the Hunger Hotline.

Inform callers to the Hunger Hotline About All Available Food Assistance Programs

- Advise callers that emergency food stamps are available within five calendar days.⁴⁸
- Coordinate with the Department of Education and the New York City Housing Authority to advertise the Summer Food Program on the Hunger Hotline. Hungry New Yorkers with children in their household could either be linked to their closest site⁴⁹ or could be connected to the School Food Line.
- Recommend hungry New Yorkers with children in their household learn more about WIC and direct them to call the New York State Department of Health Growing Up Healthy Hotline.

In addition, the Public Advocate makes the following recommendation for 311:

311 Operators Should Consistently Provide Information About All Available Food Programs to Callers Requesting Information About Food

- 311 operators should inform callers about the Food Stamp Program, WIC, Summer Food Program, and other food assistance programs in addition to transferring people to the Hunger Hotline.
- 311 operators should inform callers that emergency food stamps are available within five calendar days.

⁴⁸ See 6.

⁴⁹ See 7.

APPENDIX A: TRANSCRIPT OF AUTOMATED HOTLINE QUESTIONS

Welcome to New York City's Hunger Hotline. Agents are available Monday through Friday, from 9 am to 5pm. You can obtain information about the emergency food assistance program using our automated information system, which is available 24 hours a day, 7 days a week.

To continue in English, press 1, *to continue in Spanish, press 2 (this part was in Spanish)*

If you are in need of emergency food assistance, press 1

When #1 is pressed:

- Before making a referral, we need some basic information.
 - How many adults are in your household?
 - How many children, 18 years old and under, are in your household?
 - Does anyone in your household require a kosher menu? Press 1 for yes or 2 for no.
 - Does anyone in your household require an HIV/AIDS diet? Press 1 for yes or 2 for no.
 - If you would like to be served a meal at a soup kitchen, please press 1; if you would like to receive packaged groceries at a food pantry, please press 2.
 - When would you like to obtain the food? (e.g. For today press 1, for tomorrow press 2, for (Sunday) press 3, for (Monday) press 4, for (Tuesday) press 5, for (Wednesday) press 6, for (Thursday) press 7.)
 - Please enter the zip code of the area in which you would like to access food.

Please have a pen and paper available to write down the information you need. Just a reminder, if you are in need of other services such as food stamps, Medicaid, public assistance, homecare, childcare, adult protective services or other emergency services, you can call HRA's info line toll-free at 1-877-472-8411. Please remember that for those eligible households, food stamps are available to supplement your food resources and help you to maintain a nutritionally adequate diet.

If you are in need of other services such as food stamps, Medicaid, public assistance, homecare, childcare, adult protective services or other emergency services, press 2.

When #2 is pressed:

- Welcome to Infoline...

If you have any problems with the emergency food network and would like to leave a message, press 3.

When #3 is pressed:

- You can leave a voicemail

APPENDIX B: HOW OTHERS SUCCESSFULLY SERVE HUNGRY RESIDENTS

Florida⁵⁰

The Hunger Hotline in Florida is operated by the Florida Association for Community Action (FACA). It provides live operator service Monday to Friday from 8:00am to 5:00pm. When hungry Floridians call the hotline, live operators are on hand to provide them with information and referrals to over 2,000 agencies across the state. Besides providing callers with information on emergency food programs in their area, FACA operators will also inform callers about the Food Stamp Program and WIC. Hungry Floridians can also access FACA's database online at any time to get an extensive list of food resources available in their selected zip codes.

Massachusetts⁵¹

Project Bread, a non-profit organization, operates Massachusetts' FoodSource Hotline. Live counselors are available during normal business hours on Mondays, Tuesdays, Wednesdays, and Fridays and extended hours on Thursdays. Operators make on average about 2,500 referrals a month to a variety of food resources. They also serve 140 languages through a special service that can link callers with a translator usually within 30 seconds. FoodSource operators can also prescreen callers for the Food Stamp Program, mail them an application, and even help those interested begin the online application.

Delaware⁵²

Delaware Helpline provides needs assessment, problem resolution, and referrals for callers with health or human service needs. Callers can speak to a live Helpline Referral Specialist who can help them address their problems and provide them with all the necessary contact information to get in touch with the relevant organizations. There is also an online referral service; individuals can search through the Helpline's extensive database of resources including Federal, State, and local government agencies, non-profit agencies, and so forth. In addition, hungry residents of Delaware can fill out an online referral form on the Helpline's website and put in a request for an operator to call them back during normal business hours.

Most importantly, the online referral service allows participating Helpline agencies to add to or update their own information, ensuring that those in need will receive crucial services.

⁵⁰ Florida Association for Community Action, *Hunger Hotline Referral Form*, available at www.faca.org/.

⁵¹ Project Bread, *The FoodSource Hotline*, available at www.projectbread.org/site/PageServer?pagename=end_foodsourcehotline.

⁵² Delaware Helpline, *Homepage*, available at www.delawarehelpline.org/helpline/index.jsp.