

New York City Hunger Hotline: Service Leaves Callers Empty Handed

A Report by the Office of the Public Advocate of New York City

**Public Advocate Betsy Gotbaum
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OFFICE OF THE NEW YORK CITY PUBLIC ADVOCATE

Betsy Gotbaum
Public Advocate for the City of New York

PREPARED BY:
Jill E. Sheppard
Director of Policy and Research

WITH THE ASSISTANCE OF:
Daniel Browne
Assistant Press Secretary

Yana Chernobilsky
Rebecca In-Young Chung
Dana Krieger
Charlene Piper
Chimezie N. Ozurumba

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Executive Summary	4
Introduction.....	5
Overview: Emergency Food and the Hunger Hotline	7
Methodology	9
Results	10
Findings.....	11
Recommendations & Conclusion.....	12
Appendix: Automated Hotline Questions.....	16

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

One year ago, the Bloomberg Administration changed the way it operates one of the City's most effective anti-hunger programs, the New York City Hunger Hotline. The hotline provided a live service for over twenty-three years that supplied callers in need with the information necessary to receive food assistance. The hotline also scheduled appointments for callers to receive food at a specific location in their respective neighborhoods. Despite a unified outcry from all of the city's leading anti-hunger organizations, the City automated the hotline in April 2003. This report finds that the hotline is now much less effective in serving low-income families, individuals, seniors, and children.

When HRA automated the hotline, the agency promised to provide a new and improved service. Specifically, the Administration planned to update the system daily and operate the hotline in six languages, extend hours of operation to twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week, provide access to a live operator during regular business hours, and collaborate with private food providers to increase the number of participating programs. Seven staff and interns from the Office of the Public Advocate placed 167 calls to the Hunger Hotline from November 13-December 12, 2003, and from March 1-5, 2004¹. In November and December, callers tested the hotline's accuracy and adequacy, evaluated how the hotline responds to requests made during evening and weekend hours and in languages other than English and Spanish, and measured wait time for a live operator. The Office also placed calls in March to determine whether any improvements had been made. This report finds that one year after the City altered the service from a live to an automated hotline, much of the information it provides is inaccurate and insufficient.

Rather than recognizing that the majority of participating food programs open and close according to the availability of food, volunteers, and resources, the automated hotline incorrectly assumes that the volunteer-operated service providers keep consistent hours of operation. The hotline also fails to inform clients of the need to call ahead or bring specific documents with them to certain programs in order to receive food. Given that City officials informed the Office of the Public Advocate that the switch to an automated hotline was not conceived as a way to reduce the cost of this \$288,000 program and that the need for emergency food has doubled over the past three years in New York City, Public Advocate Betsy Gotbaum calls for Mayor Bloomberg to restore the hotline as a live service. This will ensure that it can once again function as an accurate and useful system for hungry New Yorkers.

¹ Callers consistently used the following profile: one-adult, three-child household requiring an emergency meal that day, without any special dietary needs.

FINDINGS

Clients cannot depend on the hotline to provide accurate office hours for emergency food programs. In 45% of calls made, the hotline provided incorrect office hours. Hotline information is only updated twice a month, not daily.

It is difficult for clients to verify whether office hours are correct because programs are often not reachable by phone. Callers were unable to contact 35% of programs. Reasons programs could not be reached include no answer, program no longer existed, and wrong number.

The hotline did not provide information about the types of documents callers may need to show a pantry or soup kitchen to obtain food. This increases the chance that some callers may not actually be able to receive assistance or enough food for everyone in their household. 68% of programs reported that clients needed to bring specific documents with them to receive food and/or call ahead to verify that food is available. The hotline does not ever provide such information to callers.

Wait time for live operator is too long. Callers waited an average of 18 minutes to speak to a live operator, with the shortest wait time 8 minutes and the longest 38 minutes.

The hotline is not effective during evening and weekend hours. While the automated hotline sought to serve people twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week, of the 15 calls placed outside of regular business hours, none resulted in a referral to a program that was open that day.

Those who speak languages other than English and Spanish are not served well by the hotline. The automated hotline only functions in English and Spanish, meaning that other callers must wait an average of 18 minutes to speak with a live operator.

After a year of operation, the hotline still provides inaccurate and inadequate information. Callers were unable to reach 26% of programs. Reasons programs could not be reached include no answer, program no longer exists, and wrong number. Of the remaining calls, hours were listed incorrectly for 31% of programs. Callers were provided insufficient information for 42% of programs.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Mayor Bloomberg should restore the hotline to a live service so it can once again function as an accurate and useful system for hungry New Yorkers. 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 becomes outdated.

If the Bloomberg Administration refuses to restore the hotline to operate entirely as a live service, the Public Advocate recommends that the Human Resources Administration make the following changes immediately.

Wrong Hours of Program Operation: Provide a real-time way for food programs to update hotline information; encourage pantries and kitchens to notify HRA each time they change hours or run out of food; advise callers to contact food programs to verify they are open; encourage pantries and kitchens to play a recorded message with updated information when no one is available to answer the phone.

Insufficient Program Information: Add information to the hotline telling callers about any documents they may need to bring or appointments they may need to make with specific food programs.

Long Wait Time: Allocate more staff to manage calls.

No Programs Listed for Evening/Weekend Hours: Program the hotline to list pantries and kitchens in alternate areas within the caller's borough if no program is open within his or her zip code on weekends and evenings.

Service Only for English and Spanish Speakers: Increase the number of automated languages to at least six.

Fewer Program Participate: Recruit non-City-funded programs to participate so that the hotline can provide as many options to callers as it once offered.

Fails to Encourage Callers to Apply for Food Stamps: Strongly encourage callers to find out if they are eligible for food stamps and inform them that food stamps are available within thirty-six hours during an emergency.

INTRODUCTION

New York City's emergency food programs help ensure that all New Yorkers have access to food in times of need. One way families, senior citizens, and individuals find their way to these food pantries and soup kitchens is by calling the New York City Hunger Hotline, which is funded and managed by the Human Resources Administration (HRA).

One year ago, the Bloomberg Administration changed the way it operates this formerly effective anti-hunger program. The hotline provided a live service for over twenty-three years that supplied callers in need with the information necessary to receive food assistance. The hotline also scheduled appointments for callers to receive food at a specific location in their respective neighborhoods. Despite a unified outcry from all of the city's leading anti-hunger organizations, the City automated the hotline in April 2003. This report finds that the hotline is now much less effective in serving low-income families, individuals, seniors, and children.

To determine whether the New York City Hunger Hotline effectively serves low-income New Yorkers, the Office of the New York City Public Advocate tested the accuracy of information it provides to callers. This report finds that one year after the City altered the service from a live to an automated hotline, much of the information it provides is inaccurate and insufficient. While encouraging New Yorkers to continue utilizing the service and commending the City for making such a hotline available, the Public Advocate asserts that the HRA must improve the quality of service it provides.

Rather than recognizing that the majority of participating food programs open and close according to the availability of food, volunteers, and resources, the automated hotline incorrectly assumes that the volunteer-operated service providers keep consistent hours of operation. The hotline also fails to inform clients of the need to call ahead or bring specific documents with them to certain programs to receive food. Given that City officials informed the Office of the Public Advocate that the switch to an automated hotline was not conceived as a way to reduce the cost of this \$288,000 program, and that the need for emergency food has doubled over the past three years in New York City, Public Advocate Betsy Gotbaum calls for Mayor Bloomberg to restore the hotline as a live service. This will ensure that it can once again function as an accurate and useful system for hungry New Yorkers.

When HRA automated the hotline, the agency promised to provide a new and improved system. Specifically, the Administration planned to²:

- Operate the hotline in six languages
- Update the automated system daily
- Extend hours of operation to twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week
- Provide access to a live operator during regular business hours

² Plans detailed in letter to City Harvest from Commissioner Eggleston, 1/13/03.

- Collaborate with private food providers to increase the number of participating programs
- Link callers to information about food stamps and benefits

This report first describes the nature of the emergency food network and discusses the challenges a successful Hunger Hotline must address. It then presents findings based on test calls to the hotline conducted in the winter and spring and identifies the aspects of the hotline that are most in need of improvement. We conclude by recommending ways HRA can make the Hunger Hotline a better service for New Yorkers.

The Hunger Hotline can be reached by calling it toll free at 866-888-8777, by calling the Human Resources Administration's info line at 877-472-8411, or by calling 311.

OVERVIEW: EMERGENCY FOOD AND THE HUNGER HOTLINE

New York City's emergency food programs consist mostly of soup kitchens and food pantries that are founded and operated by volunteers as a response to need within their communities³. This ad hoc emergency "network" expanded from an estimated thirty food programs in the 1980s to a present total of over 1,000⁴. But the sheer number of pantries and kitchens does not mean that they are easy to locate, nor does it mean that residents know when or how to utilize them.

An estimated 1.5 million New Yorkers, or one out of five, turned to food pantries, soup kitchens, and shelters for food in 2001⁵. This figure includes over a quarter of the City's children and one third of the City's seniors⁶. Some individuals turn to emergency food programs on a continuous basis to supplement a low income or handle long-term unemployment, while others utilize the programs to cope with a specific crisis such as the loss of a job or the need to spend limited income on healthcare costs.

A survey of programs conducted by the New York City Coalition Against Hunger found that demand for emergency food nearly doubled over the past three years and increased by 26% in 2003 alone⁷. The report also found that soup kitchens and food pantries turned away an estimated 146,256 New Yorkers in 2003 because the programs did not have enough food or other resources to serve them⁸.

The nature of soup kitchens and food pantries makes it difficult for an automated hotline to accurately provide information on how they operate. Programs serve food at varying hours and days, and have different capacity levels. Certain programs serve only a handful of people each day, while some others serve 700 people regularly⁹. Some require documentation to demonstrate need. A few programs have sizable operating budgets but most report needing more resources. They receive and distribute food from a variety of private donors and not-for-profit organizations (see *Food For Thought: How the Food Industry Can Help End Hunger in New York City*, Office of the Public Advocate, December 2003¹⁰), in addition to the City-funded Emergency Food Assistance Program (EFAP.)

Aware of the increased demand for food and the challenges confronting food programs, advocates have focused on ways to make food programs better able to meet the need¹¹.

³ New York City Coalition Against Hunger Annual Survey 2003.

⁴ Emergency Feeding Programs in New York City, www.nyccah.org/database/efpzipcode.html.

⁵ Food Bank for New York City/America's Second Harvest, "Hunger in America 2000: The New York City Report" November 2001; Bureau of the U.S. Census, U.S. Census 2000.

⁶ Ibid. New York City emergency food programs served over 531,000 children and 331,000 seniors in 2001.

⁷ New York City Coalition Against Hunger, "No Recovery for the Hungry," November 2003.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ For example, St. John's Bread and Life soup kitchen serves 700 individuals daily. www.breadandlife.org/foodservices.html#3

¹⁰ <http://www.pubadvocate.nyc.gov/reports/fooddonation122303.shtml>

¹¹ Food Bank for New York City, Annual Agency Conference, September 2003.

Some suggest streamlining and consolidating services so that no two programs operate in close proximity or coordinating the hours of operation so communities can have more consistent access to emergency food throughout the week. The Policy Committee on New York City Hunger Resources is developing a computer network to better share food and resources¹². However effective these efforts, food providers describe the programs as in constant flux, closing or opening as volunteers, food and space is available¹³.

Since 1979, when World Hunger Year founded the Food and Hunger Hotline,¹⁴ New Yorkers have been able to learn where programs in their neighborhoods are located by calling a live operator for information. This Manhattan-based not-for-profit ran the hotline for several years and spun off the program into an independent not-for-profit, the Food and Hunger Hotline. Then the New York City took over the hotline so it could be funded at a higher level and expanded as an official City service.¹⁵ City Harvest managed the hotline through contracts with the City until April 2003, when the Human Resources Administration began automating most of its functions.

City Harvest, New York's only food rescue program, managed the service for five years with a team of live operators. They contacted up to three food programs to make a reservation (not just a referral) for callers¹⁶. Those in need could be certain that the program they visited was open and had food, and operators provided specific instructions such as the type of documentation callers needed to receive food. Operators were familiar with the programs' varying capacities and knew how frequently each could accommodate clients.

In addition, City Harvest urged callers to apply for food stamps, collected detailed demographic information that could be used to better understand the nature and causes of hunger, and informed the public of the extent of need in New York City. The organization also made its own network of agencies available to callers in addition to those programs that received City funding.

HRA automated the hotline on April 1, 2003. The number of monthly calls more than doubled during certain months last year¹⁷, reaching a high of 7,272 in August 2003. This rise in calls is consistent with the rise in need reported across the city. From May 2003 to February 2004, over 83,000 people turned to the hotline for food. Given that the hotline no longer makes appointments for callers, this report seeks to determine if callers actually are able to receive food as a result of the automated referral.

¹² Emergency Food Database, www.feednyc.org. The Policy Committee on NYC Hunger Resources consists of representatives from the New York State Department of Health, HRA, the New York City Department of Health and Mental Hygiene, United Way, City Harvest, the Food Bank for New York City.

¹³ Letter from City Harvest to Mayor Michael Bloomberg and HRA Commissioner Verna Eggleston, 11/22/02.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Conversation with World Hunger Year co-founder Bill Ayres, date.

¹⁶ Letter from City Harvest to Mayor Michael Bloomberg and HRA Commissioner Verna Eggleston, 11/22/02.

¹⁷ 2002 Hunger Hotline Statistics, City Harvest; Preliminary Statistics May 2003-February 2004, New York City Hunger Hotline, the Human Resources Administration.

Callers press “1” for emergency food assistance, “2” for information on other services such as food stamps, and “3” for complaints. After pressing “1,” callers answer basic questions about where they live, the size of their household and their need for food by responding on the keypad of a touch-tone phone. They receive an automated response with the contact information and location of several emergency food programs in their zip code and are connected by phone to the program of their choice. Callers can press “0” to speak to a live operator. It is the responsibility of participating programs to notify HRA when their operating hours change.

METHODOLOGY

Seven staff members and interns from the Office of the Public Advocate placed 167 calls to the Hunger Hotline from November 13 through December 12, 2003, and from March 1 through 5, 2004.¹⁸ After receiving contact information for pantries and kitchens from the automated hotline, callers spoke with the food programs directly to verify whether the hotline referral information was accurate.

Of the initial 132 calls placed in the winter, 95 calls tested hotline accuracy and adequacy. Calls were placed over several weeks to ensure that the evaluation occurred on a variety of days and avoided acquiring information solely before or after hotline updates. The percent of calls made per borough roughly matched the percentage of the City's population at or below the federal poverty line within each area¹⁹. Calls were randomly divided between requests for soup kitchens and requests for groceries from food pantries.

17 calls were placed to measure wait time for a live operator. 15 calls were made throughout the test period to observe how the hotline responded to requests made during evenings and weekends. 5 calls were requests in languages other than English and Spanish.

The Office then placed 35 additional calls in March to determine whether any improvement had been made in hotline accuracy and adequacy.

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

- A match between the hotline's recorded information and the actual food program hours of operation²⁰
- The hotline's ability to provide sufficient information to client (need to schedule an appointment, bring identification for each household member, bring proof of address, etc.)

¹⁸ Callers consistently used the following profile: one-adult, three-child household requiring an emergency meal that day, without any special dietary needs.

¹⁹ Out of the 1,707,555 people at or below the federal poverty line in New York City, 36% (618,787) reside in Brooklyn, 24% (410,744) reside in the Bronx, 19% (324,779) reside in Queens, 18% (308,230) reside in Manhattan, and 3% (45,015) reside in Staten Island. Of the 95 initial calls, 34 were placed using Brooklyn zip codes, 23 from the Bronx, 18 from Queens, 17 from Manhattan and 3 from Staten Island.

²⁰ Hours were deemed incorrect only if they were grossly misleading – if a person could arrive at a given food pantry in the window specified by the Hotline and find the pantry closed for the day.

RESULTS

Of the 95 calls placed in November and December to measure accuracy and adequacy, callers were able to contact 62 programs (65%) and unable to contact 33 programs (35%). Reasons programs could not be reached include no answer, program no longer existed, and wrong number.

Of the 62 positive contacts:

- Program hours matched in 34 cases (55%) and did not match in 28 cases (45%).
- The hotline did not provide clients essential program information in 42 cases (68%). In the other 25 cases (32%) no such information was required.
 - In 40% of calls the hotline did not inform the caller that he or she would need to bring special documents beyond ID (i.e. proof of residence, proof of household size, etc.) to the food program
 - In 10% of calls the hotline did not to inform the caller that it was necessary to call the food program in advance
 - In 18% of calls the hotline did not inform callers that both calling ahead and special documents were required.

Of the 17 calls that measured how long it takes to speak with a live operator, the average wait time was eighteen minutes. The shortest wait time was eight minutes and the longest was thirty-eight minutes.

Of the 15 calls placed during evening and weekend hours, none resulted in a referral to a program that was open that day.

Of the 5 calls made in languages other than English and Spanish none were accommodated by the automated hotline; all were accommodated by a live operator.

Of the 35 calls placed in March to measure accuracy and adequacy, callers were able to contact 26 programs (74%) and unable to contact 9 programs (26%). Reasons that programs could not be reached included no answer, program no longer existed, and wrong number.

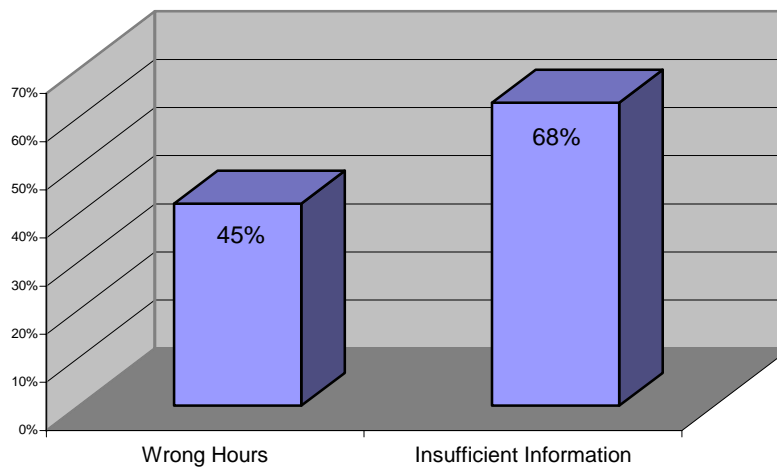
Of the 26 positive contacts:

- Program hours matched in 18 cases (69%) and did not match in 8 cases (31%).
- The hotline did not provide clients essential program information in 11 cases (42%).

FINDINGS

Findings below are based on the 62 calls tested for accuracy and adequacy in November and December.

Hotline Fails to Provide Accurate and Sufficient Information

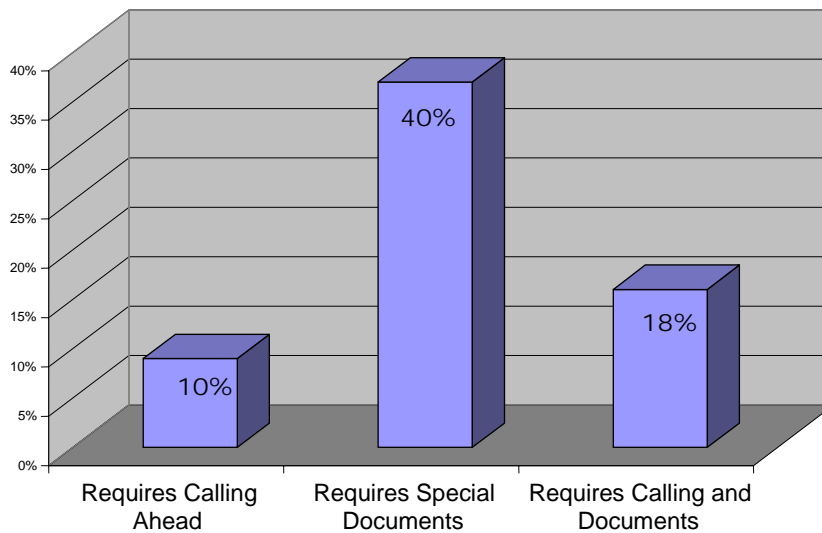


Clients cannot depend on the hotline to list accurate hours of operation for emergency food programs. In 45% of total calls made, the hotline provided incorrect program hours. Since typical callers would not expect the hotline to be inaccurate, it is likely that they would travel to a program without first verifying its hours and find the program closed.

When clients do call, it is difficult to verify whether program hours are correct because programs are often not reachable by phone. This reality makes it even more important for the automated information to be kept up to date. Callers were unable to contact 35% of programs. Reasons programs could not be reached include no answer, program no longer existed, and wrong number.

The hotline does not provide information about the types of documents callers may need to obtain food at a pantry or soup kitchen. This increases the chance that some callers may not actually be able to receive assistance or enough food for everyone in their household. In 68% of total calls made, programs reported that clients needed to bring specific documents with them to receive food and/or call ahead to verify that food is available. The hotline does not ever provide this information to callers in advance.

Breakdown of Insufficient Information: Hotline Fails to Prepare Callers



Additional findings based on the 62 calls placed in November and December include the following:

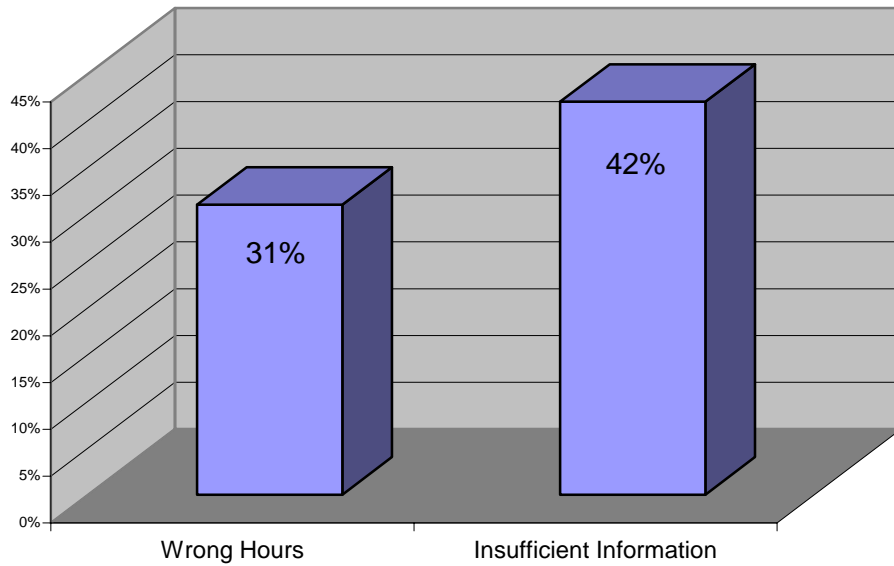
Wait time for live operator is too long. Callers waited an average of 18 minutes to speak to a live operator, with the shortest wait time 8 minutes and the longest 38 minutes. One caller reported that an operator told her she was “lucky” she only waited 20 minutes. The operator remarked, “Some people, it takes an hour.” This length of time serves as an impediment for those in need of food.

The hotline is not effective during evening and weekend hours. While the automated hotline sought to serve people twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week, of the 15 calls placed outside of regular business hours, none resulted in a referral to a program that was open that day. Instead, the hotline prompted callers to call back during regular business hours. Although no program may have been open within the caller’s zip code, the hotline did not offer information on where to turn to instead.

Those who speak languages other than English and Spanish are not served well by the hotline. The automated hotline only functions in English and Spanish, meaning that other callers must wait for an average of 18 minutes to speak with a live operator.

The finding below is based on the 26 additional calls tested for accuracy and adequacy in March.

Spring Update: Hotline Shows Minimal Improvement



A year into operation, the automated hotline still provides inaccurate and inadequate information. Hours were listed incorrectly for 31% of programs. Callers were provided insufficient information for 42% of programs.

RECOMMENDATIONS AND CONCLUSION

The New York City Hunger Hotline is a valuable service for low-income New Yorkers but the Public Advocate finds its usefulness is diminished by inaccurate and insufficient information. By automating the hotline, the Bloomberg Administration has proven itself to be out of touch with the way emergency food programs operate. Given that City officials informed the Office of the Public Advocate that the switch to an automated hotline was not conceived as a way to reduce the cost of this \$288,000 program, the decision to automate the hotline demonstrates insensitivity to the needs of vulnerable New Yorkers. The hotline provided incorrect information on emergency food program hours to almost half of callers and insufficient information to more than two-thirds of callers. This exacerbates an already challenging circumstance for clients and increases the possibility that they will not be able to receive food upon visiting a program.

New Yorkers who turn to the hotline for information on when and where to go for emergency food deserve accurate and trustworthy referrals. Although access to food stamps, an increase in the minimum wage, and the availability of affordable healthcare and childcare are all essentials in the long-term fight against hunger, emergency food programs serve an important role in helping low-income individuals fight hunger on a day-to-day basis. While HRA has expressed interest to the Office of the Public Advocate in making the hotline run more smoothly, the agency has not provided a timeline for improving the service.

The number of monthly calls more than doubled after the hotline was automated, demonstrated the tremendous need for the service. But since the referrals it provides are much less accurate than the former hotline's reservation system, the hotline is not as effective as it was in the past. In addition, the number of programs listed in the hotline database decreased when it was automated because it now only includes agencies that receive City funding. With fewer options for callers, it is crucial to ensure that the hours provided are accurate, that programs have food to provide to the caller, and that the caller knows what type of documents or appointment may be necessary to receive food.

The Human Resources Administration failed to carry out plans to²¹:

- Operate the hotline in 6 languages – the automated system still operates only in English and Spanish. Callers can, however, speak with a live operator in a variety of languages.
- Update the automated system daily – it is only updated twice a month²²
- Collaborate with private food providers – the hotline only refers callers to programs that receive funding from the City, a smaller number of programs than participated previously²³

In addition, the hotline provides no way to ensure access to food. Without an appointment, which the City-Harvest-operated hotline offered, there is no way to know

²¹ Plans detailed in letter to City Harvest from Commissioner Eggleston, 1/13/03.

²² Conversation with HRA staff, 3/16/04.

²³ EFAP Master List, December 2003, Human Resources Administration

whether the program is able to accommodate the caller and whether it is actually open to serve.

In informal discussions, managers of food pantries requiring documents or an advance call indicated that they try to accommodate all people. But given that their programs have limited amounts of food and few volunteers, the lack of an appointment or documents increases the likelihood of being turned away. (The hotline also forfeits the opportunity to inform clients about the availability of food stamps.) The automated message and the operators who staff the hotline should encourage callers to determine whether they are eligible to receive this vital income-support benefit. The hotline also gives the false impression that callers in dire need can only receive emergency food only from emergency food programs. The hotline fails to inform callers that emergency food stamps are available to those who are eligible within thirty-six hours.

Based on this information and the findings of this survey, the Public Advocate makes the following recommendations:

Mayor Bloomberg should restore the hotline as a live service so it can once again function as an accurate and useful system for hungry New Yorkers. Because the majority of participating food programs open and close according to availability of food, volunteers, and resources, information provided by the automated hotline become outdated on a daily basis.

If the Bloomberg Administration refuses to restore the hotline to live service, the Public Advocate recommends that the Human Resources Administration make the following changes immediately.

Wrong Hours of Program Operation

- Provide a real-time way for food programs to update hotline information
- Encourage pantries and kitchens to notify HRA each time they change their hours or run out of food
- Advise callers to contact food programs to verify that they are open
- Encourage pantries and kitchens to play a recorded message with updated information when no one is available to answer the phone

Insufficient Program Information

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

Long Wait Time

- Allocate more staff to reduce long wait times for callers who wait for a live operator

No Programs Listed for Evening/Weekend Hours

- If no program is open within a caller's zip code on weekends and evenings, program the hotline to list pantries and kitchens in alternate areas within the caller's borough

Service Only for English and Spanish Speakers

- Increase the number of automated languages to at least six

Fewer Program Participate

- HRA should recruit non-City-funded programs to participate so that the hotline can provide as many options to callers as it once offered.

Fails to Encourage Callers to Apply for Food Stamps

- The hotline should overtly encourage callers to find out if they are eligible for food stamps, and other benefits programs, and inform them that food stamps are available within thirty-six hours during an emergency.

APPENDIX: Automated Hotline Questions

Upon calling the Hunger Hotline, the caller is asked a series of questions:

- (1) Language: The caller is given two choices of language: Press #1 for English or #2 for Spanish
- (2) Type of Assistance Required: Press #1 for Emergency Food Assistance or #2 for other services such as food stamps, Medicaid, public assistance, home care, child care, adult protective services, or other emergency services and #3 for Complaints

When #1 is pressed:

- (3) Number of Adults in the Household
- (4) Number of Children (18 and under) in Household
- (5) Does anyone in the household require Kosher food?
- (6) Does anyone in the household require HIV/AIDS diet food?
- (7) Do you want to be referred to a soup kitchen, or to a food pantry for packaged groceries?
- (8) When do you need the food? (e.g. press #1 Today, #2 Tomorrow, #3 Sunday, #4 Monday, #5 Tuesday, #6 Wednesday, #7 Thursday)
- (9) Which zip code do you reside in?

At any time a caller can press zero and be transferred to a live operator.