NYC

**Human Resources
Administration**
Department of
Social Services

TESTIMONY

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New York City Human Resources Administration/Department of Social Services

*Hearing on the Use of Technology to Better Target Benefits
and Eliminate Waste, Fraud, and Abuse*

*House of Representatives Ways and Means Subcommittee on Human Resources
United States Congress*

April 19, 2012

Good Morning Chairman Davis, Ranking Member Doggett and members of the Committee. I am Robert Doar and I am the Commissioner of New York City's largest social services agency, the Human Resources Administration (HRA). In New York State, counties administer and contribute to the funding of federal social service programs and my Agency manages over $39 billion in resources in an array of programs including TANF, SNAP, Medicaid, and Child Support Enforcement. Thank you for inviting me here today to talk about the efforts underway in New York City to better coordinate data across these and other programs. Mayor Michael Bloomberg has made it a top priority to break down silos between city agencies in order to better serve the millions of participants in our programs as well as to properly administer the significant amount of city, state and federal tax dollars.

NEW YORK CITY'S (HEALTH AND HUMAN SERVICES) HHS-CONNECT

The implementation of a system which shares data across eight health and human service agencies that utilize over 80 different case management systems, serve over three million recipients, and report to different state and federal oversight agencies was truly ground-breaking. We embarked upon this change, HHS-Connect in 2008 under the strong leadership of the City's Deputy Mayor for Health and Human Services, Linda Gibbs. All the commissioners involved were also asked to make a strong commitment to the initiative that was monitored and enforced by City Hall.

SELECT NEW YORK CITY HEALTH AND HUMAN SERVICE PROGRAMS				
SNAP Recipients	1.8 million monthly		Foster Care Annual Placements	5,860
Medicaid Recipients	2.9 million monthly		Annual Child Protection Abuse & Neglect Investigations	58,666
TANF Recipients	353,062 monthly		Homeless Shelter Daily Census	40, 500
Child Care/Head Start Slots	115,000 monthly		Annual Child Support Collections	$731 million

Although the broader HHS-Connect blueprint provides for future elements including the involvement of additional city agencies and possibly community providers, at present there are two major functions that are now well underway. One focuses on client access to information about benefits and services, while the other provides workers with access to better data and creates a holistic view of the client.

<u>ACCESS NYC</u>

Our client portal, ACCESS NYC, is a screening tool that provides clients with convenient access to many agency services. It allows New York City residents to self-screen for over 30 city, state, and federal human services benefit programs. Residents can also apply on-line for SNAP, School Meals, and Senior Citizen and Disabled rental increase exemption programs. Recently, Medicaid renewals were added to the site and 100,000 SNAP applications have been submitted

on-line through this and the New York State's website. ACCESS NYC is available in seven different languages and receives an average of 40,000-70,000 visits a day.

Worker Connect

Our more complex element was the creation of Worker Connect to facilitate data integration and exchange among existing agency information management systems. The idea is to share client information and documents on file across human service agencies while safeguarding confidentiality. Historically, workers have never been afforded a single automated consolidated view because the systems of the various agencies didn't talk to one another. Worker Connect is a secure, read-only web-based application that allows select city workers to access a limited set of information from multiple data sources through one point of entry. However, in order to assure compliance with governing privacy laws and regulations, it does not contain information related to a client's health, HIV status, mental health, substance abuse history or treatment, or domestic violence history, nor does it contain case notes relating to the client.

Key Elements: Common Client Index and Document Management

From a technological perspective, the key components of this application have been the Common Client Index (CCI) and Document Management. The CCI is a technology that provides for the unique identification of a client across all social service programs and agencies. The CCI is the initial process to link the client's identity within any of the participating Health and Human Services Agencies. The identifier is used to data mine details such as benefit information, case composition, and employment history and display them to workers. One challenge in sharing data across systems is that the data formats were not standardized. Therefore, New York City is participating in the efforts of the Department of Health and Human Services' Administration for Children and Families to establish National Information Exchange Model (NIEM) standards for the Health and Human Services Domain. These data standards have facilitated the process for dynamic data sharing across systems with differing data definitions.

The Document Management was based on a technology initially implemented at HRA as an electronic repository of documents submitted by clients when they applied for our benefit programs-primarily TANF, SNAP and Medicaid. It has assisted both clients and workers by eliminating the need to reproduce the same documents across programs and helps streamline application processes in many agencies. For example, it may contain key documents such as a lease, a pay stub, a driver's license or a birth certificate which can be viewed by authorized users.

Health and Human Service Agency Involvement

Due to the nature of their work, certain agencies in the City tend to use the information while others provide it. HRA, as the city agency which determines eligibility for most entitlements and with the largest program caseload, is a key provider. Our New York City Housing Authority also contributes information from their tenant data base about lease holders and other occupants in apartments as well as rental amounts.

In the alternate, our child welfare agency regularly <u>uses</u> Worker Connect to quickly identify and locate children and guardians they have difficulty finding but are known to other city agencies. Oftentimes the reports they receive from a central registry are missing critical identifying information, especially when they are called in by anonymous sources. Worker Connect has alerted staff to the identity of household members and to the existence of another parent or other children who may be at risk. It has also been useful to our homeless agency's intake facility where families showing up at the facility often do not have easy access to much of their documentation. It has been a huge benefit to have the technology to instantly print and provide clients with replacement copies of identifying documents that are essential for them to access services. Unless needed for other purposes, clients no longer have to go through the time-consuming process of applying for replacement birth certificates, driver's licenses, or searching for copies of leases and paystubs. The New York City Health and Hospital Corporation's financial counselors also utilize Worker Connect to quickly identify whether persons who have received care are enrolled in Medicaid or help facilitate an application to the program.

HRA also uses Worker Connect as an additional tool in our work to identify fraud, abuse, and improper payments within the public assistance programs we administer. Our eligibility investigators also use it for eligibility verification to quickly and accurately identify inconsistencies, particularly unreported income, between information provided to us on applications and that which is submitted to other agencies. In the future we hope to use it to help identify patterns of potential fraud and abuse within the public assistance programs we administer.

Worker Connect Usage
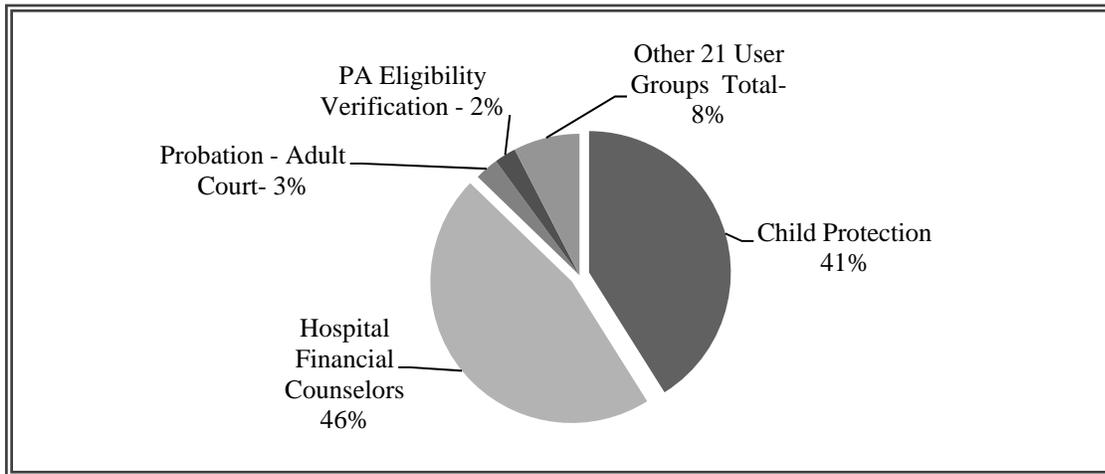
Information Sharing and Legal Concerns

I would like to be clear that information sharing was not undertaken lightly. For example, we strictly adhered to federal, state, and local laws governing the protection and use of the confidential records maintained by our social service agencies. The type of information found in

these records was carefully reviewed to determine whether appropriate legal exceptions apply that allow for the authorized disclosure and/or use of certain types of confidential information to designated agencies for authorized purposes within our health and human services structure.

There is an overarching requirement that access to information is only granted in compliance with all applicable governing laws and regulations. Administration attorneys conduct case by case analysis for all "use cases" and during that vetting process review the:

- Entity requesting access to the information including user group roles and responsibilities;
- Content of the information requested;
- Source of the information;
- Purpose and intended use of the information;
- The reason the information was provided initially; and
- Existence of any statutory and regulatory restrictions regarding the disclosure of confidential information.

Before any information is shared, there is an assessment of the relevance, necessity, and benefit of the requested disclosure. Legal counsel analyze whether the disclosure of data would be used for a purpose that would further the assistance of clients to access publicly-funded services to best meet their needs, and whether the disclosure was in furtherance of the proper administration of government programs and benefits. Appropriate legal exceptions are identified to determine which types of data may be shared absent the need for individual written consent.

Federal Requirements- SSA, HIPAA, FERPA

While this legal analysis was conducted, certain types of data were identified as having heightened restrictions on use and/or to disclosure. In particular, federal Social Security Administration (SSA) data, federal Health Information Portability and Accessibility Act (HIPAA) protected data health information, and Department of Education's Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA) data. Our attorneys were bound closely by the Privacy Act of 1974 and restrictions against the improper use or disclosure of SSA maintained data. As HRA's use of SSA data is limited to income and eligibility verification purposes, measures were taken so that client social security numbers in our system were are not disclosed as part of the HHS Connect initiative. Similarly, the issue of individual consent provisions in HIPAA limited the sharing of Medicaid information to a data element on Medicaid case status provided to a limited group of users. All substance abuse treatment, mental health treatment, domestic violence, child abuse and HIV/AIDS records were excluded from the HHS-Connect initiative due to the restrictions placed on this information by various laws regarding the sensitive nature of the records and the limited circumstances under which disclosure of such records would be permitted. Finally, we have not incorporated any information from our Department of Education, as FERPA restricts the data sharing of student education records , without parental consent, to very limited exceptions – even in circumstances where the student is a mutual client of the New York City's Department of Education and the social service agency.

Once it is determined who is legally allowed access to particular data, we still needed to make sure that the data is protected. In order to accomplish this we implemented a set of standards:

- Only authorized individuals with verified credentials upon login have access and that access is limited to certain data sources or even sometimes a single data element;
- Data can only be accessed by authorized users with a connection directly to the City's secure institutional network;
- Specific logs are maintained and recorded on both access and attempts to access the system, the activities undertaken once a user is logged in, and any attempt to change read-only data elements, as well as on any security events;
- Built-in protections and double checks exist (Embedded Entitlements Management) to ensure users can only view data fields approved for their role;
- Data in transit is protected using state of the art methods (Secure Sockets layer (SSL)/Transport Layer Security (TLS)).

Lessons Learned Through HHS-Connect and Better Human Service Data Coordination

Congress and other stakeholders are correct in exploring better ways to coordinate among the programs and services that often reach the very same participants. This is a very important endeavor and in our experience it was important to proceed methodically, especially to make sure that each piece of new technology implemented is working as intended before moving to the next phase. For example, for almost the first entire year our Agency was one of the only agencies contributing data to the system. Also, although our Common Client Index is already an invaluable tool, the next phase of it provides administrators with alerts when data changes within one application that may have a bearing on a different system. This phase is only in use in our child protection program at this point.

We also found that it was important to examine the validity of data between agencies and to what degree that information can be used. For example, we were disappointed to find that in some programs it was not sufficient to see a copy of a passport or birth certificate in the document viewer, and that an original document or one that can be confirmed from the issuing source is needed. Similarly, certain data elements are universally seen as both accurate and useful, and yet their use and/or disclosure is severely limited. For example, Social Security Numbers are the easiest unique identifier to use in confirming that the information being shared among agencies concerns the same individual, yet in most instances this is not a "permitted use" for this Social Security Administration data. Likewise, many children are known to both educational agencies and social services agencies, but federal law severely restricts the ability of the educational agencies to share their information, even where it would be use to directly improve the health and well-being of the students.

I also believe that we need to be careful to recognize that the sharing of data is not synonymous with the sharing of eligibility rules. Although we strive to make sure that low-income individuals and families have appropriate access to the benefits for which they are eligible, we need to be mindful of unintended consequences. As a human service administrator for over 15

years, I know that every program has different standards for how they consider resources and income and ultimately determine eligibility and many of these differences are appropriate given the different goals of the programs. Discussions as to what extent programs that share common data or clients should share the same eligibility standards need to be approached strategically.

In closing I would like to thank the Chairman and Ranking Member for their work that resulted in the passage and signing into law of provisions for standardized data within the child welfare, Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF), and unemployment insurance programs. New York City looks forward to working with the Committee as it moves forward to improve the overall human service data and information systems.