

# OPPORTUNITIES TO IMPROVE THE EFFICACY OF THE FOOD STAMP PROGRAM IN NEW YORK CITY

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## INTRODUCTION

Hunger and food insecurity are serious problems in New York City. Approximately 1.3 million New Yorkers rely on emergency food programs such as soup kitchens and food pantries.<sup>i</sup> Limited access to food and, in particular, limited access to nutritious food affect the development of health conditions ranging from stunting and poor brain development in children, to chronic diseases like diabetes and heart disease in adults.<sup>ii</sup> There is also a growing body of evidence that food insecurity can lead to obesity because the least expensive food available is typically high in calories and high in fat, but low in nutrients.<sup>iii</sup> The Food Stamp Program (FSP), the US's largest food assistance program, is an opportunity to relieve hunger and its health effects, as well as obesity and its health effects in low-income communities.

This paper explains how the FSP functions in New York City and New York State, and identifies areas of opportunity for maximizing good nutrition and healthy weight for low-income New Yorkers. The first set of opportunities address factors within the program that pose barriers to maximizing enrollment among eligible individuals. The second set concern the program's intersection with food retailers and the availability and affordability of healthy foods in low-income neighborhoods. This policy brief suggests possible approaches to these two sets of issues.

To develop this paper, the New York Academy of Medicine reviewed publicly available documents, spoke with public officials, and contacted a number of nonprofit organizations.

## THE FOOD STAMP PROGRAM

The Food Stamp Program, the US's largest food assistance program, provides income support to low-income households to facilitate the purchase of food. In FY 2008, more than 28 million US households received benefits. The benefit amount varies according to household size, income, and assets. The average monthly benefit in the federal fiscal year October 1, 2008, to

September 30, 2009 was \$101.52.<sup>iv</sup> This subsidy helps many families move above the official federal poverty threshold.

The benefit costs are entirely funded by the federal government. Administrative costs are shared between the State and the federal government, but increasing enrollment yields a net gain for New York City. The Food Research and Access Center estimates New York is among the cities missing out on the most federal food stamp benefits, leaving \$271 million unclaimed in 2007.<sup>v</sup> Furthermore, every \$5 of food stamp benefits generates almost twice as much – \$9.20 – in local economic activity.<sup>vi</sup> Local food retailers, particularly those in low-income areas, benefit from increasing food stamp participation.

The FSP was reauthorized in the Food Conservation and Energy Act of 2008, and as of Oct. 1, 2008, is known as the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) at the federal level. States are not required to use this new name and New York does not. The paper “food stamps” of the past have been replaced with Electronic Benefit Transfer (EBT) cards. Participants access their benefits by using their EBT card at food retailers as they would a bank debit card.

FSP eligibility rules are set at the federal level, but states have some flexibility regarding eligibility determination and some aspects of program implementation. Across New York State, the FSP is administered by the Office of Temporary and Disability Assistance (OTDA). Individuals apply for food stamps through their county-level department of social services. For the five counties in New York City, the program is administered through the New York City Human Resources Administration/Department of Social Services (HRA).

New York State has three alternate application mechanisms. One is a 16-page “joint application” that allows applicants to also apply for other assistance programs. The second route is a 7-page simplified application that allows individuals to apply only for food stamps. A third route is the Food Stamps Paperless Office System Project, a partnership between the New York City Coalition Against Hunger (NYCCAH), HRA, and six emergency food programs. It enables online application through designated computers at food pantries and soup kitchens.

The paper and electronic applications have been simplified in recent years, but this was to some extent accomplished by transferring questions to the required enrollment interview.<sup>vii</sup>

In the past, the federal program rules required an in-person enrollment interview. Federal and state program rules now permit this interview to occur via telephone for applicants who are in “household hardship situations,” which can be interpreted to include those who are working, disabled, facing transportation difficulties, or caring for a household member.<sup>viii</sup> However, even when interviews are conducted by telephone, HRA requires participants to appear at a food stamp office for finger-imaging, a fraud protection measure that advocates cite as a significant barrier to program enrollment.<sup>ix</sup> Finger-imaging does not take place in the rest of New York State. In New York City and State, telephone recertification is possible to maintain benefits after initial enrollment.

## PROGRAM ELIGIBILITY

Through the application and interview processes an applicant’s gross and net income, assets, household size, and household membership are evaluated for initial and ongoing eligibility. For example, to be eligible in FY 2008, a two-member household must have had an income less than \$1,517 per month. This income threshold is 130% of the income established as the 2008 federal poverty level for a 2-person household. If one household member is disabled, the income limit is raised to \$2,333. This income may be exceeded, however, if the household’s countable resources are less than \$3,000.<sup>x</sup> As of January 1, 2008, thanks to “categorical eligibility” (explained further below) most households no longer have a resource test, meaning that the household’s assets (savings accounts, etc.) are not counted for food stamp purposes. But as noted in the example, low assets can help a household qualify if the household exceeds the income ceiling. Assets also need to be reported to receive expedited food stamps.

Citizenship and residency status are also factors. Food stamp benefits for legal immigrants were largely eliminated by the 1996 Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (PRWORA), but benefits were restored for certain categories of immigrants in the Agriculture

Research, Extension and Education Reform Act of 1998 and the Farm Security and Rural Investment Act of 2002. Therefore, in addition to US citizens, specified “qualified aliens” are now eligible.<sup>1</sup> Within the qualified alien population, some are eligible with no waiting period while others must wait 5 years. Undocumented immigrants are not eligible for food stamps. Citizen children of undocumented parents are eligible.<sup>2</sup>

“Categorical eligibility” was introduced with the 2002 Farm Bill to facilitate increased enrollment. Through this, individuals who receive aid through programs funded by federal Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) block grants do not have to go through a separate FS-eligibility determination process. Each state determines which TANF-funded services or benefits confer categorical eligibility for the FSP.<sup>xi</sup> In New York State, TANF funds programs range from cash assistance to job training. Anyone who receives this aid can apply for food stamps using a simplified process that requires less documentation. For individuals receiving a TANF service and in a household without an elderly or disabled household member or dependent care expenses, the qualifying income level is a monthly gross income at or below 130% of the federal poverty level. If a household meets this threshold, no further documentation concerning income or assets is needed to qualify for food stamps. For households with an elderly/disabled household member or dependent care expenses, the monthly gross income must be at or below 200% of the federal poverty level.<sup>xii</sup> The eligibility constraints regarding citizenship and residency continue to apply. There is also an exception for households that include an individual who intentionally violated program rules.<sup>xiii</sup>

As of January 2008, New York offers “expanded categorical eligibility.” Any family that receives a copy of OTDA’s “Helping Hands” brochure (which lists available welfare and assistance programs and is included in FS application packets) is considered to be a recipient of a TANF-

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<sup>1</sup> For more detailed information about Qualified Alien status see [http://www.health.state.ny.us/health\\_care/medicaid/publications/docs/adm/04adm-7attc.pdf](http://www.health.state.ny.us/health_care/medicaid/publications/docs/adm/04adm-7attc.pdf) Alien status.

<sup>2</sup>For a more complete overview of the eligibility requirements for immigrants see McCarthy E and Sayeed A. (2006) Immigrant Access to the Food Stamp Program. Food Change.

funded service and can come under consideration for categorical eligibility. This applies to any individual or family that receives the brochure, regardless of whether they receive any other TANF services. People who do not qualify for consideration under categorical or expanded categorical eligibility may still be eligible under the normal eligibility rules.

According to some advocates, errors frequently occur in processing applications so that potentially eligible people are sometimes incorrectly told they are ineligible or are dropped from the program shortly after initial enrollment. The report *Immigrant Access to the Food Stamp Program* cites a legal advocate who says it would take “one attorney to every six caseworkers to properly apply eligibility rules to eligible applicants.”<sup>xiv</sup> The complex eligibility rules are a central challenge in estimating the size and characteristics of the FSP eligible but unenrolled population in New York City. This in turn poses barriers to improving enrollment outreach efforts.

#### DO FOOD STAMPS LEAD TO OBESITY?

Like food insecurity, obesity is a health crisis in our country, state, and city. The average American is 23 pounds overweight and consumes 250 calories more per day than they used to. The average 18 year old today is 15 pounds heavier than the 18 year old of 30 years ago.<sup>xv</sup> Sixty percent of New Yorkers are overweight or obese. And as with hunger, obesity disproportionately affects the poor as well as African-Americans and Latinos. Nearly 45% of children living in poverty in 2007 were overweight or obese compared with 22.2% of children in households with incomes four times the poverty level.<sup>xvi</sup> New York’s highest rates of obesity are among Black women (36.8%) and Hispanic men (28.8%).<sup>xvii</sup>

Food insecurity and obesity have long been viewed as separate public health problems. There is a growing body of evidence, however, that indicates the problems are in fact connected since the cheapest food available is often high in calories and fat and low in nutrients.

Whether and how the food stamp program affects obesity is currently being explored. Several studies suggest that long-term use of food stamps increases risk for obesity.<sup>xviiiix</sup> Other research suggests that food stamps only increase the risk of obesity for adult women. The USDA's Economic Research Service has examined how the diets of food stamp participants compare with the diets of low-income and higher-income individuals not participating in the program. This research suggests that the diets of food stamp participants and income-eligible nonparticipants do not differ significantly in most categories.<sup>xx</sup> Overall, food stamp recipients tend to consume more calories but fewer meals than low-income nonparticipants. They also had a higher body mass index (bmi) than eligible nonparticipants and consumed fewer of several nutrients and vitamins than low-income individuals not participating in the program. Whether or not the FSP's current design directly furthers obesity in the food insecure population, there is potential for the program to improve nutrition and reduce obesity.

## POTENTIAL INTERVENTIONS TO INCREASE ENROLLMENT

The 2009 Community Service Society survey of low-income New Yorkers found that among native-born respondents with incomes less than 100% of the poverty level, half are not receiving food stamps. A perceived lack of eligibility was the top reason these individuals cited for not receiving Food Stamp assistance.<sup>xxi</sup> Additional barriers include the social stigma of receiving public benefits, the burden of fulfilling documentation requirements, and limited office locations and office hours for in-person interviews and finger-imaging.<sup>3</sup> For immigrant communities, concerns about citizenship barriers also pose barriers.

The above-cited barriers to enrollment are far from having been remedied, but they are frequently discussed in the literature. This paper will therefore focus on two less-commonly noted and local problems. The first is the lack of data on the eligible but unenrolled.

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<sup>3</sup> New York City, Texas, Arizona, and California are the only localities in the 50 states that require FS participants to have their fingerprint images electronically recorded.

Information about this population is important for guiding outreach and for informing policy changes that will improve the FSP's ability to meet its goals. For example, federal rules have been changed to make it easier for working families to qualify for benefits. The value of cars used to get to work, for example, is no longer included in the assessment of a family's assets. As a result, there have been significant increases in the national participation rate of working families.<sup>xxii</sup> At the local level, HRA has created specialized units to process applications for homebound individuals. This population now has access to an enrollment process that does not require office visits.<sup>xxiii</sup> These changes in the program's administration were presumably driven by advocates for these subgroups and/or investigations into the needs of particular subpopulations. In a city as diverse as New York City, targeted information about its many subgroups is essential to the program's successful implementation.

The second, related local problem is the absence of mechanisms for ensuring program accountability.

#### OPPORTUNITY #1: GENERATE GEOGRAPHIC AND DEMOGRAPHIC DATA ON THE ELIGIBLE BUT UNENROLLED

In June 2009, New York City's Human Resources Administration (HRA) reported 1.5 million city residents were participating in the US Food Stamp Program (FSP).<sup>xxiv</sup> This impressively high number represents an important achievement by the City's social safety net, but much remains unknown about the thousands of eligible individuals who remain unserved, and therefore hungry and malnourished. Simply "counting the number of people eligible for Food Stamps over time in New York City is nearly impossible," say advocates.<sup>xxv</sup> There are no neighborhood-level estimates of the unserved, or that include demographic information to inform outreach efforts.<sup>xxvi</sup> There do exist neighborhood-level reports of the number of people receiving food stamps. New York City reports, for example, that 32,226 East Harlem residents received food stamps in 2008. But what proportion does this represent of the individuals who *should* be receiving food stamps? This is not known. Hazardous even a rough estimate for, say, Harlem and

the South Bronx is complicated by the high numbers of resident immigrants who may or may not qualify. However, if advocates could appropriately distribute resources across neighborhoods, enrollment outreach could be enhanced and emergency food providers could better serve communities of individuals that are not FS-eligible.

It is well-documented that household characteristics (such as household composition, age of its members, earnings, and participation in other low-income programs) are an important influence on the tendency to claim benefits. For example, FSP-participation rates have historically been high for children, individuals in households with very low income, and recipients of TANF or SSI.<sup>xxvii</sup> Participation rates have been low for older adults.<sup>xxviii</sup> New York has many significant subpopulations and therefore many opportunities for increasing participation among entire populations. Studies have shown that disseminating demographically-tailored information about Food Stamps can have a dramatic effect on addressing misperceptions, facilitating enrollment, and increasing participation rates.<sup>xxix</sup> For example, the Food Card Access Project offered linguistically-appropriate prescreening and a range of follow-up and facilitation services to immigrants in New York. Immigrants are often the least likely to apply for government programs, but through targeted outreach this subpopulation became *more* likely to participate than other clients receiving outreach.<sup>xxx</sup>

Our analysis is that the lack of data local and demographic data is largely due to the complexity of the program rules, and points to an underlying flaw in the program's design. Complicated eligibility rules addressing assets, income, immigration status, and other characteristics direct the program's services toward a subgroup of the food-insecure population (as opposed to, say, all individuals who self-identify as needing assistance). As a result, the program is difficult to effectively administer and monitor, neighborhood-level need is nearly impossible to determine, and targeted outreach strategies are difficult to design. The alternative concept of categorical eligibility has recently been introduced to help begin to ease the administration of the program. Enrollment is only the second half of the problem, however. Targeted outreach strategies to inform people of their eligibility and assist them in making their applications and maintaining

their enrolled status could help increase enrollment and bring low-income communities the economic and community development benefits of the Food Stamp program.

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## POSSIBLE INTERVENTIONS

1. **Call for HRA to release information on the neighborhood-level demographics of the populations served.** HRA currently publishes at [nyc.gov](http://nyc.gov) information on the numbers served within each community board. Releasing demographic data that can be compared against data about the age, ethnicity, household composition, and other aspects of the wider neighborhood population may be useful in identifying gaps in high-poverty areas. Appropriate measures will be required to ensure privacy is maintained.
2. **Call for City and State agencies to conduct routine data-matches to identify the FS-eligible.** In 2009, HRA searched its databases to identify individuals who, by virtue of qualifying for certain income-sensitive programs, might also be eligible for Food Stamps. Individuals participating in Family Medicaid, SCRIE, and DRIE were cross-checked against the rolls of those receiving Food Stamps. Individuals not currently receiving FS were invited to participate. HRA's 2009 data-match was reportedly labor-intensive due to incompatible data systems. A new, New York State insurance enrollment center is being developed. It may be efficient to build in the capacity for routine cross-checks for food stamp eligibility. The United Hospital Fund recently noted that "coordination between food stamps, Medicaid, and Family Health Plus looks especially promising because the programs have very similar eligibility requirements, they all require family income data to be updated annually, and demographic data from all three programs reside in the same data system at the Office of Temporary and Disability Assistance (OTDA)."<sup>xxxi</sup> These cross-checks could generate zip-code level information about neighborhoods and populations (older adults, working families, ethnic origin) where there are gaps and may also indicate low-income, high-enrollment areas where there have been successful strategies for enrolling people eligible for multiple programs.

- 3. Call for the extension of automatic enrollment.** The challenge of better-informing outreach could be sidestepped by doing away with the application process and automatically issuing EBT cards to more individuals who are likely to be eligible. New York State has undertaken a pilot project to automatically issue EBT cards to individuals who apply for SSI. A similar effort could be undertaken for those likely to qualify for categorical eligibility. For example, individuals who file income tax returns indicating an income less than 130% of poverty (or 200% of poverty in the case of older adults, the disabled, and those with dependent care costs).

## OPPORTUNITY #2: ENHANCE PROGRAM ACCOUNTABILITY

HRA does not currently report the percent of people erroneously dropped (known as the “negative error rate”)<sup>xxxii</sup> or ruled ineligible for the program, nor is there a public measure against which such a metric could be evaluated. Additionally, most people who do apply for food stamps complete their initial enrollment fairly easily and receive “emergency food stamps.” Problems then often emerge when they must complete the fuller application process and within a few months time, these eligible individuals stop receiving food stamps. When absolute numbers of food stamp participants are counted, there is no indication what percentage are a part of these short-term enrollees. Along with being a discouraging experience for people eligible for this benefit, so-called “churning” distorts calculations of need.

## POSSIBLE INTERVENTIONS

- 4. Call for the release of HRA error rates and population-level data on unsuccessful applications.** The USDA reports national- and state-level rates of improper denials of food stamp applicants, known as the “negative error rate.” This information is presumably initially collected at the local level, so it may be possible to find out what populations are having the most difficulty successfully applying for food stamps.<sup>xxxiii</sup> Similarly, information about which neighborhoods or populations are having the highest

number of denials, could inform outreach programs of areas where more intensive assistance is needed.

**5. Identify a citywide advocate for assuring maximum Food Stamp enrollment.**

Independent emergency food providers in the City and a number of City agencies must make resource allocation decisions based on estimates of the number of people not being served through the food stamp program. Candidates for fulfilling this responsibility include the Mayor's Food Policy Coordinator, the Office of the Public Advocate, and the Independent Budget Office.

## POTENTIAL INTERVENTIONS FOR INCREASING ACCESS TO HEALTHY FOOD

There are various pathways through which the food stamp program may contribute to lowering rates of obesity. These pathways must focus on combating obesity and hunger simultaneously and include shaping where food stamp participants shop and what they buy. Ways to affect where people shop include regulating which stores are certified to accept food stamps and offering incentives for stores that offer food stamps to offer more healthy, affordable food. Ways to affect what people buy include increasing education for food stamp recipients, providing incentives for food stamp recipients to purchase healthy food and finally, restricting what food participants can buy.

### OPPORTUNITY #3: ENHANCE EDUCATION EFFORTS

The federal government has dramatically increased funding over the past two decades to provide education to food stamp participants about purchasing and preparing healthy food on a limited budget, spending \$341 million in 2009. States have the flexibility to design their own nutrition education initiatives, choose who they would like to educate and operate through implementing agencies and partner organizations of their choice.

New York State's food stamp nutrition education program is run by OTDA and called *Eat Smart New York!*. Cooperative extension offices, the Food Bank of NYC and the NYS Department of

Health run and teach the classes. They cover dietary quality, food security, food safety, food resource management and physical activity. The program has been shown to make a marked difference in participants' behavior, with more than 40% of participants in 2009 showing improvement in almost all of the curriculum areas four to sixteen weeks after the course was over. Unfortunately, according to OTDA, less than 1% of food stamp program participants receive nutrition education in New York.<sup>xxxiv</sup> In fact, the program self-advertises as the “best kept secret in the food stamp program.” One barrier to voluntary participation is the stigma associated with attending a class tied to food stamps. To overcome this, many providers offer education classes without connecting it to the food stamp program.<sup>xxxv</sup> Given the nutrition education program's proven impact on its participants, it appears to be a good opportunity to tackle obesity, its health effects, and its cost to society.

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## POSSIBLE INTERVENTIONS

- 6. Improve recruitment efforts for nutrition education.** Potential ways to increase participation include: creating more education that does not require attending a class (e.g. print and online materials); providing nutrition education at the point of purchase (posters, brochures, shelf and food labels); finding creative ways to advertise the program and reduce the stigma often associated with it; offering more classes outside of working hours; offering incentives to participate; offering incentives for referrals; and lastly, mandating education.

## OPPORTUNITY #4: REDEFINE WHAT “FOOD” IS

Restricting the purchase of unhealthy foods with food stamps is a contentious issue. Opponents arguments include: that the government is attempting to play “food police;” that restrictions will further stigmatize food stamp participants and discourage participation; that restrictions will have little effect on diet given that food stamps pay for only a portion of the most participants' food budgets; that it is nearly impossible to create one or two criteria, or a complex system, to define what is healthy and unhealthy food; that food manufacturers would

respond by developing items that would meet the new criteria for allowable food but would not be much different from the restricted food; and that implementing restrictions would be challenging for retailers and program monitors.<sup>xxxvi</sup> Proponents argue that the government has a right to regulate what its money is spent on; that there are high levels of obesity among food stamp participants, and in addition to being a public health concern, obesity and its effects cost \$7.6 billion a year in health care expenditures. It is also noted that the program currently prohibits certain food items such as alcohol, hot food, and food intended to be eaten in the store.

In 2010, the New York State Assembly considered the “SNAP Back Into Shape Act” which prohibited food stamps from being used to buy “not nutritional” food, defined as any item which has 400 milligrams or more of salt per serving or has 37.5 grams or more of sugar per one hundred gram serving of food. This bill did not pass. A strategy along this line, however, may warrant reconsideration as it is gaining momentum at the national level, particularly around efforts to limit purchases and consumption of sugar-sweetened beverages.<sup>4</sup>

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#### POSSIBLE INTERVENTION

- 7. Develop a health-promoting definition of “food” across multiple government programs.** Considering the definition of food in multiple contexts, such as government food procurement and sales tax may help defray some of the concerns about singling out the purchases of food stamp participants. New York State already has a complex definition of food to determine what items are exempt from sales tax. That definition,

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<sup>4</sup> See the editorial “Using the Food Stamp Program and Other Methods to Promote Healthy Diets for Low-income Consumers” by Jonathan Shenkin and Michael Jacobson in the September 2010 issue of the American Journal of Public Health.

along with definitions from many other states, might be examined when developing a recommendation for strengthening the food stamp system.<sup>5</sup>

#### OPPORTUNITY #5: ENHANCE AND EXPAND THE LOCATIONS WHERE FOOD STAMPS ARE USED

The USDA's Food and Nutrition Service is the primary authority overseeing retailers that accept food stamps. To become and remain an authorized retailer, a store must continually offer three types of food in each of four staple food categories – meats, poultry and fish; breads and cereals; vegetables and fruits; and dairy. At least two of the staple categories must include perishable items. Alternatively, a store that has at least 50% of its sales in one staple group of food can qualify, as is often the case with bakeries and butcher shops. Stores are reauthorized every five years.<sup>6</sup> These venues offer an opportunity for creating a shopping experience that supports healthy food choices.

#### POSSIBLE INTERVENTIONS

- 8. Identify and advocate for incentives to offer stores to increase their healthy food offerings.** The DOHMH Healthy Bodegas Initiative has worked for the past five years to increase healthy options at bodegas through education of bodega owners. Initiatives include promoting the sale of 1% milk, fruits and vegetables, low-sodium soups and low-calorie drinks; improving food layouts and displays to promote fruits and vegetables; and connecting bodega owners to farmer's markets and community organizations. The Healthy Bodegas Initiative could be expanded to offer financial incentives to participating stores. In its 2010 annual report, the program said it would like to help businesses acquire low-interest loans, and offer free energy-savings assessments and

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<sup>5</sup> A comprehensive listing of states' definitions may be found here [www.impactteen.org/...PDFs/Food Definitions 2008 for web 041309.pdf](http://www.impactteen.org/...PDFs/Food%20Definitions%202008%20for%20web%20041309.pdf).

<sup>6</sup> Store eligibility requirements are described at the following site: <http://www.fns.usda.gov/snap/retailers/store-eligibility.htm>

incentives to upgrade their stores, but has not had the resources to do so thus far.<sup>7</sup>

Exploring ways to reward stores for offering healthy options may also be worthwhile.

Stores operators could be offered incentives through cash bonuses, income tax rebates, sales tax discounts, and fee reductions depending on the sales or offering of certain items.

- 9. Enhance the standards required of venues accepting food stamps.** Modifying the standards described above to require, for example, lean cuts of meat, low-fat dairy, and high-fiber grain products could help assure the provision of a wider array of healthy foods. Other options might be to regulate the amount of staple food offered, the variety of foods offered, whether foods are fresh, and what percentage of overall sales come from staple foods. Raising standards may risk cutting off food sources for people who live in areas with limited supermarkets or other stores with greater variety. It may be possible to create exceptions for areas where this is likely. New York State, for example, recently implemented enhanced Vendor Minimum Stocking Requirements for the WIC program. It is identifying ways to ensure that these new requirements do not cause this problem in food desert areas upstate.
- 10. Expand the number of healthier venues that accept food stamps.** Only twenty-eight of New York City's 50 Greenmarkets accept food stamps, even though spending at Greenmarkets by food stamp participants doubled last season. Several levels of intervention could increase greenmarket participation including: creating incentives for the markets to accept food stamps; providing the equipment necessary for markets to accept food stamps; and mandating that the markets accept food stamps. Expanding locations where food stamps can be used could also be explored. Several community groups recently have considered creating mobile vans that accept food stamps. FreshDirect and City Harvest are running a pilot which offers South Bronx residents a

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<sup>7</sup> Information about the Health Bodegas initiative is available at [http://www.nyc.gov/html/doh/html/cdp/cdp\\_pan\\_hbi.shtml](http://www.nyc.gov/html/doh/html/cdp/cdp_pan_hbi.shtml)

catalogue of food available at a 20% discount, ordered at and delivered to the weekly farmers market in front of a public housing complex. In Baltimore, there is a program where residents in certain neighborhoods can visit libraries to order and pick up groceries.<sup>xxxvii</sup>

## CONCLUSION

The Food Stamp Program is often regarded as a federal program with few opportunities for enhancement at the local level. This paper has identified a number of enhancements that could be pursued to better ensure that New Yorkers benefit from the program's capacity to reduce hunger and increase access to healthy foods and thereby reduce obesity, diabetes, and other chronic diseases.

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<sup>iv</sup> Program data from the USDA Food Stamp website:

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<sup>vii</sup> Personal communication with Terence Kelly at NYCCAH, 2009.

<sup>viii</sup> Testimony of New York City Public Advocate Betsy Gottbaum. Available at <http://pubadvocate.nyc.gov/news/TestimonyofPublicAdvocateBetsyGotbaumforCityCouncilHearingsPromotingEconomicSelf-Suff.html>

<sup>ix</sup> Tribich, Chloe. (August 2, 2009) No free lunch: conflict over food stamp access. *City Limits Weekly*. [http://www.urbanjustice.org/pdf/press/citylimitsweekly\\_03aug.09.pdf](http://www.urbanjustice.org/pdf/press/citylimitsweekly_03aug.09.pdf)

Also, the Urban Institute finds that use of biometric technology can lead to as much as a 4.3% decline in food stamp receipt. See

[http://www.urban.org/UploadedPDF/411438\\_Food\\_Stamp.pdf](http://www.urban.org/UploadedPDF/411438_Food_Stamp.pdf)

<sup>x</sup> NYS Office of Temporary Disability website:

<http://www.otda.state.ny.us/main/foodstamps/#eligibility>

<sup>xi</sup> <http://74.125.93.132/search?q=cache:KlPojisoRnYJ:www.gao.gov/new.items/d02409.pdf+food+stamp+categorical+eligibility&cd=1&hl=en&ct=clnk&gl=us&client=firefox-a>

<sup>xii</sup> Secor, Dawn. (January 17, 2007) Memo to CBOs: Resource test removed for most food stamp households through “Expanded Categorical Eligibility” in NYS.

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<sup>xiii</sup> Ibid.

<sup>xiv</sup> Schwartz, Sonya. (2001) Immigrant Access to the Food Stamp Program: Overcoming Barriers to Participation. Clearinghouse review. <http://www.frac.org/text%20documents/sonya.pdf>

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<sup>xvii</sup> Ibid

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