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New Report Finds Hundreds of New York City Households Improperly Denied Food Stamps

Groups call on Governor to Eliminate Fingerprinting Requirement with Executive Order

Albany, NY – An Empire Justice Center report issued today and endorsed by Hunger Action Network of New York State reveals that hundreds of eligible New York City families were improperly denied Food Stamp/ SNAP (Supplemental Nutritional Assistance Program) benefits because of the City's fingerprinting requirement.

The report found that out of 482 New York City Fair Hearing cases filed between November 2010 and October 2011, 97% had been improperly denied, leaving the City's most vulnerable families without essential nutritional assistance.

The groups also called on Governor Cuomo to rescind the fingerprinting requirement by issuing an Executive Order or by instructing the Office of Temporary and Disability Assistance (OTDA) to remove this requirement. The only two states in the nation that still require finger printing for nutritional assistance are New York and Arizona. The finger printing requirement is predominately used in New York City and not in other parts of the states.

One of the authors of the report, Cathy Roberts, a Senior Paralegal in the Albany office of the Empire Justice Center said, "Our report provides quantifiable evidence that finger imaging is not only leaving seniors, disabled children and adults, as well as hard working families without desperately needed nutritional assistance, it's inefficient and ineffective. Over the course of a year, 97% of all applicants who requested a fair hearing related to finger imaging had to have their applications reprocessed by agency staff, wasting valuable time and agency resources. It's time for New York to take a fresh look at this ineffective tool – and join 48 other states in leaving finger prints behind."

"It is time for Governor Cuomo to join the rest of the country and finally eliminate finger imaging as a barrier to receiving SNAP benefits. Besides being a waste of taxpayer dollars, finger imaging contributes to the stigma of being poor and hungry. In my quarter-century of work with Hunger Action Network, the thing that has always surprised me is the large number of people at food pantries who are not receiving SNAP benefits. Finger imaging is one of the key barriers preventing needy households from getting food from SNAP when they most need it," said Mark Dunlea, Executive Director of the Hunger Action Network of NYS.

“There is no doubt that fingerprinting deters law-abiding New Yorkers who need assistance from applying for help,” stated Lois Wagh Aronstein, AARP New York State Director. “Governor Cuomo can change this. Hunger among older adults is a growing problem in our country. Eliminating fingerprinting would allow New Yorkers to get the help they need, particularly in these tough economic times.”

"This excellent new report simply adds more weight to the tons of existing evidence that finger imaging food stamp applicants not only fails to reduce fraud or prevent duplications that couldn't be better prevented through other means, but also that the process is a colossal waste of time and money for the State, the City, and struggling families who need food benefits, " said Joel Berg, Executive Director of the New York City Coalition Against Hunger.

“Finger imaging denies food stamp benefits to eligible New York City residents; the time has come to dispense with this punitive, antiquated, and inefficient requirement,” stated Lori McNeil, Ph.D., Director of Research and Policy for the Urban Justice Center.

“The economic downturn has had a staggering impact on people with disabilities and an increase in hunger is the result. We should remove any and all barriers to help,” stated Susan M. Dooha, J.D, Executive Director for the Center for Independence of the Disabled, NY.

“During this time of great financial strain, we should be looking for ways to streamline benefit processes. This is a perfect way to wipe out unnecessary bureaucracy that wastes precious government funds and creates harmful barriers to needed programs,” said Allison Sesso, Deputy Executive Director of Human Services Council.

The report also concluded that the finger printing requirement which resulted in the erroneous denial of food stamp/SNAP benefits violated federal law. Originally designed to reduce duplication of benefits, finger printing is considered an outdated technique to reduce fraud. Last year, almost 18 percent of New York residents reported that there were times in the past 12 months when they did not have enough money to buy food that they or their family needed, as stated by the Food Research and Action Center (FRAC). The New York City Coalition Against Hunger reports that food pantry use among older adults is up alarmingly, while over half of the New Yorkers who are eligible for Food Stamps are not receiving them (FRAC).

While one in every four New Yorkers age 60 and over who is living at home is considered nutritionally at risk. The South Bronx, which is pre-dominantly Hispanic, has the one of highest rates of food insecurity in the nation, according to FRAC. In New York City, one in three (32%) of Hispanic seniors experience food hardship, according the Council of Senior Centers and Services.

For more information on the report, “Time to Leave Finger Prints Behind” visit:
<http://www.empirejustice.org/assets/pdf/publications/reports/time-to-leave-finger-prints.pdf>

Empire Justice Center is a statewide antipoverty law firm with offices in Albany, Rochester, White Plains and on Long Island. Empire Justice seeks to improve the law for all New Yorkers through policy analysis and advocacy, impact litigation, direct legal assistance to low income and vulnerable New Yorkers, and provision of training and technical assistance to legal services and human services providers.

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