

**Economic Justice and Social Welfare Network
Policy and Advocacy Committee
Access to Assistance Campaign**

OVERVIEW: BARRIERS TO ACCESS IN THE PUBLIC ASSISTANCE PROGRAM

Barriers: New York City residents with little or no money, seeking public assistance from the New York City Human Resources Administration face numerous obstacles when seeking help.

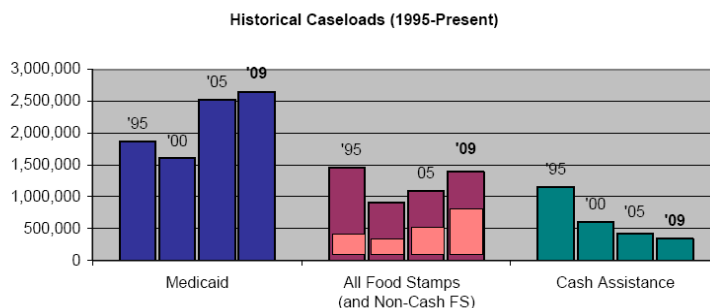
Barriers include onerous application requirements, excessive wait times at centers with little and incorrect information provided, inadequate screening for disabilities, unrealistic and punitive time frames to find child care, presumptive fraud investigations, agency mishandling of client cases, failed communication systems, and the rampant and arbitrary sanctioning of clients. These systemic problems make this program for lowest income people the most burdensome to obtain and retain.

From 1997 to 2007, the welfare caseload has declined dramatically despite a 35% increase in applications. For those same years denials jumped from 26% in 1997 up to 42% in 2007.¹

Impact: The programs' responsiveness to high poverty and unemployment rates ensuing from the Great Recession highlights the failure of the system to serve income eligible households.

By contrast, Food Stamp (FS) and Medicaid (MA) caseloads trends have risen as expected during the recession. This is the result of proactive government initiatives that ease the application processes for FS and MA, including facilitated and online enrollment, phone recertifications, and highly visible advertising campaigns that effectively de-stigmatized the program.

From March 2006 to March 2011 the number of Food Stamp recipients in NYC increased by 66% and the Medicaid roles increased by 10%. During that period the public assistance caseload dropped by 12%. Since income eligibility standards for Family Assistance/Safety Net Assistance is lower than those for Food Stamps and Medicaid, welfare eligible households are poorer than the general Food Stamp and Medicaid population. This means that the poorest New Yorkers are encountering many unnecessary barriers when trying to access this critical benefit program.



Human Resources Administration (HRA) Testimony before the City Council General Welfare and Finance Committees, "The 2010 Preliminary Budget and Mayor's Management Report", March 23, 2009

Due to disputed application denials, sanctions and case closings there has been a sharp rise in the number of scheduled fair hearings, significantly increasing the costs incurred by the state to administer the hearings. Despite a considerable increase in the number of hearing officers, a dramatic backlog of cases with pending final decisions remains. For applicants this is usually a time period when the household not receiving any assistance.

¹ Bich Ha Pham and Jill Poklemba, *The State of New York's Social Safety Net for Today's Hard Times*, Federation of Protestant Welfare Agencies