



Food Stamps and the Fight Against Obesity – Remarks

Gary Jenkins, Assistant Deputy Commissioner, FIA Division of Food Stamps

Good morning,

Thank you to the Columbia University Mailman School of Food Policy and Obesity Prevention student group for hosting this important panel discussion. My name is Gary Jenkins and as Assistant Deputy Commissioner, I am in charge of the New York City Food Stamp Program within the City's Human Resources Administration. Commissioner Robert Doar, who is a leader on this issue, is disappointed he could not be here today.

There's a story about a boy, the youngest of eight kids, raised by a single mom in a low-income household. His family received food stamps, and he loved drinking his favorite soda, Dr. Pepper. He wasn't aware of the harm soda was causing him... or his family. His grandmother passed away from diabetes, his mother is currently battling diabetes, and several of his siblings have diabetes too. You've probably guessed this boy was me. So I have understood for a while that the sugary drinks and other junk food we all enjoyed growing up —often purchased with food stamps— were a big factor in these health issues.

Before I discuss my views of the role of the Food Stamp program in the fight against obesity, I want to quickly describe the program itself, which has changed a lot since my childhood. HRA's Division of Food Stamps oversees benefits for over 1.8 million New Yorkers, almost 40% or 695,000 of which are children. Participation in the Food Stamp program has more than doubled since Mayor Bloomberg took office, growing to become one of the most visible forms of support in low income neighborhoods. Of those receiving food stamps, 1.2 million are in households that do not also receive disability benefits or cash welfare, meaning they use food stamps to supplement their work. The City offers Food Stamp Program enrollment at 16 food stamp offices and 83 community-based organizations throughout the five boroughs and New Yorkers can now apply for food stamp benefits online or through the mail. We have now received over 100,000 applications to date online. Recipients receive their benefits on an Electronic Benefit Transfer or EBT card, which works just like a debit card and replaced the coupons known as food stamps. Thanks to Commissioner Doar's efforts, the Food Stamp Program has become a vital work support, helping New Yorkers living in poverty and impacted by the bad economy support themselves and work toward gaining financial independence.

Food Stamps eligibility is based on income. Benefits are meant to supplement recipients' food budget, not pay for all of the food they consume. Food Stamp benefits are funded by the Federal government and administered by States and localities. In 2011, over \$3.5 billion dollars in Food Stamp benefits were distributed. The average monthly benefit for a family of four is \$629 dollars. Food Stamps also provide an important economic stimulus for businesses, especially in low-income communities. Every food stamp dollar spent generates one dollar and eighty cents in economic activity. According to the recent report by the Mayor's Center for Economic Opportunity, the Food Stamp Program alone lifted over 250,000 New Yorkers out of poverty in 2010.

Now let me turn to the role that the Food Stamp Program has in addressing the growing epidemic of obesity. In 2008, Congress changed the name of the Food Stamp Program to the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program. This was intended to show a greater focus on nutrition. We all know and appreciate that the food we eat is an important part of staying healthy. Food Stamp benefits can help families afford fresh and nutritious foods they might not otherwise buy, which can have health benefits throughout their lives. I was raised in New York City and could count on one hand places where one could purchase fresh fruit and vegetables. Today there are at least three places where I can purchase fruit and vegetables on my way home from the subway, in a predominantly minority neighborhood in the heart of Brooklyn.

Studies have shown that obesity and diabetes disproportionately affect the poor - the primary beneficiaries of the Food Stamp Program. My fellow panel members will discuss these alarming trends in greater detail. But I wanted to spend some time describing the efforts that we have engaged in recent years to address this growing problem. As many of you know, Mayor Bloomberg's administration has a great reputation for fresh, innovative thoughts and a track record for taking on challenging problems. In this spirit, the City has taken many steps through the Food Stamp Program to address the growing problems of obesity and diabetes. For example, Food Stamp benefits can be used to make purchases at many of the City's farmers' markets, and each year from July 1 through November 15, HRA and the Department of Health and Mental Hygiene (DoHMH) provide Health Bucks at participating markets throughout the city. Health Bucks incentivizes food stamp recipients to purchase fruits and vegetables by providing an extra two dollars for every five dollars in benefits used to purchase these items. We are constantly looking for new and effective ways to improve the nutrition among food stamp recipients.

With this same innovative spirit, the City and State joined together to submit a proposed pilot program in 2010 to address the growing problems of obesity and diabetes among New Yorkers, especially in low income neighborhoods. New York City has taken a keen interest in moving this critical issue forward. The proposed program would have added soda and other sugary beverages to the list of items not eligible for purchase under the Food Stamp Program. HRA partnered with DoHMH and our fellow New York State agencies to submit a request to the United States Department of Agriculture, the federal agency that oversees the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, to implement the restriction. We felt that our proposal would be received favorably since it was consistent with the goals of the Obama Administration, including reducing childhood obesity and using research to guide policy.

To our dismay, after almost a year of waiting on a response from the USDA, the proposal was rejected. The primary reason for rejection given by the USDA was operational issues for food stores. However, when we spoke to some representatives from the grocery industry they did not feel this would be a major issue to resolve. The Women, Infants and Children's (WIC) program prohibits the purchase of soda. The same operational process could be applied without difficulty.

Critics say our proposal to restrict soda from the Food Stamp Program places a stigma on participants. However, when we surveyed participants in the Food Stamp Program about the proposal, almost 66% either supported it or were indifferent. There are already a number of items that cannot be purchased with food stamp benefits, including prepared foods, alcohol, tobacco, paper goods among others. It is not clear how adding one more item to this list would have substantially affected stigma. Again, we could follow the same process as the WIC program. It is also worth noting that our proposal gained support from more than 40 national and local health and social service organizations and advocates across the political spectrum, including the American Heart Association, the Children's Health Fund and the National Association of County and City Health Officers.

Some say that government should not play a role in a person's household. But the name of the program is the Supplemental **Nutrition Assistance** Program, and its stated goal dating back to 1964 “to provide for improved levels of nutrition among low-income households,” indicates that providing assistance to purchase nutritious food is at the core of its mission. Some have also questioned why we proposed to exclude sugary beverages and not other non-nutritious foods or beverages. Given that we were proposing a pilot program, we wanted to start with the one thing that research shows is a major contributor to the obesity problem. We turned to our expert partners in the DOHMH and they said it was sugary beverages.

We also have evidence that sugary beverage consumption among food stamp recipients is fairly high. In a survey of New York City's Food Stamp recipients conducted by our office last summer, we found that 40% of respondents drank soda at least 1 to 3 times per week and 60% drank other sugary beverages at least 1 to 3 times per week. The evidence is strong that sugary beverages lead to negative health-related outcomes and government has a responsibility to educate and play an active role in reducing potential health related concerns.

As the head of the Food Stamp Program in NYC, I will continue to explore ways to reduce obesity and diabetes with participants of food stamps. I will have ongoing discussions to educate recipients on the best ways to use food stamp benefits, which will include healthy food choices. Our program has consistently been recognized through several USDA Hunger Champion awards over the past and has contributed significantly to the State winning federal bonus. We will apply this same spirit and energy to promoting good nutrition. The mission is too important to simply walk away from.

Thank you.

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