



For Immediate Release: July 18, 2009

Contact: Alexandra Yannias, ayannias@nyccah.org
Mobile: (708) 738-9198; Office: (212) 825-0028, ext. 212

**Advocates, Elected Officials, Community Members Honor Nelson Mandela's
Birthday by Calling on Government to End Apartheid-Like Practice of
Finger-Printing NYC Food Stamp Applicants**

On July 18th, 2009, Nelson Mandela's 91st birthday, the New York City Coalition Against Hunger (NYCCAH) joined elected officials and community members on the steps of City Hall to call on all levels of government to end the City's policy that requires all recipients of federal Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program benefits (SNAP, formerly known as food stamp) to provide a finger image (i.e., a finger print) in order to obtain the nutrition assistance to which their family is legally entitled.

New York City is one of only four places in the United States that require a finger image from individuals who receive SNAP benefits. Although the City claims that the finger imaging policy prevents fraud, the states that do not require a finger image have a lower error rate and a higher rate of legal participation than New York City. This practice also costs the City up to \$800,000 to administer each year, which advocates argue is a waste of both taxpayer money and administrative effort that could be more effectively used to serve the people of New York City. In addition, the finger imaging requirement may deter eligible families from applying to the SNAP program and forces qualified individuals to miss work in order make extra visits to City offices in order to provide a finger image.

Since the process of finger printing disenfranchised South Africans in apartheid-era South Africa for identification purposes was an important issue in the anti-apartheid struggle, the opposition to the City's finger imaging policy was both an important current issue as well as a symbolic one in honor of Mandela's legacy. In fact, one of the original anti-Apartheid leaders, Mohandas Gandhi, led opposition to the use of finger-printing in South Africa as an identification mechanism, saying he had a "very serious objection to ... digit impressions because they have the ring of criminality."

Said State Senator Liz Krueger: "As food prices soar and the economy plummets, we need to use every option available to maximize participation for hungry New Yorkers. Food Stamps are a win/win for our State. Every new dollar in Food Stamps is immediately spent in a neighborhood food store or green market, helps low-income families meet their nutritional needs, and creates jobs in both our urban communities and on our farms. New York City must end its outdated policy of requiring finger imaging; otherwise New York's hungry will continue to suffer and our economic crisis could very well be prolonged."

New York City Comptroller William C. Thompson, Jr. said, "By requiring fingerprints, the City is creating another obstacle for New Yorkers who are seeking food assistance. Not only does the administration's flawed policy add another layer of bureaucracy to the system, but it also adds another cost to the program. This is money that would be better spent by providing further assistance to New Yorkers. This is yet another disturbing example of how the administration is making it difficult for families to get the food they need when they need it the most."

16 Beaver Street · Third Floor · New York, NY 10004 · Phone: (212) 825-0028 · Fax: (212) 825-0267
Email: info@nyccah.org · Website: www.nyccah.org

Stated Public Advocate Betsy Gotbaum: "Commissioner Doar tried to limit finger imaging when he ran the State agency that manages HRA, but now he insists on continuing this wasteful, unnecessary, and demeaning policy. If New Yorkers from Wall Street don't need to provide finger prints to benefit from the Mayor's JumpStart program, why should hungry New Yorkers have to provide finger prints for food they need to survive? This program is just one more hurdle for families trying to access needed benefits. The administration should be doing everything in its power to break down barriers to food stamps, which bring federal dollars into our local economy."

Said NYC Council Member Eric Gioia: "Continuing to require finger-imaging is a bad decision that costs the City hundreds of thousands of dollars in upfront costs and could deny us over \$60 million a year in federal funding while at the same time keeping food off hungry people's tables. This is simply wrong. We can't let bureaucratic red tape and the failed policies of past administrations prevent those who need help from getting it."

Said Joel Berg, executive director of the New York City Coalition Against Hunger: "We continue to urge all levels of government to end this discriminatory practice of requiring a finger print from low-income people who need food. We honor Nelson Mandela's dedication to promoting a fair and just government for all and we couldn't think of a more appropriate time to call attention to this inefficient and discriminatory practice than on his birthday. As Mr. Mandela once said, 'We must use time wisely and forever realize that the time is always ripe to do right.' As the economy continues to decline, we believe that the time is ripe to end the discriminatory process of finger imaging our neighbors who are in need of food."

At the press event, NYCCAH also discussed the preliminary results of its finger imaging survey that it has, thus far, administered to over 100 residents in Long Island City. The teenage Long Island City residents who administered the survey spoke about their opposition to the finger imaging requirement and about what they learned through administering the surveys in their community.

Overall, the preliminary survey results illustrated the inefficiency of the finger imaging policy: Nearly 40% of respondents missed one day of work or more to provide a finger image in order to receive SNAP benefits. The results also highlighted the extent to which this requirement might deter eligible individuals from applying for federally funded SNAP benefits because individuals felt that they are "being treated like criminals" by having to give a finger image. The Coalition will expand this survey over the summer and will administer the survey in all five boroughs.

Said Devin Wooden, a teenage resident of Long Island City who helped to administer the survey, "A lot of people need food stamps, but there are a lot of problems with the process. People think it's for a criminal background check so they don't want to apply. People I surveyed said that they don't feel comfortable giving a finger print and that they feel like they are being treated like criminals by having to give one."

Jose Luis Pages, a 17 year old resident of Long Island City, spoke about the fact that he will have to give a finger image next year when he turns 18 in order for his family to continue to receive SNAP benefits.

Said Pages, "It's unfair. Even though we're only 17, we're going to have to give a finger print just to keep our food stamps next year. I'm going to have second thoughts about applying for food stamps now that I know about this requirement and other people I spoke to during the survey said they also wouldn't apply for food stamps if they have to give a finger print. It's nonsense because we could be doing something else instead of wasting our time at an office giving a finger print, like getting a job or providing for our family."

##

16 Beaver Street · Third Floor · New York, NY 10004 · Phone: (212) 825-0028 · Fax: (212) 825-0267

Email: info@nyccah.org · Website: www.nyccah.org