



AN INTERFAITH EFFORT SHELTERING THE HOMELESS, FEEDING THE HUNGRY AND CARING FOR PEOPLE WITH AIDS
"Share your bread with the hungry, and bring the homeless poor into your house." (Isaiah 58:7)

Reverend Dr. Terry Troia
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Comments on HRA's Proposed Emergency Food Assistance Program Rule

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Submitted Via <https://rules.cityofnewyork.us/>

HRA Rules c/o Office of Legal Affairs
150 Greenwich Street, 38th Floor
New York, NY 10007

Dear Sir/Madam,

On behalf of Project Hospitality, Inc., I am submitting comments in response to response to the New York City Human Resource Administration's (HRA) proposal to repeal the existing rule entitled "Distribution of Food and Administrative Funds to Emergency Food Providers" Chapter 4 of Title 68 of the Rules of the City of New York and replace it with a rule entitled "Emergency Food Assistance Program".

Project Hospitality has a 40 year history of serving the needs of the poor, hungry and homeless residents of Staten Island, New York. It is the mission of Project Hospitality to reach out to community members who are hungry, homeless or otherwise in need, in order to work with them to achieve their self-sufficiency. PH seeks to realize its mission by advocating for those in need as well as providing a comprehensive continuum of care that provides the essentials of food, clothing and shelter enhanced by health and mental health services, substance abuse treatment, HIV prevention and care, domestic violence education and services, immigrant services, vocational training, transitional and permanent housing, legal and financial services and services for at-risk youth. We address the needs of more than 26,000 impoverished and marginalized individuals annually. The challenges our clients face have only been exacerbated by a global pandemic and an ushering in of uncertainty in various parts of their lives. The number of meals we serve as an agency has nearly doubled as a whole. Our main food pantry location alone nearly eclipses the number of meals served per year annually prior to the onset of the pandemic as of this year. The need only continues to rise, too. As past EFAP recipients, we have been grateful to have access to these funds. It really takes every single dollar we get to run our food operations. The uncertain environment around food pricing and delivery makes programs such as EFAP vital to ensure that we, along with our colleagues in this field, to have all the resources necessary to run a healthy emergency food establishment and tackle that hunger gap head on.

We are an active and founding member of The Roundtable: Allies for Food Access: a group of emergency food providers in New York City that came together starting in 2018 to work together to explore and pursue opportunities for collective purchasing and collaborative advocacy work. Current Roundtable members include West Side Campaign Against Hunger, Met Council, NY Common Pantry, Holy Apostles Soup Kitchen, Project Hospitality, St. John's Bread and Life, POTS, and The Campaign Against Hunger. Together, in the last year we have collectively served over 40 million meals to 800,000 different households. Unfortunately, although the public health emergency of COVID-19 has subsided, we are now seeing higher demand for emergency food than ever before due to sky-rocketing food, fuel and housing prices. PH served over 3 million meals last fiscal year, and we project that increase to continue into the foreseeable future.

To meet our communities' needs during this hunger crisis, we need HRA to take steps to **ensure the new DSS Community Food Connections program is successfully implemented, has increased transparency, encourages more direct input from multiple EFPs, improved payment processes, and allows grantees more flexibility and multiple pathways to**

implement the program and access funding. However, Project Hospitality, along with other Roundtable members, are concerned that some of the proposed changes to the Emergency Food Assistance Program (EFAP) being outlined in this new rule from HRA will have a negative impact on the emergency food provider community, our operations, and the constituents we serve. To help improve the administration of the program and ensure that it is as successful and impactful as possible, we recommend the following changes to the EFAP program:

COMMENTS ON THE PROPOSED RULE

Food Allocation and Budget

- 1) We are concerned about the proposed change to the EFAP funding allocations formula. Under the proposed rule, there is no mention of a clear formula used to determine EFAP budget and allocation amounts for all providers has been replaced with an opaque and subjective process to determine allocations based upon factors like "community need", "capacity", "prior performance" and "racial equity and inclusion". The proposed rule does not outline nor are providers given a definition of these terms, how they will be weighted, how they relate to how much funding will be allocated per provider, or clear understanding of how to quantify them. We ask that HRA define and clarify these terms, the process by which provider budget allocations will be determined using these new criteria, and the kind of data providers need to provide to HRA to demonstrate they meet these factors.
- 2) We request that HRA work with the Administration and Comptroller's Office to speed up payments to EFAP providers, ensuring they have money up front to cover the administrative costs of implementing the program and are not required to obtain reimbursement for program services. Awaiting reimbursement is especially burdensome for new and small emergency food providers that may not have a line of credit or enough cash on hand to cover up front costs of implementing the EFAP program.
- 3) We encourage HRA to provide financial incentives to encourage emergency food providers to purchase and serve fresh produce.
- 4) We support the inclusion in the proposed rules formalizing HRA's ability to reimburse not-for-profit organizations for infrastructure and operational costs. We also call on HRA to allow EFAP providers to include an annual increase in funding for providers indexed to rising inflation, including food costs and COLA for Human Service Providers, and to tie annual funding allocations to programming levels/goals annually.

Program Eligibility

- 5) We strongly oppose the proposed change to EFAP rules explicitly prohibiting subdistribution of food to smaller pantries. This was previously allowed under the former "Distribution of Food and Administrative Funds to Emergency Food Providers" rule and is a key way that our programs operate, support pantries within our network, and are able to avoid food waste.
- 6) The new language in the proposed rule about how prior to food expiration, food must be used to serve people in need and can not be "traded, sold or disposed of" and that if any EFAP food is spoiled or expires, the "provider must notify HRA before disposing of it" may become very burdensome for both providers and HRA.
- 7) We ask that HRA reduce the current burden that exists for emergency food providers trying to obtain EFRO numbers for new locations. To do so, the proposed rules should include eliminating the need to be in a specific geographic area (not relevant for mobile markets) or in operation for a certain period of time, and requirement to track product by individual EFRO sites. Moving forward, we ask that HRA use this opportunity to update the EFAP rules to require organizations to obtain only one single EFRO and encourage the Administration to look at the P-FRED program as a model to engage providers without the use of EFROs.
- 8) We are very concerned about the increased amount of data that pantries and other small emergency food providers are being asked to collect and provide to HRA under this proposed rule. In addition to monthly reports on the number of people served and "any other statistical data that HRA may request", providers are being asked to (a) Maintain records documenting the receipt and distribution of all EFAP food, (b) Maintain receipts documenting all costs associated with the distribution of EFAP food, (c) Retain all records for three years from the end of the calendar year to which they pertain, and permit inspection of those records by HRA personnel, (d) Maintain a copy of food receipt and distribution records at the distribution site, and (e) Maintain requisite permits and licenses to receive and distribute the EFAP food. Since many pantries are run by volunteers, the collection and retention of this information may be too onerous for them to take on. We instead encourage HRA to take responsibility for collecting and holding this data for providers moving forward.
- 9) The proposed rule also specifies that EFAP providers must make reasonable efforts to provide "balanced, nutritious meals" and should consider "cultural preferences" and "dietary restrictions" of constituents. However, within this rule HRA does not provide a definition of these terms or information or resources for how to determine what cultural preferences or dietary restrictions of our communities are. We request that HRA work with the EFAP advisory group to define these terms and ensure that nutritious and culturally relevant foods are available to EFAP providers through EFAP vendors. The new rule also asks that providers communicate about food

allergies to constituents but does not say how. Additional guidance here would be appreciated.

EFAP Advisory Group

- 10) We support the proposed rules's continued inclusion of an advisory group of EFAP practitioners to inform administration of the EFAP program, including what foods will be provided through the program. We respectfully request that members of The Roundtable: Allies for Food Access be included in this advisory group given our strong expertise in and experience implementing the EFAP program. It is critical that there is accountability to this advisory group and that HRA develops a process to ensure practitioners recommendations are heard, documented, and will be incorporated into EFAP operations moving forward.
- 11) We are concerned that members of this advisory group are being asked to serve on a volunteer basis without compensation. This may create an equity issue by precluding some practitioners from participating in the group, especially individuals from frontline communities that have deep knowledge of EFAP and food access challenges in their neighborhoods. We call on HRA to allocate funds to compensate practitioners for their time advising the agency on EFAP program administration.
- 12) We call on HRA to organize a separate meeting with the larger community of EFAP emergency food providers from across the city six months following the vendor transition from Food Bank of NYC to H. Schrier to collect feedback and consult on program operations and administration. We also encourage the agency to commit to an annual meeting with a broad set of emergency food providers to ensure successful implementation of the EFAP program and ongoing, two-way communication.

Communication with Practitioners and Program Transparency

- 13) We call on HRA to make the administration of EFAP more transparent and a commitment to publicly sharing program impacts, outcomes, vendor data, and information on how funding allocations to emergency food providers are determined on an annual basis. In addition, we encourage HRA to consider bringing greater transparency to the EFAP administrator RFP and vendor selection process and consider innovative joint contracts and/or sub-contracts for program vendors, including produce contracts.
- 14) We are greatly concerned about the fact that very few EFAP providers received an email notice about or were made aware of the proposal to repeal and replace the existing EFAP rules by HRA. It is also insufficient that only 2 weeks notice was given for providers to respond to this rule change. Moving forward it is essential that HRA ensure greater awareness of and participation in future rule changes.

Capacity Building Grants

- 15) We support the proposed language to offer new Capacity Building Grants and make funds available to EFAP food providers, or other nonprofit organizations intending to become EFAP food providers, in order to help them establish or expand their operational capacity, increase services, and to help establish new and expand existing emergency food programs across the city.

Certification Requirements

- 16) We call on HRA to allow multiple vendors to provide food safety certifications training to EFAP providers to give them greater choice in who they work with to obtain these certifications.
- 17) The proposed rule explains that HRA may open or close EFAP applications for certain populations or geographic areas but we are concerned about the fact that the agency does not explain why or when that would happen, for how long, or how these closures would be communicated. We believe that this may prevent communities in need participating in the program from accessing needed EFAP funding and ask that HRA provide additional guidance on when EFAP applications may close and why.
- 18) We also encourage HRA to support the recruitment of additional providers into the program by accepting applications on a more regular basis and creating a centralized website with all info needed to apply to participate in the program.

ISSUES WITH COMMUNICATION AROUND TRANSITION OF EFAP TO H.SCHRIER

We are in urgent need of information and certainty about the EFAP program, how it will be administered going forward, and what funds we will be allocated as providers to operate the program in the coming year. The new DSS Community Connections program is set to start next month, yet this information has not been received. We are deeply concerned about this lack of communication from HRA.

Last month, a two minute webinar about the transition from Food Bank of NYC to H. Schrier was held that unfortunately did not contain the most critical pieces information providers need about how the program would operate under the new administrator. EFAP providers still have not received information about when their annual funding allocations will arrive from H. Schrier or how much funding they will receive, making it difficult to plan our feeding programs and operations for

the coming year. In addition, providers have also not received instructions from H. Schrier on how to login to, access, or navigate their ordering system. It is difficult to forecast spending when we are not seeing prices or what products will be offered by H. Schrier. As mentioned above, communication has been minimal to none regarding progress, or lack of, with H. Schrier. As a result, providers have not been able to see what food is available to them through the new administrator or vendors or make any food purchases to meet either the existing or future need of their communities. It is also making it difficult for our agency to plan its winter holiday programming without concrete information on pricing or vendor availability by that time.

Adding to the confusion is that even though EFAP providers were told that Food Bank for New York City would no longer be administering the program, providers were notified that they would still be receiving a very small allocation from the Food Bank for NYC to spend during the new EFAP cycle in the transition period between now and when H. Schrier takes over the program. In our experience speaking with other providers, there is not widespread knowledge that these funds are now available to them. When some members of the Roundtable have logged into the Food Bank for NYC's EFAP portal, the only foods available to them were fish and rice which is of limited value. In order to operate our feeding programs, EFAP providers need to be able to access and order the full line of fresh, frozen and dry food items from the EFAP administrator. In order to ensure that we can serve our communities well and meet the increasing need for emergency food, it is critical that these issues be addressed immediately by HRA and that communication between the agency and providers be improved.

CONCLUSION

As practitioners with deep expertise operating the EFAP program, we respectfully request that HRA take these recommendations on how to improve the administration and concerns about the proposed rule into consideration. With these changes, we believe that the EFAP program will be as successful and impactful as possible.

Thank you for the opportunity to submit comments on the proposed rule on the Emergency Food Assistance Program. Please do not hesitate to contact the Director of Food and Nutrition, Alex Hughes, at ahughes@projecthospitality.org to provide further information.

Sincerely,

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