

**New York City Council
Committee on Aging, Council Member Margaret Chin, Chair
Committee on General Welfare, Council Member Stephen Levin, Chair
January 24, 2017**

**Testimony by LiveOn NY
Oversight – Reducing Food Insecurity in New York City**

LiveOn NY is dedicated to making New York a better place to age. At the core of LiveOn NY's mission is the desire to support our membership organizations, numbering over 100 organizations that provide 600 community based programs and services for older adults, ranging from individual community based centers to large multi-service organizations throughout all five boroughs. We are pleased to focus our efforts towards promoting better policy which will provide for better aging both today and for the years to come.

LiveOn NY's Older Adult SNAP and SCRIE Initiatives

LiveOn NY also administers a citywide outreach program that targets older adults in the communities where benefits are most underutilized. This program places friendly and highly-trained retired professionals within low-income, high-needs communities to educate thousands of older adults, including those who are homebound, about food assistance options, and screen and enroll those who are eligible for SNAP, SCRIE and other benefits.

LiveOn NY also staffs a call hotline, (347) 815-5930, staffed by a professional client services team that assists older adults and caregivers with benefits screenings and applications, serving approximately 1,000 clients per quarter.

LiveOn NY respectfully offers this testimony outlining several case examples, challenges and recommendations and looks forward to working with you to address this important issue.

Case examples from LiveOn NY's outreach team that demonstrate the multiple challenges older adults face with access to food

1. **Case 1:** Jane Doe is a 61 year old woman from Manhattan. She received Social Security Disability (SSD) and is suffering from memory loss. During screening, the client had extreme difficulty following and understanding the application process. Not only was Ms. Doe exhibiting confusion, but she was also very reluctant to disclose information. She had two social workers assisting her from her senior center but they still needed LiveOn NY's assistance in applying. Ms. Doe had a lot of difficulty with the documentation requirements for SNAP. She had trouble finding appropriate copies of documents and ones that were in good enough condition to use. LiveOn NY's client service coordinator was able to bridge communication between Ms. Doe., her social worker, and our follow up team. Her documents had to be submitted at different points through the application process. She was eventually approved for \$185 per month in SNAP benefits. It is not likely she would have gotten the benefits without assistance.

2. **Case 2:** Ms. Smith is 75 years old. She lives in NYCHA housing in Queens. She uses a motorized scooter to get around and has some health issues. She has had her fair share of complications with her SNAP case dating back to the first time LiveOn NY assisted her in July 2015. First, her benefits got cut off because HRA had never received an interim report that she says she submitted. We were able to intervene and save her case. She came back to us this Fall to recertify her SNAP. After submitting her recertification as usual, we learned that she was in fact invited to recertify through the IVRS system which is a computerized phone system that allows certain clients to recertify without submitting any paperwork. Because her recertification was submitted already, she could not take advantage of the IVRS option. Shortly thereafter she was denied. HRA said they never received her recertification package. Through mediation with HRA, our client service coordinator was able to have the case reopened after proving that the client was in compliance. She receives \$148 monthly in SNAP benefits and did not experience and interruption in benefits. These case complexities are so nuanced: it would be difficult for most to navigate this system without knowledge of the HRA's back-end processes.
3. **Case 3:** Mr. Jones is 81 years old, living in the Bronx. LiveOn NY has assisted this client for 2 years. He came to us for help recertifying SNAP. He is one of the many SNAP recipients that is experiencing the SNAP NOW recertification telephone interview process, where clients initiate their phone interviews with HRA instead of HRA calling them. The system has been known to keep clients on hold for very long periods. Mr. Jones informed us that he was on hold from 9:30am-2:30pm waiting on the line for the representative. Most clients are unable to wait this long for the rep for a myriad of reasons.

Additional Challenges

1. Many older New Yorkers are poor and food-insecure

While the United States has experienced a decline in the national poverty rate for older people, New York's older adults have experienced an increase in poverty with data showing that one in three are currently poor. Further, the average annual income for older New Yorkers is often inadequate to cover the high cost of living in New York but does not allow many to qualify for public assistance benefits.

Given that research continues to show that most people desire to age in place as they grow into their later years, community based supports are needed now and into the future to ensure that older New Yorkers can age the way that they have lived – like New Yorkers. Additionally, as the proportion of older adults continues to increase in each county, older adults must be a priority within policy, programming and services.

2. Older New Yorkers are consistently under-enrolled in public benefits due to barriers and difficulties with the application process

Within New York, older adults and adults with disabilities are consistently “under-enrolled” in public assistance benefits. Among those living with hunger, the under-enrollment rate of SNAP benefits is around 40%. This underutilization is consistent among other benefits as well. Among the top barriers for benefit utilization particularly among older adults include stigma or misunderstanding, language barriers, apprehension about the process and government systems, and physical obstacles such as travel distance or unwelcoming environments.

Because LiveOn NY works directly with older adults and their caregivers through our outreach, as well as the feedback we receive from our members who do benefits outreach, we see first-hand these issues that contribute to under-utilization.

LiveOn NY commends HRA for their steps forward make the benefits screening process more efficient through SNAPNOW. However older adults still face some unique challenges with the process. First, as illustrated through Mr. Jones’s case above, many older adults have reported a very long wait time on hold when using the SNAPNOW phone system. Older adults often use pre-paid phone plans and cards, so they do not have the ability to remain on hold for extended periods of time, let alone endure the inconvenience of sitting on hold for hours.

Second, we applaud HRA’s recent upgrades to ACCESSNYC, as well as allowing the ability to upload documents through mobile devices. This has proven to be very efficient and useful for advocates, caregivers and client representatives. However, as processes advance with technology, HRA should be cognizant that older adults themselves may not be able to access these services.

LiveOn NY’s Recommendations

1. Support a shortened SNAP Application form for older adults

As demonstrated by the above case examples, as well as the underutilization statistics, LiveOn NY recommends that HRA consider using a streamlined SNAP Application form for older adult applicants. Because older adults’ incomes generally remain stagnant, or even worse, decline over time, removing one of the initial barriers to application for benefits would help older adults, as well as reduce the immense amount of time that often multiple caseworkers need to spend per applicant.

Several states have explored the usage of a shortened application form for older adults through pilot programs. LiveOn NY recommends that HRA explore this option, as well as related waiver options to streamline the process for older adults.

2. Introduce and adopt legislation to establish a per meal reimbursement for senior center congregate and home delivered meals based on the annual Consumer Price Index (CPI) for food costs in NYC

Per meal reimbursement for congregate and home delivered meals does not reflect the increasing costs for food. Legislation that would establish an automatic reimbursement increase annually based on NYC's annual CPI for food costs would not cause an undue burden on the budget, and would ensure that these major nutritional programs for older New Yorkers will be able to purchase nutritional food to serve a diverse population.

3. Form an HRA Senior Task Force to address the barriers to enrollment for older adults

LiveOn NY applauds the New York City Department of Finance (DOF) for their foresight in establishing a SCRIE Task Force which includes stakeholders from the government as well as community based organizations. LiveOn NY has been active with this Task Force and it has been a valuable experience to discuss challenges and recommendations to strengthen the SCRIE program. LiveOn NY also participates on a SNAP Task Force with the Food Bank that has been very beneficial to generate ideas to help strengthen the SNAP program.

LiveOn NY recommends that HRA form a senior-focused task force, which would include governmental representatives, beneficiaries, stakeholders from the community and caregivers, among others, to discuss barriers and practical solutions to increase access to benefits for older adults, including SNAP. Older adults are also often accessing benefits across multiple systems and departments, so a Task Force could explore cross-department challenges and solutions. LiveOn NY would welcome the opportunity to participate in this Task Force.

LiveOn NY thanks City Council for the opportunity to provide this testimony, and looks forward to working with you on to make New York a better place to age.

For more information on LiveOn NY, contact Bobbie Sackman, Director of Public Policy at 212-398-6565 x226 or bsackman@liveon-ny.org.

LiveOn NY is dedicated to making New York a better place to age. Founded in 1979, with a membership base of more than 100 organizations ranging from individual community-based centers to large multi-service organizations, LiveOn NY is recognized as a leader in aging. LiveOn NY's membership serves over 300,000 older New Yorkers annually and is comprised of organizations providing an array of community based services including elder abuse prevention and victims' services, case management for homebound seniors, multi-service senior centers, congregate and home-delivered meals, affordable senior housing with services, transportation, NORCs and other services intended to support older New Yorkers. LiveOn NY connects resources, advocates for positive change, and builds, supports and fosters innovation. Our goal is to help all New Yorkers age with confidence, grace and vitality.