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New Yorkers at the Broadway Presbyterian soup kitchen fight bureaucratic difficulties to qualify for and receive food stamps.

Fed Up With Hunger

City Food Stamp Application Process Frustrates Potential Recipients

By Olivia Rosane
Spectator Staff Writer
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A visitor to the Broadway Presbyterian soup kitchen minced no words in his opinion of the city's Food Stamp system.

"It sucks what they have you going through to get [food stamps]," he said.

This man's frustration echoes the findings of a recent study done by the Center for Urban Justice that found that the amount of bureaucratic red tape involved with the application process deters many eligible New Yorkers from receiving food stamps. The study calls on the Human Resources Administration, the city's welfare agency, to make the application process easier by taking measures such as extending office hours, halving wait time, and ultimately allowing people to apply without visiting an office.

Yet while the study focuses on the needs of working people who cannot leave their jobs for office visits, Nathan Marwell, CC '08 and the coordinator for Community Impact's Food Advocacy and Nutrition, works with people with a different set of concerns: the homeless and impoverished of Morningside Heights.

"The biggest thing is just lack of information," said Marwell, explaining what keeps most of the eligible people he has spoken with from being on food stamps.

To remedy this, FAN members guide potential food stamp through the program and its application process.

Marwell said the unpredictability of the food stamp system poses problems to those he tries to help. "People will just lose their food stamps without even knowing it," he said. And when that happens, he added, "They get kind of fed up with the system, and they don't bother to go

back on [food stamps].”

Marwell also helps people with the paperwork needed to apply. “A lot of people are self-conscious about filling out forms,” he said, a sentiment that was often echoed at the Broadway Presbyterian Soup Kitchen. “I’m not here to write a book,” Gerald Wilson said of his experience with food stamps. Another man, who chose to go by his last name of Arlanskas, added that the difficulty of applying increased the stigma associated with receiving food stamps. “They don’t want to streamline the process,” he said.

But not everyone has had such a rough time of it.

According to the HRA Web site, applicants can receive more food stamp benefits if they turn in their application on the day they pick it up, and can expect to wait up to 30 days before first receiving food stamp benefits.

Samuel, a food stamp recipient, said that the application process actually went fairly smoothly for him, though he added that help from his two grown children “might have had something to do with it.”

U.S. Congressman Charles B. Rangel’s (D-Harlem) district office said they hadn’t received any complaints about the food stamp program before mentioning that such things were usually handled by the city administration. HRA representatives could not be reached for comment.

In addition, the Center for Urban Justice study acknowledged that New York City had already done a lot to make food stamps more available between January 2000 and December 2004, including allowing elderly people or those with disabilities to apply via mail or fax and instituting a shorter application form. Their efforts have paid off, as the number of New Yorkers on food stamps has increased since 2002.

But regardless of their availability, food stamps are essential for people like Arlanskas.

“You need them,” Arlanskas said. “What am I gonna say?”

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