

April 18, 2006

Mayor Overrules 2 Aides Seeking Food Stamp Shift

By [SEWELL CHAN](#)

Mayor [Michael R. Bloomberg](#) took the rare step yesterday of overruling his own top two social service officials, deciding not to pursue a federal waiver that would make it easier for able-bodied childless adults to receive food stamps.

A statement issued by one of those officials, Deputy Mayor Linda I. Gibbs, said the city was taking the action "because we believe that every New Yorker who can work should work." She said the city would "continue to monitor this population closely and may consider seeking a waiver next year."

Ms. Gibbs and the commissioner of the city's Human Resources Administration, Verna Eggleston, had approved the waiver request, which would have allowed some able-bodied adults ages 18 to 49 to receive food stamps for longer than the normal federal limit of three months in any three-year period.

Administration officials said last night that the mayor ultimately had to sign off on the policy anyway. "The city was exploring its options and didn't need to make a final decision on whether to seek the waiver until the end of the month, so it was premature for anyone to assume which option the city would ultimately choose," said Paul Elliott, a spokesman for the mayor.

In explaining the administration's decision not to seek the waiver, Ms. Gibbs said in a statement, "This potential policy change is not consistent with the mayor's goal of helping New Yorkers become self-sufficient."

The mayor's move was not only a highly unusual public decision to overrule a city department's actions, but also something of an embarrassment for Ms. Gibbs, who was promoted to deputy mayor for human and health services in January after running the Department of Homeless Services, and for Ms. Eggleston, who has led the Human Resources Administration since Mr. Bloomberg took office in 2002.

The rare public override appears to have been an unintended result of the unusual autonomy Mr. Bloomberg grants to his deputies and commissioners, who in this case began pursuing a policy shift before the mayor had signed on.

The city had said it "will accept the federal waiver" — which is used by many large cities across the country and several in New York State, like Buffalo and Rochester — on March 28 in a letter from Ms. Eggleston to the

commissioner of the State Office of Temporary and Disability Assistance, Robert Doar. The New York Times yesterday reported the decision to seek the waiver.

When Ms. Eggleston wrote the letter in March, Ms. Gibbs had not yet briefed the mayor or obtained his approval. Indeed, a city official said last night that Ms. Gibbs did not realize until the middle of last week that the letter had gone out, and that she was still preparing a policy briefing for the mayor.

Ms. Eggleston's letter and the state's response to it "were not binding communications," Mr. Elliott added.

The decision stunned advocates for the needy, who had been pressing for more-generous food stamp policies since the mayoralty of Mr. Bloomberg's predecessor, [Rudolph W. Giuliani](#), who opposed most public assistance programs under the argument that they discouraged work and subsidized dependence.

"It looked like we were departing from the Giuliani era's stinginess and cruelty when it came to dealing with poor people," said Douglas Lasdon, executive director of the Urban Justice Center, a nonprofit law firm that sued the city, under both mayors, over food stamp rules and procedures. "This has not been an administration that has bowed to the political winds. It is a bit petty and odd."

Councilman Bill de Blasio, a Brooklyn Democrat who is chairman of the General Welfare Committee, said he would hold hearings and try to change the mayor's mind. "It's a huge mistake," he said. "We have a growing hunger and poverty problem and we need this waiver. This has caught everyone off guard."

Unlike Mr. Giuliani's welfare policies, which converted welfare offices into job centers, placed recipients in jobs raking leaves and significantly tightened eligibility for cash assistance, the waiver would only have affected a small fraction of the 1.1 million city residents who receive food stamps.

About 43,000 able-bodied adults without dependents now use food stamps, and the waiver would have made about 13,900 more such adults eligible, according to city estimates.

Councilman Eric N. Gioia, a Queens Democrat, and [Representative Anthony D. Weiner](#), a Democrat from Queens and Brooklyn, both said they feared that the controversy would overshadow an even-larger issue: the roughly 600,000 residents who are eligible for food stamps but do not receive them.

"The substance of this issue has always been clear — that the right thing to do is to apply for the waiver and allow people to get help at no cost to city taxpayers," Mr. Weiner said yesterday, only an hour after his office had released a statement praising the mayor for seeking the waiver. "I guess the mayor was persuaded that the politics of looking tough is imperative, and that's a shame."

While the federal welfare overhaul of 1996 imposed the three-month limit on food stamp use by able-bodied jobless adults without children, it also allowed states to seek waivers of the time limit for residents in areas of

relatively high unemployment.

Diane Cardwell contributed reporting for this article.

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