

# FAILING PHONES

## City Infoline Leaves New Yorkers in Need Without Help

August 2020

### EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The HRA Infoline is the central phone number for New York City's Human Resources Administration, the agency responsible for overseeing the administration of vital safety net benefits such as Public Assistance (PA), Food Stamps (SNAP, or Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program), and Medicaid. In March, the City shut down the vast majority of SNAP offices and Job Centers (the offices responsible for the handling of Public Assistance benefits)<sup>1</sup> as a result of COVID-19, leaving benefit applicants and recipients increasingly dependent on the HRA Infoline in order to contact the agency. Simultaneously, the massive layoffs and rise in unemployment led to tens of thousands of new applicants for SNAP and PA in New York City alone, with HRA estimating in May that it had received three times as many SNAP applications and twice as many PA applications as it had at the same time last year.<sup>2</sup>

After months of hearing from clients experiencing significant issues with HRA's Infoline such as dropped calls and excessive wait times, the Urban Justice Center's Safety Net Project decided to conduct an informal 'audit' to test the efficacy of the HRA Infoline. Between June 23, 2020 and August 4, 2020, we made 98 calls to the Infoline and tracked results. The overall rate of calls dropped was over 58 percent. In addition to dropped calls, we also documented significant issues

with language access, uninformed workers, and confusing menus. Overall, the Infoline was found to be ineffective, with many problems preventing it from being a reliable and useful resource for constituents needing help. The impact of these failures is serious. The inability to contact HRA often results in benefits being denied or cut, leaving tens of thousands of families, who are overwhelmingly black and brown, without benefits to buy food, purchase basic necessities, and pay rent in the middle of the pandemic.

To ensure that all New Yorkers in need are able to access critical safety net benefits and the services they require, we propose that New York City immediately increase capacity for the HRA Infoline, including adding staff, improving the provision of appropriate language services and expanding worker training. We also call on the City to commit to reopening HRA's currently-closed SNAP and Job Centers so that New Yorkers have sufficient options for accessing needed support.

### BACKGROUND

Accessing HRA via the phone was problematic even before the pandemic. In 2019, Safety Net Project released a report titled, [The Bureaucracy of Benefits](#), which highlighted many of the obstacles New Yorkers face attempting to access PA and SNAP benefits. One of the issue areas we explored was HRA's negligent operation of its offices' phone lines; we examined data from HRA's own Job Center monthly phone audits from 2017 and 2018, and found that average compliance (with HRA's phone policies) was 46 percent, meaning 64 percent of calls were not returned and/or there was an issue with the voicemail system. Almost all of the centers had grossly over-reported their own compliance with HRA phone protocol.

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<sup>1</sup> 10 of the City's 16 SNAP offices were closed, and 23 of the City's 30 Job and Services Centers for Public Assistance were closed.

<sup>2</sup> Steven Banks, "Before the New York City Council, Committee on General Welfare NYC Department of Social Services Fiscal Year 2021 Executive Budget Hearing," May 18, 2020, [https://www1.nyc.gov/assets/hra/downloads/pdf/news/testimonies/2020/Testimony\\_FY21%20Exec%20Budget\\_051820\\_FINAL.pdf](https://www1.nyc.gov/assets/hra/downloads/pdf/news/testimonies/2020/Testimony_FY21%20Exec%20Budget_051820_FINAL.pdf)

Currently, with only one SNAP and Job Center open in most boroughs, the HRA Infoline should be the easiest and safest way for individuals to directly communicate with a city worker regarding their benefits and applications. As a result of COVID-19, the City has obtained waivers from the State and the Federal government that allow many application, recertification, and case-management appointments – which were previously mandated to be in-person – to be conducted online or over the phone. The waivers have also granted HRA workers the ability to help individuals fill out applications over the phone by collecting a verbal signature and to conduct application and recertification interviews by phone. Constituents are also encouraged to call the Infoline if they need to reschedule appointments, report case issues, ask questions about their application or case status, or report a change in their case such as a new household member or loss of income. Though the flexibility granted to benefit recipients and applications by these waivers was a positive development; the Safety Net Project staff had heard mounting complaints from clients about the Infoline’s efficiency, which led to this study and report.

One specific example of the changes HRA instituted in April was allowing Public Assistance eligibility interviews – which are required after an initial application is submitted and usually happen in-person – to be conducted over the phone. Once an individual submits an application over the online portal or via mail or fax, an HRA worker is supposed to call the applicant to conduct the mandatory interview, which comes from an “unidentified number.” Per an April 2020 policy, if the applicant does not answer, the worker is supposed to leave a scripted message – with no call-back number – which states: “This interview is required and we won’t be able to process your application if we can’t reach you. We will call you again tomorrow. The call may come from an unidentified number.”<sup>3</sup> If the client does not

answer on the second attempt, their application will be rejected. There is no direct number for an applicant to call the HRA worker back if they miss their initial call(s), meaning their only recourse is to call the Infoline and request that an HRA worker attempt the interview again. The case is then put back in HRA’s queue of calls, which are conducted again on the worker’s schedule. The applicant is never given a specific time to expect the call. The City reported that from April to June of this year, 13,650 Public Assistance applications were rejected for “Failure to Keep/Complete Interview.” This reflects almost a 100 percent increase from the previous three-month reporting period. Given that the Infoline was the only option available for applicants to proactively reach HRA employees without traveling to one of the few open centers throughout the city, this increase in denials was undoubtedly impacted by Infoline problems and is representative of a larger failing of HRA’s phone systems.

## **IMPORTANCE OF INFOLINE TO HRA CONSTITUENTS**

Ms. Sanchez, a Safety Net Project client, called the Infoline in July after she received a notice that HRA had scheduled a phone appointment for her and then never called. When she first tried to call the Infoline, the calls did not go through or would say all agents are busy. Finally, when she got through to a representative a few days later, despite selecting Spanish from the menu, the worker who answered did not speak Spanish. The worker told her that she would call an interpreter and put Ms. Sanchez on hold for several more minutes. When the interpreter got on the line with Ms. Sanchez, the worker was no longer on the call. The interpreter said they could wait to see if the worker got back on but after a few minutes, the interpreter said she was sorry and disconnected the call. When asked if she could summarize the impact of the issues she experienced with Infoline, Ms. Sanchez said:

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<sup>3</sup> “COVID-19 Interim Cash Assistance Interview Process,” Policy Bulletin #20-17-ELI, April 9, 2020, Human Resources Administration, [http://onlineresources.wnyc.net/nychra/docs/pb\\_20-17-eli\\_covid-19\\_interim\\_ca\\_process.pdf](http://onlineresources.wnyc.net/nychra/docs/pb_20-17-eli_covid-19_interim_ca_process.pdf)

*“the [Infoline] frustrated me because I received an appointment and then [HRA] never called so I tried to call them because I did not know if they were going to close my case and I needed to report changes. I was scared because my [HRA] office is closed and the only way I could connect with HRA was by phone and they were not answering.” (translated from Spanish)*

Ms. Wilson, a community member in the Bronx, also shared her experiences with the Infoline when she contacted HRA in order to apply for benefits to help with her rent arrears:

*“I’m in supportive housing and had rental arrears before Coronavirus happened. I went through the rental arrears application process on the app on my phone and submitted all the documents. I was expecting a phone call from HRA but I did not anticipate it being from a private number so I never answered and didn’t realize it was them. I called the infoline and did the call back option and left my number multiple times, I think it said 24-48 hours, but if they called back, it must have been from a private number again. That led to holding everything up about two weeks. Then the window for my first application expired and I had to start the application all over again.*

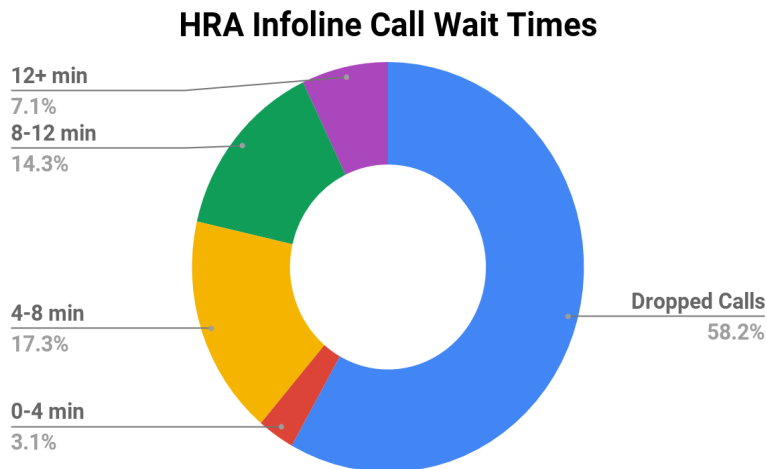
*When I spoke to the infoline, they told me the HRA workers would be calling from private phone numbers since they were working from home. I don’t like to give my personal information including a Social Security number and medical information to someone on an unknown, private number.*

*Now I’m having secondary issues with my housing. Plus I have to worry about every private call that comes in, I have to wonder if it’s HRA and if I should be giving them my legal information. I have anxiety already and it gives me more anxiety.”*

## FINDINGS

### Majority of Calls Dropped

We placed 98 calls to the Infoline between June 23, 2020 and August 4, 2020 at various times throughout the days. 58.2 percent of calls were dropped by HRA’s system. The call-drops occurred at various times, including during automated messages, at the end of automated messages, and during hold music. For the 42.2% of calls that did go through to an HRA worker, over half of the calls had wait times of 8 minutes or more when we chose the shortest route to speak with a worker.<sup>4</sup> The longest wait time experienced without being disconnected was 20 minutes. It is worth noting that due to the lengthy and confusing menu options, described in more detail below, many callers would not be able to easily determine the quickest route to speak with an HRA staff member and would therefore experience longer wait times than the ones measured in our tests.



### Confusing and Malfunctioning Menus

Leading up to and during the time of our test period, the Infoline format changed multiple times – recorded messages that play upon dialing were added, removed

<sup>4</sup> Wait time was calculated as the time that elapsed from the time when the number was dialed to the time that the caller was connected with a worker.

and adjusted. Prior to the call period, until June 22, the HRA Infoline started with a four minutes and thirty second English recorded message describing the services offered by HRA and providing alternate phone numbers clients could call for help with various issues. The automated message was followed by the language menu. On June 23, the HRA Infoline went straight to the language menu with no recorded message. On July 1, the HRA Infoline started with a new two minute and forty second recorded message (again in English only) describing how benefit processes have changed as a result of the pandemic. This automated message was followed by the language menu.

After the language menu, there is a lengthy menu with various options callers can select based on their needs. For the purpose of our data collection, we routinely selected option #1 for “HRA Reasonable Accommodations” in this menu, which we determined to be the best option to connect directly with a worker without needing to provide case information. All other options branch out into more automated messages, creating additional steps and menus that callers must successfully navigate before they can speak to HRA staff.

After the selection of “HRA Reasonable Accommodations” from the menu, an automated message relays the following: “HRA Infoline is experiencing a higher than usual call volume.” Then the message describes a call-back feature that was implemented “in an effort to provide [the caller] with excellent customer service.” With this feature, the message explains, individuals can leave their phone number and they will receive a call back within 48 business hours. The callback option was tried two times, and weeks later, no call back was ever received.

There were at least five instances in which the language and call option menus malfunctioned; upon selecting a menu option, the menu continued to repeat on loop. Even upon entering the number multiple times, the menu continued to repeat and the only option was for the caller to hang up and try again.

## **Barriers to Language Access**

The HRA Infoline language menu contains options for the following languages: English, Spanish, Russian, and Mandarin. There are no options for other languages presented on the menu. When selecting languages other than English, it was found that the worker who picked up always spoke in English when introducing themselves. 56 percent of the time when selecting a language other than English, the HRA worker who answered the call placed the caller on hold for approximately five minutes to get a translator on the line. Some workers spoke Spanish and did not require a translator. No workers who initially answered calls spoke Russian or Mandarin, despite selecting the appropriate option from the language menu and requesting translation verbally.

As mentioned above, the prerecorded Infoline messages are exclusively in English, and preempt the caller’s ability to select their preferred language. Even after selecting a language other than English, automatic messages such as the “All agents are busy. Please try again later” message that plays when calls are disconnected, were only in English.

## **Infoline Staff Uninformed of Policies**

In May, HRA received a Federal waiver allowing SNAP and PA applications to be submitted by HRA employees over the telephone by documenting a verbal signature. Per the Center Director Memorandum issued by HRA (CD 20-15 “Telephone Application Submission Process for Job Center #90 During the COVID-19 Emergency”)<sup>5</sup>, SNAP and PA applicants can call HRA requesting assistance in submitting an application and if the worker determines they are not able to use the City’s online application portal (*AccessHRA*), they should be informed that “an interview may still be conducted

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<sup>5</sup> “Telephone Application Submission Process for Job Center #90 During the COVID-19 Emergency,” June 9, 2020, Human Resources Administration, [http://onlineresources.wnyc.net/nychra/docs/cd\\_20-15\\_telephone\\_submission\\_process\\_during\\_covid-19.pdf](http://onlineresources.wnyc.net/nychra/docs/cd_20-15_telephone_submission_process_during_covid-19.pdf)

over the telephone, and that the application will be completed by the HRA employee during the interview.”

We attempted nine different calls to test this new process with Infoline workers over our four week test period. The caller indicated that they needed help with applying for PA and SNAP and that they did not have access to a device or Internet to log on to *AccessHRA*. Of these nine calls, only two workers were aware that PA and SNAP applications could be filled out over the phone. One additional worker did not know about the ability to complete a PA application over the phone, but provided a separate phone number the caller could use for an over-the-phone SNAP-only application service.

The other workers we spoke to directed the caller to the website and/or in-person centers, and stated that if the caller did not have access to the Internet and did not feel safe going to a center, there was no way to complete an application for SNAP or PA. One of the workers simply hung up the phone upon being asked this question. One worker explained that she was not allowed to be on the phone with a caller for long enough to complete an interview and that she could not help, and disconnected the call.

### **Indifferent and Annoyed Workers**

Of the workers that were communicated with overall, about 10% were described by the caller as “rude” and about 10% were described as particularly “nice” and “helpful.” All other workers were described as “indifferent” or “annoyed.”

## **RECOMMENDATIONS**

Major changes are necessary to adequately address the issues outlined above. When these systems fail, families go without food, rental assistance and other essentials.

Our recommendations are as follows:

### **Technology Improvements:**

- Increase Infoline’s caller capacity to ensure no calls are dropped.
- Add additional Infoline staff to further reduce wait times.
- Simplify menu options so that callers can easily connect with a person or receive needed information.
- Add a feature to the Infoline that specifies the average wait time for that caller. Callers may have limited time and or data/minutes on their phones and should be made aware of how long the anticipated wait is so they can determine if they can stay on the line or call back.
- Decrease the length of the initial pre-recorded message so that callers with limited time and or data/minutes on their phones have a greater likelihood of connecting to a worker faster.

### **Language Justice:**

- Offer the language menu at the onset of any call. Any pre-recorded informational message should then be played in the language the caller selected.
- Expand the language menu to offer, *at a minimum*, translation in the top ten languages preferred by New Yorkers who access HRA benefits, as well as any additional languages spoken in neighborhoods most affected by COVID-19.
- Enforce policy that workers connect to a translator before answering the client call so that a client does not need to reiterate their language preferences verbally and be subjected to an additional wait.
- Automatically play any pre-recorded messages in the client’s selected languages. For example, when calls are disconnected, the message stating “All agents are busy. Please try again later” should play in the language the client selected from the language menu.

### **Worker Trainings:**

- Ensure all workers are promptly trained on new policies, such as the signature waiver.
- Train workers on best practices for working with interpreters telephonically.
- Enforce policy that workers should never hang up on callers. Establish internal mechanisms for workers to escalate challenging calls to senior staff or supervisors.
- Create a mechanism for callers to report their experience after the call ends, such as an automated survey so that callers can describe any issues they experienced and HRA can track systemic issues and determine when individual or collective retraining of its staff is needed.

## **CONCLUSION**

Overall, the HRA Infoline was found to be ineffective the majority of the time. The number of dropped calls and lengthy pre-recorded messages make it unreliable and particularly inefficient. Many people who receive or need public benefits may not have reliable access to a phone or sufficient data to allow them to be on the phone and navigate the menu and wait times we experienced, and if calls are dropped, people may not have the ability to make multiple attempts. The lack of sufficient knowledge of workers about the new application offerings leads to the spread of misinformation and prevents individuals from applying for essential safety net benefits. The language access structure built into the Infoline presents undue hardships and disproportionate delays for non-English speakers. Reported problems with the call-back feature and often non-functional menus also make the HRA Infoline not dependable for the millions of New Yorkers who receive and apply for public benefits.

Ultimately, the failures of the Infoline can lead to very serious challenges for New Yorkers in need of vital food, cash, rent, and other benefits. The black and brown

communities that have faced the most extreme health and economic impacts of the pandemic are the same communities most in need of these social services. By depriving people of access to basic food, cash, and rental assistance, these failures have significant implications for the health and wellbeing of these communities. Even for those who eventually receive assistance, experiencing problems with the Infoline problems adds additional uncertainty and stress to families already undergoing significant hardship. The City's Human Resources Administration must address these technological and systemic issues to ensure all New Yorkers can access the benefits they need at all times without added hardships.

### **ABOUT THE SAFETY NET PROJECT**

The Safety Net Project (SNP), an independent project at the Urban Justice Center, advocates for safe and secure housing and fundamental resources like food and cash assistance for exploited and marginalized communities in New York City. We combine legal and advocacy services, policy work, and community organizing to advance the movement for social and economic justice.

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Writing and research was led by Kiana Davis and Sameer Jain. Zachary Ferretti and Sophie Edwards also contributed to research. Marika Dias and Helen Strom assisted with editing.