

The New York Times

[N.Y. / Region](#)

Navigating a Bureaucratic Maze to Renew Food Stamp Benefits

By [WINNIE HU](#) JULY 23, 2015



Delbert Shorter, 78, received \$180 a month in food stamps until the benefits were cut off three months ago. Credit Ángel Franco/The New York Times

Three months after Delbert Shorter's food stamps were cut off, he still does not know why.

At first, he thought that his \$180 a month allotment from the federal Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, commonly called SNAP or food stamps, was just late. But as one week turned into another, Mr. Shorter, 78, who lives in a fifth-floor walk-up on the Upper East Side, grew more anxious, and hungrier. He stockpiled canned foods from a church food pantry, borrowed \$60 from his home health aide and turned to a senior center to help get his food stamps back.

“It’s very hard,” he said. “If I knew it was really going to come, I would not have to worry about the next meal.”

Even as New York City has embarked on a campaign to increase access to food stamps in recent months, Mr. Shorter’s plight illustrates the barriers that remain for those who are already enrolled. Many people who rely on the benefits say they have been forced to navigate a frustrating and overly bureaucratic process whenever there is a question or issue with their benefits, or when they are required to renew their eligibility. In the confusion, some lose the benefits.



Glenna Flournoy, 85, a retired teacher of English as a second language, and City Councilman Ben Kallos at the Stanley M. Isaacs Neighborhood Center. Mr. Kallos has introduced legislation to make the process of getting food stamps and other benefits easier. Credit Angel Franco/The New York Times

These complaints have reverberated through senior centers and soup kitchens around the city, and prompted one city councilman to introduce legislation this week designed to make the process of getting food stamps and other benefits easier. The [Carter Burden Center for the Aging](#), which provides services on the Upper East Side and in East Harlem, said that dozens of people have struggled to renew their food stamps in the past six months. Some have waited hours for prearranged phone interviews that were canceled at the last minute, if a call was received at all.

Kenneth Craddock, 68, said that it took him four appointments — and nearly 16 hours of waiting by the phone — to complete a 10-minute interview so that he could renew his \$141 a month in food stamps. “I couldn’t move. I was trapped by the telephone,” Mr. Craddock said, adding that he barely gets by on \$1,452 a month in social security benefits and could not afford to lose the food stamps.

Mary Dodd, the center's director of social services, told the story of one woman, a Chinese immigrant in her 80s, who speaks little English and has trouble walking. A Manhattan resident, the woman received a letter directing her to go to an office in Brooklyn to renew her food stamps, Ms. Dodd said.

The [Safety Net Project at the Urban Justice Center](#), which advocates on behalf of poor and working-class people citywide, said it has seen a sharp increase in complaints from food stamp recipients in the past two years. The most frequently cited problem is that people are receiving less in food stamps than they are entitled to, or they are submitting required documents only to be told they were never received.

Denise M. Miranda, the managing director of the project, said, "There is a real irony that they are trying to get more people to enroll but an all-too-common experience is that people are getting cut off every day, and people are submitting documents three and four times to no avail."

"That's not the way it's supposed to work," she added.

The [New York City Human Resources Administration](#), the agency that administers the food assistance program locally, said that more than 1.7 million city residents received food stamps in 2014. Officials have suggested that as many as 550,000 more residents could be receiving the benefits.

In April, the city announced a [new outreach campaign for food stamps](#), focusing especially on older residents and on immigrants; it is being funded by \$1 million a year for four years, with money added to the agency's budget by the mayor.

Steven Banks, the commissioner of the [Human Resources Administration](#), said that some of the complaints about the food stamp program are the result of longstanding issues, and the agency has taken steps in the past year to address them. "We are moving, literally, as quickly as possible to eliminate these barriers to assistance," he said.

Mr. Banks said the agency is seeking a federal waiver to replace the current system of phone interviews, in which agency workers make the calls within prearranged blocks of time, with what he described as an "on-demand, consumer-directed system" that would allow food stamp applicants and recipients to call the agency directly for interviews.

The agency is also streamlining the application process, including by eliminating the requirement for a phone interview for some older people with disabilities, and by eliminating the need to resubmit proof of rent payment for many other food stamp recipients.



Mr. Shorter with his cocker spaniel, Madge, on his way to the Carter Burden Center for the Aging, where a caseworker is helping him reapply for food stamp benefits. Credit Angel Franco/The New York Times

Mr. Banks called the issue of missing documents an “age-old persistent problem,” and said the agency has set up computers at some food stamp offices that allow people to scan in their papers. The agency is also testing technology that would allow people to scan and send documents via their smartphones.

Councilman Ben Kallos, a Democrat from the Upper East Side, has also introduced legislation that would require city agencies to send pre-filled applications for food stamps and other government benefits for those who are eligible, using information from previous enrollments or applications. These agencies would also be required to inform people who apply for food stamps if they are eligible for additional benefits.

“We must work to eliminate the bureaucracy, paperwork and waste that prevent our poorest from accessing and keeping the benefits they need to be lifted from poverty,” Mr. Kallos said.

Mr. Kallos, who is chairman of the council’s governmental operations committee, added that he would also work for federal and state changes that could eventually allow city residents to receive food stamps automatically based on tax filings, and to continue receiving those benefits as long as they remained eligible with no renewal process.

But for now, some food stamp applicants are still struggling. Glenna Flournoy, 85, a retired teacher of English as a second language, said that when her \$15 a month in food stamps stopped without warning two years ago, she did not know what to do, so she did nothing. “I didn’t know about the system,” she said. “I just thought it would go on until you dropped dead.”

After joining a neighborhood senior center, Ms. Flournoy said she has tried to reapply for food stamps. She said she spoke to program workers twice by phone, and went to a program office, only to be told that she still needs to be interviewed. The food stamps, though not much, were enough to buy milk and cereal for breakfast; without them, she often skips breakfast or goes to the senior center to eat.

“I worked more than 30 years in this city paying taxes, and I can’t get food stamps now that I’m retired,” Ms. Flournoy said. She receives about \$2,100 a month from social security, along with a small pension. “I just don’t think it’s fair. It shouldn’t be a problem, really.”

Mr. Banks, citing privacy concerns, said that he could not comment on specific cases, but added that his agency was reviewing them and reaching out to individuals.

For Mr. Shorter, the \$180 he received in food stamps was enough to cover his meals for the month when carefully rationed. A former landscape designer, he receives \$775 a month in social security, of which \$448 goes to pay rent for a small apartment he shares with a 9-year-old cocker spaniel named Madge.

On a recent morning, Mr. Shorter sat in a sweltering kitchen because he could not afford to run the air-conditioner. He said he owed Consolidated Edison more than \$2,000 in past bills. “Why I needed the food stamps is, I did not have enough,” he said. “I’m not talking about going to a show every night. I’m talking about the basics.”

Mr. Shorter, who has diabetes and uses a pacemaker, said he did not have any problems getting his food stamps until they stopped in May, with no explanation. Busy with doctor’s appointments, he waited another month, thinking they would come back. He ate cold bologna sandwiches to stretch his dollars.

His home aide, Ron Rosario, who often buys the groceries, helped him reach out to a caseworker at the Carter Burden Center. She was unable to get his food stamps reinstated, but she submitted a new application for him this month. They were told it was never received. The caseworker is now submitting another application for him.

“Basically, we’re stuck, not even knowing whether his application has been looked at, let alone approved,” Mr. Rosario said. “So now we’re back to the beginning again.”