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TIPS

City Limits WEEKLY

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TIPS

THE NEW COST CONSCIOUSNESS

The age of the computer has finally arrived at the city's welfare system. The Human Resources Administration announced last week it will soon begin using a computer program to more accurately calculate exactly what benefits its clients are eligible for. > *By Pat Sisson*

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The age of the computer has finally arrived at the city's welfare system. The Human Resources Administration announced last week it will soon begin using a computer program to more accurately calculate exactly what benefits its clients are eligible for.

By inputting a family's size and income into the Self-Sufficiency Calculator, a caseworker can tell his or her client how much he or she can receive in food stamps, coupons from the Women, Infants and Children program, tax credits, home heating assistance, child care credits and Medicaid, and where he or she should go to collect them.

"We're going to build on this tool to help clients help themselves," HRA Commissioner Verna Eggleston said of the program designed by the Women's Center for Education and Career Advancement and the United Way of New York City.

Five nonprofit advocacy groups first tried out the calculator last fall, and so far, they say, the results have been positive. "This program helps people who are scared to step off of welfare see the transitional benefits they can receive," said Janice Teague, director of the Urban League.

In fact, thousands of New Yorkers who qualify for those benefits do not receive them. According to the Community Food Resource Center, about \$900 million in food stamps and another \$500 million in Earned Income Tax Credits go unclaimed each year in New York.

At the Women's Housing and Economic Development Corporation, which helps about 400 welfare-to-work clients in the Bronx a year, the calculator has found benefits for 120 so far. It is critical for keeping clients away from the "cliff effect" of losing benefits when wages rise slightly, said WHEDCO's Donna Rubens.

The program is not only about public assistance eligibility. Simply by typing in a borough, a family can see what it can expect to spend on rent, food, and other basic living expenses. "This tool can help begin an honest conversation between caseworker and client," said Diana Pearce of the University of Washington, author of the first study on which those numbers are based. "It will move beyond benefits to actually forming a strategy."

HRA has yet to use implement the program in house. The agency will do so "as soon as it is practical," said HRA spokesperson David Neustadt. Former commissioner Lilliam Barrios-Paoli, now a vice president at the United Way, said the agency will have to adopt a whole new mindset to get the ball rolling.

The calculator is now available at www.wceca.org. Interested caseworkers at city nonprofits should contact WCECA for instructions and information about its free three-hour training session.

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