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Federal Court Settlement to End Massive Delays in Processing NYC Food Stamps

New York- Today the Southern District of New York approved a settlement agreement that will end massive delays in the provision of food stamp benefits to thousands of low-income families and individuals in New York City.

The Williston settlement agreement provides that New York City must process food stamps applications and provide benefits to eligible households within 30 days to most households and within 5 days to the most financially needy applicants, as required by state and federal law. The class action lawsuit, *Williston V. Eggleston*, was brought by New York Legal Assistance Group, the National Center for Law and Economic Justice, and the Urban Justice Center.

"Application processing delays of weeks, even months, are all too common in New York City," stated Leslie Annexstein, Director of the Urban Justice Center's Homelessness Outreach and Prevention Project. "The fact of the matter is, by the time most families apply for food stamps, they have exhausted their resources and are in desperate need of food."

"This ruling ensures that prompt attention and relief will finally be paid to those low-income families that depend on food stamp benefits and are most at risk of going hungry," stated Randal Jeffrey, Director of New York Legal Assistance Group's General Legal Services Unit.

The lawsuit, filed in 2004, challenged New York City's failure to process applications for food stamps filed at non-cash assistance centers within the time frames required by law, as well as New York State's failure to adequately supervise the City's timely processing of the applications.

Under the settlement agreement, New York City agrees to abide by federal and state deadlines for processing food stamp applications and providing food stamps to eligible households, including those most at-need who qualify for expedited food stamp processing, and New York State agrees to supervise the City's implementation of federal timeliness requirements.

"The joint commitment represented by this Settlement will go a long way toward ensuring that the working poor will find it easier to feed their families," stated Lynn Lu, Staff Attorney with the National Center for Law and Economic Justice.

"Finally, all residents of New York City can rest assured that they will receive the assistance to which they are entitled without delay."

Under the terms of the agreement:

- Individuals experiencing food stamp application delays have a mechanism to seek individual relief
- The City must post and maintain signs in food stamp centers informing the public of their right to apply for food stamps and the time frame for processing the applications.
- Compliance will be measured through regular reports to the plaintiffs' counsel demonstrating the timeliness of food stamp application processing.
- Federal court jurisdiction for enforcement of the settlement agreement will last for four years with a mechanism for extending jurisdiction if defendants fail to comply.

"This is an important agreement for New York City's low-income families, because it makes clear that they are entitled to food stamps in a timely manner. There shouldn't be anymore application delays on the City's watch," stated Annexstein. "We appreciate that the City and State recognized the urgency of this critical matter."

The National Center for Law and Economic Justice

The National Center for Law and Economic Justice, a national law and policy organization, advances the cause of economic justice for low-income families, individuals, and communities. NCLEJ has provided legal representation and advice to low-income individuals and grassroots organizations and legal support for their advocates on economic justice matters since 1965, and is involved in ground-breaking, successful litigation and policy work around the country today. For more information, go to www.nclej.org

The Urban Justice Center

The Urban Justice Center (UJC) serves New York City's most vulnerable residents through a combination of direct legal service, systemic advocacy, community education, and political organizing. The Homelessness Outreach and Prevention Project (HOPP) at UJC advocates for economic justice for low and no-income New Yorkers through direct legal service for clients, impact litigation, and research and policy advocacy focused on access to public benefits programs. HOPP operates six legal clinics throughout the city in Queens, Brooklyn, the Bronx and Manhattan.

New York Legal Assistance Group

NYLAG, founded in 1990, is a not-for-profit law office providing free civil legal services to low income New Yorkers. A full service agency, NYLAG provides consultation, representation and advocacy. Last year, NYLAG handled 22,370 cases and assisted thousands of other clients through successful impact litigation and community legal education. For more information on NYLAG, please visit www.nylag.org