June 27, 2019

Commissioner Steven Banks
150 Greenwich St., 40th Fl.
New York, NY 10007

Dear Commissioner Banks,

As Members of the New York City Council, we write to express our opposition to the impending closure of the St. Nicholas SNAP center.

Following last year’s closure of two SNAP offices in Brooklyn, we are concerned about the impact this will have on people’s access to services. Community engagement and input are essential in decisions that affect the lives of our constituents, and we recommend thorough community input be solicited before moving forward with a center closure. Many residents who visit the St. Nicholas SNAP Center face language barriers, are elderly, or do not have consistent access to the internet, phones, and/or computers.

As such, we were disappointed to learn that when evaluating the need for a SNAP center that provides food assistance for tens of thousands of families, HRA did not sufficiently consult the community. Currently, 20,000 clients receive benefit services from the St. Nicholas location and we are not confident that the East End office can sufficiently service these additional clients. SNAP recipients frequently complain about mistreatment, case errors, and long wait times at the East End office, and we suspect that an additional client caseload will only compound these issues. Given the mistreatment and stress we have seen our constituents face at HRA offices, it is important that we ease client burdens and lower wait times, not exacerbate them.

We urge you to suspend the closure in order to allow time for thorough community input before making a final decision. While your agency has contended that technological advancements reduce the need for physical centers, the shutdown of centers happening across the city is continuing at a rapid pace. The fact that 87% of applications are filled out online shows a positive step forward, however, it is important we recognize that there is often still an in-person component to these applications and we should not respond hastily with center closures — online applications often still require the applicant make contact with physical centers.

In order to ensure that all New Yorkers receive the benefits and client assistance to which they are entitled, we ask that you allow greater time and feedback in your decision-making.

Due to the short timeframe provided on this matter, we ask you to postpone the pending closure in order to receive input from the Central Harlem community and local stakeholders.

Sincerely,

Stephen Levin  Bill Perkins  Diana Ayala
Council member, 33rd District  Council Member, 9th District  Council Member, 8th District