

Focus on People

Sandy Eller

TJH Speaks with JCCRP Food Stamp Enroller Helen Isakova

While many people who are facing financial difficulties attempt to trim non-essentials from their monthly budget, food is one of those items that cannot be considered an extra and when faced with rising prices, a trip to the local grocery store can prove to be extremely challenging.

Yet for many, the problem can be solved with a trip to the Jewish Community Center of the Rockaway Peninsula, an affiliate of the Metropolitan Council on Jewish Poverty and a beneficiary agency of the UFA, where Helen Isakova spends her days helping families enroll in New York State's food stamp program.

Now currently known as the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program or SNAP, the New York State food stamp program helps families that meet the program's income guidelines supplement their food budget by supplying them with electronic benefit cards that can be used in stores.

"They can't use the cards in restaurants but they can buy most food items

using SNAP," explained Helen.

A mother of three and a resident of Bensonhurst, Helen has been with the JCCRP for one year, after an eighteen year stint as the assistant director of home services for the Met Council in lower Manhattan. Helen, who is originally from Saint Petersburg, Russia, has lived in the United States for the last twenty years and finds fulfillment helping people on a daily basis.

Helen estimated that it takes approximately one hour to fill out all the paperwork to enroll in SNAP.

"I enter the information directly onto a computer provided by the city but final approval by a case manager at the Human Resources Administration can take up to forty five days," Helen told *The Jewish Home*. "The process can be much shorter in case of emergencies and the amount of benefits given is decided on a case by case basis depending on income, expenses and family size."

According to the SNAP website, many people are unaware that they are even eligible for SNAP benefits or are

under the misconception that if they own a home, a car, have savings or are immigrants that they don't qualify for the program. The maximum allowable SNAP benefit for a single person is \$200 per month, while for a family of six the number jumps to \$952 per month, a tremendous boon in what is for many a difficult financial climate.

"The only way to know if you are eligible is to apply," explained Helen, who processes approximately fifteen applications each week. "We have seen a lot more people applying for the program since Hurricane Sandy. So many people are losing their jobs in this area and they need extra help just to feed their families."

One particular victim of Hurricane Sandy stood out in Helen's mind, a single mother of three who lost both her job and her house to the October megastorm.

"She didn't want to move into a FEMA or Red Cross hotel because she wanted to stay in her community, near her support system and keep her chil-

dren in their schools and in a familiar environment," recalled Helen. "The woman and her children moved in with her grandmother while she tried to rebuild her home."

It was on a visit to the JCCRP to apply for FEMA where the woman met Helen who encouraged her to submit a SNAP application in order to help her out during this particularly trying time in her life.

"She was so grateful that she was able to receive the assistance she needed right in her own community," said Helen.

Helen encourages potential applicants to bring a variety of documentation with them in order to complete the enrollment process including proof of identity, proof of address, social security numbers for all family members, proof of earnings and proof of shelter costs.

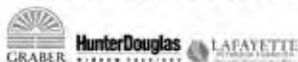
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