



**Testimony of Molly Wasow Park, Acting Commissioner
New York City Department of Social Services**

**Before the New York City Council, Committee on General Welfare
Department of Social Services Fiscal Year 2024 Preliminary Budget Hearing
March 13, 2023**

Good morning. I want to thank Deputy Speaker Ayala, Chair Brannan and the members of the General Welfare and Finance Committees for holding today's hearing and for the opportunity to testify about the Department of Social Services' (DSS) Fiscal Year (FY) 2024 Preliminary Budget.

My name is Molly Wasow Park. For the past several years I have served as the First Deputy Commissioner for the Department of Homeless Services (DHS), and for the bulk of my career I have worked to promote and finance affordable housing development. Today I introduce myself as the Acting Commissioner of the New York City Department of Social Services, which is made up of the Human Resources Administration (HRA) and the Department of Homeless Services (DHS). I look forward to working with the Council as Acting Commissioner. I am joined by DSS First Deputy Commissioner Jill Berry, HRA Administrator Lisa Fitzpatrick, DHS Administrator Joslyn Carter, and DSS Executive Deputy Commissioner of Finance Rosine Ferdinand.

Before I begin my testimony, I would like to thank our DSS frontline staff and providers for their dedication and service to our clients and New York as a whole. During the pandemic and in our recovery, DSS staff and providers have stepped up repeatedly to meet the challenges New York City has faced to ensure New Yorkers in need can access the services and supports many rely on in these challenging times, and they continue to do so.

Under the leadership of Mayor Adams, DSS-HRA-DHS staff and providers work every day to fight poverty and provide New Yorkers in need with essential benefits such as Cash Assistance, SNAP, Medicaid, Home Energy Assistance, Rental Assistance, Fair Fares Transit Discounts, anti-eviction legal services, and other

benefits and programs. We work to prevent homelessness, provide shelter when there are no alternatives, address unsheltered homelessness with care and compassion, and connect vulnerable New Yorkers to suitable housing to set them on a path to stability. It is my honor to serve as Acting Commissioner as DSS works to advance these critically important goals.

With an FY24 Preliminary Budget of \$10.7 billion, including \$8.4 billion in City funds, and a staff headcount of 12,127 total positions, DSS/HRA continues to serve millions of low-income New Yorkers through a range of programs that address poverty and income inequality. The nation's largest municipal social services agency, DSS/HRA assists approximately three million New Yorkers every year, administering many public benefit and support programs. The majority of the DSS/HRA budget supports entitlement spending; close to 85% of HRA's city tax levy and almost 80% of total funds are allocated for Medicaid payments to the State and cash assistance payments to clients and, on their behalf, rental assistance payments to landlords.

DHS' FY24 Preliminary Budget is \$2.3 billion, including \$1.5 billion in City funds, and a staff headcount of 1,920 total positions. DHS staff and our network of service providers administer the City's shelter system and provide supports for New Yorkers experiencing homelessness. Over 95% of DHS's budget is allocated for direct and contracted shelter, intake and street outreach services.

Those figures, \$10.7 billion at DSS/HRA and \$2.3 billion at DHS, only scratch the surface of all the critical social supports we provide to vulnerable New Yorkers. As the safety net of the safety net, our team is committed to uplifting the well-being of New Yorkers in need. Some of the key programs we administer in DSS/HRA include:

- the Federal Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), Medicaid and Cash Assistance entitlement programs, all of which help provide food, health care access, and income security to New Yorkers;
- rental assistance programs such as CityFHEPS, State-funded FHEPS, and federally-funded emergency housing vouchers (EHV) which provide housing stability;
- the Home Energy Assistance Program (HEAP) which helps keep vulnerable New Yorkers warm in the winter and cool in the summer;
- programs for people living with HIV/AIDS, domestic violence survivors, and those in need of adult protective services to meet the needs of highly vulnerable individuals and families;
- and the Fair Fares program, which provides low-income individuals, regardless of immigration status, with discounted MetroCards to support their transportation needs.

At DHS, we provide shelter to families and adults; we provide 24/7 outreach and low-barrier beds to unsheltered people, and we support their transitions to stable and subsidized permanent housing.

Just as there is no single profile for a New Yorker, there is no single profile for a client of DSS-HRA-DHS – a client may avail themselves of our education, training, and job placement services to pursue a career, a client may be a survivor of domestic violence securing their safety, or a client may be a person living with HIV/AIDS gaining assistance to live more independently. We serve working families and individuals; we serve people who are unable to work; we serve people who need our services for a short while and those with longer term needs; we provide one-time and on-going assistance; we provide means-tested and universal benefits. From children and their guardians receiving assistance from HRA's Office of Child Support Services to seniors and individuals with disabilities to assist with home care, protective services, and long-term care programs – New Yorkers of all ages benefit from our wraparound programs and services and will benefit from the preliminary budget we discuss today.

Before my colleagues and I take your questions, I do want to discuss a few key issues facing DSS, the steps we have taken, and our pathway forward.

Asylum Seekers and the DHS Census

I can report that as of March 12th there are 21,841 Asylum Seekers currently residing in DHS shelter. New Yorkers should be justly proud of our identity as a sanctuary city, and of our centuries-long history of welcoming newcomers from around the globe. We will continue to build on that rich tradition. We have opened 94 emergency shelters since spring of 2022, responding in real time to ensure asylum seekers coming to New York have a safe place to stay.

While our shelter census is currently almost 71,000, I think it is important to understand that without the asylum seeker crisis, the DHS census would be approximately 49,000 today. That 49,000 figure represents a marginal increase over last year and shows that this Administration's efforts were keeping the shelter census stable even in the face of increased housing costs, inflation growth, the end of the eviction moratorium and the State's Emergency Rental Assistance Program (ERAP), and the continued financial and housing challenges low-income New Yorkers face every day.

Our team works tirelessly to deliver services that support the dignity and respect that every New Yorker and our “new” New Yorkers deserve – no matter their background, no matter their origin, no matter their present circumstances. We will continue to work with partners at the Department of Education, Health and Hospitals, the Department of Health and Mental Hygiene, at NYC Emergency Management, Administration for Children’s Services, Mayor’s Office of Immigrant Affairs, and at other agencies across the administration to provide services using a whole-of-government approach.

As Mayor Adams has said, we have a “responsibility as a city to care for New Yorkers in the greatest need.” While recognizing that critical responsibility, I would like to restate Mayor Adams’ important call on State and federal authorities to aid in addressing this crisis – assisting us, and all our partners across government and the nonprofit sector, in delivering the care and support asylum seekers deserve. The Mayor’s recently released *The Road Forward: Blueprint to Address the New York City Asylum Seeker Crisis* outlines the key ways in which the New York State and federal governments can address this crisis in partnership with New York City.

Housing Subsidies & Housing Retention

DSS actively works to keep people in their homes, and thereby keep our New York neighborhoods strong. As sociologists, urban planners, and public health experts all agree, the consequences of housing instability can be catastrophic – having impacts on the ability to create and maintain supportive social networks, employment, food security, education opportunities, and health.

DSS wrestles with the breadth of housing instability in New York City. Because of the scale of this challenge, we believe it requires a coordinated and multi-pronged response. Only through mobilization of all levels of government can housing instability truly be overcome.

Despite the scale of the challenge, we at the City-level diligently employ a multiplicity of tools. We believe the most appropriate course of action is to carefully target assistance for those in need. The rental assistance subsidies and the emergency rent arrears that we provide and the homelessness and eviction prevention work we pursue serve as essential tools here. Rental assistance programs, including CityFHEPS, State FHEPS, and HASA enhanced rent supplements, help keep New Yorkers housed and help those experiencing homelessness move out of shelter and into stable housing by providing monthly rent supplements. HRA provides over \$200

million on average each year in emergency cash assistance rent arrears to prevent eviction. Homeless prevention services and aftercare services to families and individuals exiting shelter and moving to permanent housing are provided through HRA-administered Homebase offices. Our 26 Homebase locations help connect eligible New Yorkers with services to prevent eviction, assistance obtaining public benefits, short-term financial assistance, and more. Our Office of Legal Services has served more than half a million New Yorkers since 2014 – and we are continually working to strengthen our first-in-the-nation universal access, right-to-counsel initiative.

In order to meet this housing challenge we need your partnership in advocating for a more proactive, federal-scale response on tackling housing affordability; that is a challenge that confronts us not only as New Yorkers, but also residents of communities across the country; last year, the Pew Research Center found “about half of Americans (49%) say the availability of affordable housing in their local community is a major problem, up 10 percentage points from early 2018.” As we work on a local level to foster housing stability, let’s recommit to working to mobilize the resources at other levels of government necessary to truly end the housing crisis.

Benefits Processing

I’d also like to speak about the processing of SNAP and Cash Assistance benefit applications and recertifications. First, I would like to begin with the context created by the COVID 19 pandemic. The pandemic caused extraordinary adversity across the nation and particularly in its epicenter in New York City, resulting in a significant increase in demand for public benefits – as illustrated by the graph on the number of Cash Assistance recipients. Beginning in March 2020, HRA saw an unprecedented and sudden increase in application volume that has not abated. Today, we continue to see an historically high volume of applications when compared to pre-COVID pandemic figures.

Relative to January 2019, January 2023 Cash Assistance applications are up by 70%. Over that same time period, SNAP applications are up 67%.

We took steps to streamline processes to keep up with growing needs; including implementing waivers from New York State to allow for extended recertification periods and suspension of some eligibility requirements; more remote screening, processing and submission methods; expanding our Interactive Voice Response System for SNAP recertifications; and continuing and expanding phone interviews. In order to continue to meet the unprecedented need for assistance, we are updating our

staffing models to better meet the significant, sustained demand we have seen for SNAP and Cash Assistance. We are actively working to recruit, train, and onboard the staff we need.

In addition to prioritizing frontline staff hiring, we are also looking at steps we can take to improve access by streamlining and simplifying the SNAP and Cash Assistance application process for our clients, as well as reducing the administrative burden on our staff. This requires a thorough and thoughtful approach in conjunction with our State and Federal partners – but we also want to make sure we are seizing this opportunity to reevaluate and reassess. We are asking key questions like:

- What further information technology tools can we deploy to streamline processes for clients and staff?
- What lessons can we draw from our experience with the pandemic to pursue greater innovation and better deliver for the New York communities we serve?

Despite the unprecedented increase in applications and related challenges, our teams processed more applications and connected more New Yorkers to benefits than in recent pre-pandemic years. 1.77 million New Yorkers receive SNAP benefits, the highest number since 2014, to address food insecurity, and more than 450,000 receive CA benefits to meet basic needs and housing costs.

While DSS has faced challenges this year, we have also had some significant achievements that benefited New Yorkers, including:

- Made the largest funding commitment in DHS history to street homeless services, including 4,000 safe haven and stabilization beds.
- Increased Home Energy Assistance Program (HEAP) accessibility by adding applications to HRA's online application and case management platform, AccessHRA.
- Increased availability of fresh produce, balanced nutritious meals, and food packages through our Community Food Connection pantries.
- Expanded IDNYC by adding six eligibility documents for asylum seekers.
- Worked with New York State to provide over \$2.3 billion in federal pandemic emergency rental assistance program (ERAP) benefits to approximately 160,000 households.
- Worked with NYC Health + Hospitals to analyze health care outcomes for clients experiencing homelessness in order to increase access and provide enhanced Medicaid services.

- HIRENYC connected nearly 5,000 low-income New Yorkers to employment opportunities across the City - the highest number of job placements in any fiscal year since its inception.
- Implemented One-Number, a technological update that consolidates multiple DSS telephone helplines and adds additional interactive voice response options so clients can quickly and more efficiently get access to information about their benefits.

I will close by underlining our ongoing commitment to break down government silos and improve access to services. The challenges DSS-HRA-DHS works to confront bridge across agencies, and further, bridge across jurisdictional boundaries. Overcoming these challenges goes to the heart of creating the kind of caring, compassionate communities we seek to live in.

We appreciate the opportunity to testify today, and we welcome any questions that you may have.

Thank you.