

**Testimony of Steven Banks, Commissioner
New York City Department of Social Services**

**Before the New York City Council General Welfare Committee
Oversight: PATH to Permanency
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Good afternoon, Chairman Levin and members of the General Welfare Committee. Thank you for inviting us to appear before you today to discuss the services and the reforms we have implemented to improve the transition from PATH back to housing in the community. My name is Steven Banks and I am the Commissioner of the Department of Social Services (DSS), overseeing the Human Resources Administration (HRA) and Department of Homeless Services (DHS).

Recognizing the growing challenges of homelessness faced by many New York City families, over the past three years, this Administration has implemented and expanded initiatives in order to prevent and alleviate homelessness, including reinstating rental assistance programs and other permanent housing initiatives that have enabled 62,158 individuals in 22,686 households to avert entry into or move out of shelter, through May 2017.

The Administration has made unprecedented investments to address homelessness and the economic insecurity felt by low-income New Yorkers, many of whom rely on HRA and DHS benefits, programs, and services. As we have testified previously before this Committee, the current shelter census level of 58,227 as of June 25, 2017 did not occur over night.

Changing the trajectory

Since the 1980s, the face of homelessness has substantially shifted from the largely single male population struggling with justice system involvement, mental health challenges, substance use disorders and inconsistent employment to what we see today – 70% of those in shelter are families, and 34% of the families with children in shelter have a working adult.

Since the 1980s, homelessness has increased exponentially. There are many factors that contributed to what has been a 115% increase in New York City's homeless shelter population from 1994 to 2014, and the steady upward trajectory of the past 35 years:

- Stagnant wages resulting in an increasing gap between wages and rent – between 2005 and 2015, the median New York City household income increased by just 4.8 percent in real dollars, while the median rent increased by 18.3 percent in real dollars.
- Systematic reductions to multiple anti-poverty tools such as cash assistance, food stamps and Medicaid;
- The prevalence of clients experiencing domestic violence;
- Insufficient support and resources to address barriers to housing facing New Yorkers with mental health and substance use disorders, including long periods of institutionalization or incarceration;
- And the loss of over 150,000 affordable or rent stabilized units.

However, one factor led to a particularly stark increase in the City’s homeless census and affordability crisis – the abrupt end of City and State rental assistance provided through the Advantage program, which had offered subsidies for people in shelters if they took part in job training. Between April 2011, when the Advantage program ended and 2014 when this Administration reinstated rental assistance and rehousing programs, the DHS census grew by an extraordinary 38 percent – some 14,000 people.

The homelessness problem we face today is the result of decades of changes in our economy and past choices made in New York City, Albany, and Washington.

Our efforts to date have stabilized the number of people in our shelters, which, without our initiatives, would have reached some 70,000 instead of the 58,227 as of this weekend.

Since coming into office, Mayor de Blasio has restored the City’s rental assistance programs and directed unprecedented resources toward a new comprehensive and holistic approach to fighting homelessness focused on prevention, street homeless outreach, expanded transitional housing options, averted shelter entry, improved shelter conditions, expanded civil legal services, and more robust rehousing and aftercare services.

The City’s prevention first strategy includes an array of tools, recognizing that the path to homelessness is not linear and therefore our approach cannot be one that is a one-size fits all approach. Every individual in our shelter census is just that, an individual and their path towards self-sufficiency must address their individual needs.

Since 2014 we have enhanced our homeless services and assistance, including these initiatives:

- **Stepped in to immediately fill the gap left by the cancellation of the Advantage program by creating three new rental assistance programs and reinstating rehousing programs**—implementing the Living in Communities (LINC), City Family Eviction Prevention Supplement/Family Exit Plan Supplement (CityFEPS), and the Special Exit and Prevention Supplement (SEPS) rental assistance programs and restoring Section 8 and

New York City Housing Authority priorities—which have helped 51,500 people from the summer of 2014 through December 2016, most of them homeless, secure permanent housing and an additional 8,860 so far in 2017, for a total of 62,158 children and adults who have been helped through this commitment of permanent housing resources;

- **Provided emergency rental assistance to 161,000 households**, helping rent-burdened New Yorkers at risk of eviction stay in their homes;
- **Launched the largest municipal commitment ever to build and expand supportive housing** by committing to building 15,000 new units in 15 years, with the first 550 units coming online this year;
- **Aggressively expanded free legal assistance for New Yorkers** in danger of illegal eviction by increasing funding for legal services for tenants to \$62 million—a more than tenfold increase. Evictions then dropped by 24 percent and more than 40,000 New Yorkers were able to stay in their homes in 2015 and 2016;
- **Made a commitment to phase in over the next five years the funding necessary to provide universal access to legal services** for all New York City tenants facing eviction in housing court;
- **Moved ahead of schedule on the largest affordable housing plan ever**—the City’s landmark *Housing New York* plan to build or preserve 200,000 affordable apartments of which over 62,000 units have been financed;
- **Committed to adding 10,000 affordable apartments for seniors, veterans, and New Yorkers earning less than \$40,000 per household**;
- **Implemented 46 systematic and management reforms to streamline how we address homelessness**;
- **Conducted almost 16,000 shelter inspections in 2016—a 84 percent increase from 2015—and fixed more than 14,000 code violations** with help from nonprofit shelter providers thanks to the work of the Shelter Repair Squad, a multi-agency task force. The number of outstanding violations within traditional shelters has dropped 83 percent since January 2016;
- **Gotten out of 925 cluster sites, which is 25% reduction in the 17-year cluster apartment shelter program**, prioritizing units with the most serious problems and moved toward ending the use of cluster units altogether by reducing the number of cluster units from 3,658 to 2,733 today;
- **Doubled the previous investment in DHS shelter security**, with a total annual security budget of \$217 million for fiscal years 2017 and 2018;
- **Put the New York City Police Department (NYPD) in charge of security at DHS shelters**, which includes standardizing and professionalizing security, surveillance, staff training and deployment;

- **Placed 3,153 homeless veterans into permanent housing, and received certification from the federal Department of Housing and Urban Development as having ended chronic veterans' homelessness.**
- Through HRA's newly formed Source of Income (SOI) discrimination unit, taking action to prevent and prosecute housing discrimination based on source of income – and fighting SOI discrimination, through the City Commission on Human Rights (CCHR) filing of five complaints against large landlords and brokerage firms that together control about 20,000 units citywide (In 2015 CCHR quadrupled the number of investigations into SOI discrimination and in 2016 it filed more than 120 SOI discrimination investigations—the highest number in its history.);
- And created the Homelessness Prevention Administration housed within HRA to oversee prevention programs to improve program management and effectiveness.

Understanding that problems with shelter safety, conditions and services can serve as barriers to shelter entry and exit, the City has redoubled its efforts to provide safe, decent living conditions and high-quality social services to every family and individual living in shelter. Some of the initiatives and reforms we have undertaken include:

- Creating the shelter repair scorecard to track shelter conditions.
- Implementing an enhanced shelter repair program.
- Increasing security at all commercial hotels that house homeless families and individuals.
- Providing 24/7 security coverage at mental health shelters.
- Overhauling reporting on critical incidents.
- Restoring a program for domestic violence services at shelters that was eliminated in 2010.
- Initiating a New York City Police Department (NYPD) shelter security review and retraining of Department of Homeless Services (DHS) Peace Officers.
- Announcing and implementing a plan to end the 17-year-old cluster shelter program and the use of commercial hotels.
- Addressing ADA accessibility in shelters through a comprehensive litigation settlement with a plan to evaluate ADA accessibility in the DHS shelter system and implement a compliance plan.
- Expanding programming, including Adult literacy, High School equivalency programming and employment services, to help clients move forward on a career pathway.

- Getting away from the one-size-fits-all approach by working with providers to develop shelter models in which individualized shelter placements are made in accordance with the client's specific needs.
- Enhancing domestic violence services in DHS shelters through expanded HRA NoVA (No Violence Again) services in DHS Tier II family shelters and increased training for Tier II shelter staff.
- Enhancing services for LGBTQI clients – for example, in February of this year, in partnership with Councilmember Torres, we opened an 81-bed shelter in the Bronx for LGBTQI young homeless adults (ages 21-30).
- Eliminated the requirement for school-age children to be present at PATH for multiple appointments: By the end of 2016, this requirement was eliminated for families who reapply within 30 days at PATH. A second phase eliminating this requirement for families reunifying with children in foster care was launched in March. An evaluation of these programs will occur during the summer of 2017.

In addition to the reforms just described, our April 20, 2017 testimony describes in detail the agency's progress on the 46 reforms adopted following the comprehensive 90-day review of homeless services last year, including reforms aimed at prevention, shelter and rehousing.

I would now like to walk the Committee through the client experience from initial application at the Prevention Assistance and Temporary Housing (PATH) intake center back to self-sufficiency in the community.

However, at the outset, I want to highlight several considerations in evaluating the current status of our programs. As we testified at the April hearing regarding the status of the 46 reforms we announced just over a year ago after the 90-day review of homeless services, we are well on our way in the implementation phase for these substantial changes in the 20-year-old homeless services system – but, of course, we are addressing systemic problems that built up over many years and the full impact of the reforms will not be felt immediately. Moreover, it was just a few months ago that we released the Turning the Tide plan to completely transform the shelter system that was created in a haphazard way over nearly four decades. For clients, this major reform is just beginning. As someone who sued the two agencies that I now run over the course of four decades, I certainly understand both the urgency of making change for clients and the complexity of making the necessary institutional reforms.

Prevention Assistance and Temporary Housing (PATH)

The City has a broader array of prevention tools than ever before, including expanded rent arrears, rental assistance, and legal services as well as assistance for family and friends who can

provide alternatives to shelter in the community. We therefore encourage families facing potential homelessness to seek help first at one of our Homebase offices in all five boroughs.

As a last resort, families can seek shelter at the Prevention Assistance and Temporary Housing (PATH) intake center, which is located at 151 E. 151st Street, in the Bronx. PATH is open 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, 365 days a year.

In City Fiscal Year 2016, DHS' Prevention Assistance and Temporary Housing (PATH) intake center handled nearly 38,000 applications from nearly 18,000 unique households – numbers which have remained steady since 2013.

Prevention at PATH/Family Intake

Upon arrival, reception staff members inquire about the family's reason for coming to PATH. In FY17 through May, we received an average of 2,982 applications per month.

When new applicants and those families reapplying after applying more than 30 days ago arrive at PATH, they are engaged by PATH social workers. These social workers provide crisis counseling, mediation services, and referrals to community-based resources as an alternative to shelter. For those families with housing options still available in the community, PATH social workers collaborate with HRA Homeless Diversion Unit (HDU) caseworkers, and Homebase offices throughout the five boroughs to put services in place to help families retain or secure independent housing without having to enter shelter. All families reapplying for services following a break in shelter services of less than 30 days, except those who have experienced domestic violence, are referred to meet with an HRA Homeless Diversion Unit (HDU) caseworker to further explore ways to avoid shelter entry through family mediation, legal services, HRA emergency grants, and rental assistance.

In addition to HRA's Homelessness Diversion Unit, co-located at PATH is HRA NoVA ("No Violence Again"), Department of Education (DOE) family assistance liaisons, Administration for Children's Services (ACS) liaisons and a contracted medical provider, The Floating Hospital.

Many of the families who arrive at PATH have existing medical and behavioral health care providers and thus not all families are referred to the on-site medical provider for comprehensive assessments. However, at PATH, families are referred to the Floating Hospital if a member of the family is pregnant, the family includes an infant under four months of age, or if any member of the family has any hospitalizations in the past month, any acute medical needs, or the presence of a communicable diseases. In addition, families self-reporting or observed to be facing mental health or substance use challenges are referred to DHS social workers for further assessment.

At PATH intake, ACS staff stationed at PATH conducts a nightly clearance of all families with children who present at PATH to apply for temporary emergency shelter; matches are then provided to DHS identifying families with open ACS cases. DHS staff members also learn of ACS involvement through the standardized intake interview, where a family has the opportunity to self-disclose this information. When PATH staff members learn of a family's ACS involvement through these means, they will contact ACS staff on-site at PATH or the ACS staff assigned to the family to inquire further regarding the family's housing needs.

Additionally, shelter staff has access to information fields in the DHS CARES system that identifies a family's ACS involvement.

Direct communication with DOE also occurs once a family is assigned to a shelter by way of an automatic feed. The DOE family liaisons as well as the 117 DOE liaisons in shelters assist in working with families to meet the educational needs of children while in shelter.

If families have no alternate housing options immediately available such that they would qualify for homeless prevention services, they are interviewed by a DHS family worker who obtains the family's two-year housing history, which serves as the basis for determining shelter eligibility. During the interview process, families may be assigned a conditional shelter placement while DHS investigates and assesses the family's individualized needs. Conditional placements last for 10 days on average. During this time, field specialists visit the homes of family and friends with whom the family previously resided to verify information provided during the interview. During this conditional placement, social service staff and social workers from DHS arrange in-person meetings, whenever possible, with families applying for shelter and family or friends they lived with previously to further pursue mediation and explain in greater detail available homeless prevention services and rental assistance programs to return to the community. Once the investigation is completed, an eligibility determination concerning the completeness of the application and the availability of other housing is written, reviewed, and provided to the family in the shelter placement.

Every household has a right to a legal conference at PATH if they are found ineligible. In addition, the family has 60 days after being found ineligible to request a Fair Hearing from New York State. Families determined ineligible for shelter receive follow-up outreach by DHS and HRA staff to direct families to services in their communities, including rental assistance when appropriate.

PATHway to permanency

As of June 25, 2017, DHS is sheltering 12,406 families with children, comprised of:

- 16,981 adults; and

- 22,117 children.

DHS operates and maintains over 160 shelters for families with children (FWC) throughout the five boroughs. These shelters are operated by over 70 providers most of whom are non-profit social services agencies contracted to provide services. Families currently reside in three types of shelter: Family Tier IIs, Family Hotels, or Family Clusters (individual apartments rented as shelter through the 17-year program that began during the Giuliani Administration).

Additionally, in order to meet our legal and moral obligation of shelter, we also house families in commercial hotels (a practice that dates back to the Lindsey Administration). As part of the Mayor's *Turning the Tide* Plan, we've announced that we will exit all 360 cluster apartments and commercial hotel facilities and thus shrink the shelter footprint by 45 percent.

Once in shelter, DHS begins working with families to develop a specific exit plan and an individualized pathway toward sustainable permanency through their Independent Living Plan (ILP), which includes five key steps.

Phase One: Pre-eligibility

Upon arrival at a shelter, the family is assigned a case manager in CARES, the DHS system of record. The case manager meets with the family to address any immediate needs and makes appropriate referrals. Case managers also review the documentation given to the client during the initial intake process and explain next steps for eligible and ineligible families.

During this time, discussions with clients also focus on the needs of children within the household, including school enrollment. The case manager refers the client to the Department of Education (DOE) liaison or the DOE Students in Temporary Housing borough contact. While DHS makes every effort to place families at shelter locations that correspond to the youngest school-aged child's school address, due to constraints in shelter capacity this is not always possible. Within the PMMR, we reported that during the first four months of FY17, there was a decline in the percentage of families with children who were placed in shelter according to the youngest school-aged child's school address. However, as we continue to implement our new borough-based shelter approach to provide shelters to enable families to be placed closer to the anchors of daily life, such as their schools, jobs, health care and houses of worship, we will be able to create the capacity necessary to address this need.

Additionally, referrals are made to the NYC Department of Consumer Affairs (DCA) and the Office of Financial Empowerment to enable clients to review their credit report, recognizing that a poor credit score or low financial literacy will present obstacles to self-sufficiency. Further referrals are made to appropriate housing readiness services, including, but not limited to, tenancy and housing preparatory workshops.

Phase Two: Initial Housing Assessment/Exit Plan Development

Immediately following a shelter eligibility determination, a CARES assessment is conducted and the shelter Case Manager and Housing Specialist work with the family to develop a sustainable, individualized exit strategy. During this process a comprehensive assessment of the family's current level of housing readiness as well as an individualized and special needs assessment is conducted and applications for public assistance are submitted. During these critical days, the family gathers housing documents and other information such as social security cards and birth certificates as set out in the Independent Living Plan (ILP). This time is also used to work with the family to explore the available housing options, including reuniting clients with family and friends in the community. This initial phase is also used to assist the family with completing and submitting housing applications, introducing them to aftercare services, and monitoring their case for public assistance compliance.

Phase Three: Exit Plan Initiation

In this step, the client and household members are linked to available and appropriate resources such as employment and job training opportunities, financial savings, continuing and/or higher education, as well as health and mental health services, as applicable. This time is also used to prepare the client for apartment viewings and interviews. Staff works with clients on approaches to interviewing for private market rental units. Clients are provided information such as how to approach an apartment viewing, including attire and etiquette, so that the client is prepared at the apartment viewing and interview. If necessary, clients are referred to programs such as *Dress for Success* and the *Men's Warehouse Gives Back to the Community Initiatives*. Throughout this step of the process, clients are also connected to child care services. Throughout this phase clients participate in monthly housing meetings with staff to review and discuss available housing resources and options. And case managers monitor the family's case for public assistance compliance and financial savings, and follow-up with referrals for each client as needed.

Phase Four: Housing Search

In Phase Four, clients meet with staff on a bi-weekly basis to review and discuss the Apartment Review Checklist (ARC), as well as to assess the client's overall progress with the housing search. Those clients who have been in shelter nine months or longer or have ACS involvement meet with staff on a weekly basis. These efforts are documented in the CARES narratives case notes. At each ILP meeting, case managers review and update the exit plans with input from Housing Specialists. If there is a change in the family's status, such as loss of employment or an addition to or removal from a family's household composition, the ILP and housing plan are immediately modified. When this happens the client is also re-budgeted at HRA.

During the Housing Search, the client may be escorted to the apartment viewing by the Housing Specialist. If the Housing Specialist is unable to accompany the client, the client is provided with a referral to the viewing with all pertinent information, including location/address, date, and time, the phone number of a contact person, written directions by public transportation or car, and given a MetroCard for travel to and from the location. If a client is non-compliant with two or more apartment viewings, the case manager meets with the family to reemphasize best practices associated with apartment searching and address other barriers that could result in a prolonged shelter stay. If a client continues to be non-compliant, a conference with the Program Director and Program Administrator and Client Responsibility Proceedings are scheduled.

The average length of stay for families with children in shelter declined by six percent from 435 days in the first four months of fiscal 2016 compared to 408 days for the 2017 period reported in the Preliminary Mayor's Management Report (PMMR). The housing search for families in DHS is affected by the many factors that lead them to shelter in the first place.

For example, as we detailed in the Turning the Tide plan, data from the Rent Guidelines Board reveals that between 1994 and 2012 almost 250,000 apartments lost the protections of rent regulation. While some units have been added as a condition for tax incentives and other subsidies that building owners received, there has been a significant net loss of rent-regulated units. Indeed, over those 18 years, the city suffered a net loss of about 150,000 rent-stabilized units, or 16 percent of the total rent-regulated stock.

Further in 2015, there were about one million Extremely Low Income and Very Low Income households—defined as households earning less than 50 percent of the Area Median Income for New York City—but there were only a little more than 500,000 rental units affordable to those households. In other words, the city has only half the housing it needs for about three million low-income New Yorkers.

New Yorkers who can only afford apartments at this rent level thus have few places to turn. While the city's overall rental vacancy rate of 3.5 percent poses problems for people of all incomes, renters only able to afford an apartment costing \$800 or less must search in a market with a vacancy rate of just 1.8 percent.

In 2016, a family of three with a household income of \$24,500 (equivalent to 30 percent of the Income Limit for the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) for 2016) could afford to pay approximately \$613 per month in rent and utilities—a figure well under half of the city's 2015 median gross rent of \$1,317. In 2014, more than half of all rental households in New York City were rent-burdened and about 3 out of every 10 of the city's renters were

severely rent-burdened, which are households that pay more than 50 percent of their income on rent.

Recognizing this, DHS has stepped up its efforts to rehouse families back in the community as quickly as possible. By adding more robust prevention services, housing specialists at every contracted shelter, and additional housing staff at both DHS and HRA we continue to address the issue of rehousing clients in communities.

Phase Five: Appropriate Apartment Identified

When a viable unit in the community is identified, clients are assisted with packing and completing the Transport Request Form, introduced to the Homebase program in the community in which they will be living, the leasing document and other relevant documents are reviewed, and the broker or landlord is contacted to confirm the apartment has been secured, and the housing packet is sent out by the DHS Office of Client Resources (OCR).

Within seven days of the family identifying the unit, the case worker submits transportation and emergency furniture requests to OCR, as needed, and accompanies the family to the lease signing.

Phase Six: Move Out

Each week, DHS and contracted provider staff locate and secure apartments for clients to move into. After the lease is signed, the expectation is families move out of the shelter and into their apartment within 48 hours. Shelter staff works to ensure that the family is packed and ready to move out on the scheduled day and time and is present with the family throughout the process. Once the family has exited shelter, the family's case file is updated with the client's new information and home address. However, as described with respect to aftercare below, the agency's interaction with the client does not end there.

Investments to Enhance Services for Families in Shelter

The Adopted FY18 budget included key investments in order for HRA and DHS to continue to address homelessness prevention, shelter, and rehousing needs.

The FY18 Adopted Budget included a \$3.7 million addition to fund 61 positions for adult family and families with children intake operations:

- 20 HC Adult Family Intake Center positions;
- 12 HC PATH Social Workers;
- 19 HC PATH intake and
- 10 HC PATH child care workers.

Further, within HRA's Homelessness Prevention Administration Unit, the Executive budget adds 17 positions to support rehousing and placement out of shelter, complemented by 13 additional positions in DHS. This investment provides more support to supplement ongoing initiatives to move individuals and families from shelter to permanent housing.

Previously in April 2016 following the 90-day review, DHS announced that it would rationalize payment rates for shelter providers, to ensure that all contracted shelter programs can provide consistent and high quality levels of service and are able to maintain their facilities in accordance with City and State standards for operations, including caseload ratios; resources for special needs and facilitation of housing placement; real-time maintenance and repairs; and funding for health and safety needs, including security and support staff.

To effectuate this rate reform and shelter services enhancements, the FY17 and FY18 adopted budgets project \$146 million for model budgets for shelter providers. But the model really includes more than just \$146 million. The rate reform includes a series of new initiatives that must be viewed holistically and that together form the model budget. This includes Thrive (\$34 million); the FY16 and FY17 COLAs (total of \$11 million); and the FY18 provider wage adjustment (\$5.7 million in FY18 growing to \$10.7 million in FY19, although this is inclusive of non-shelter providers as well). The January 17 Plan added Adult shelter enhancements of \$9 million for not-for-profit providers; \$17 million was added for security at mental health shelters in the January 17 and Executive 17 Plans; and \$5 million is provided annually for one-time shelter maintenance and repair costs that are not capitolly eligible. Taken together, these investments for not-for-profit shelters total over \$200 million when fully annualized.

Moreover, we expect some benefit from the settlement reached in April in the Legal Aid Society's litigation against the State concerning the public assistance program known as the Family Eviction Prevention Supplement that provides a monthly rental subsidy to low-income families with children in New York City. As part of the settlement, the State is approving a new rental assistance plan that we submitted for this program. Under the settlement, a family of three currently eligible for \$850 per month in rental assistance through the State-approved program, for example, will be eligible for \$1,515, representing a 78 percent increase. Another important outcome of this settlement is that now each year 1,000 survivors of domestic violence, who previously were ineligible for this subsidy, are eligible as part of the new plan that we submitted to the State.

Social Workers in Shelters

In 2015, the Mayor and the First Lady announced a historic plan of action called ThriveNYC to guide the city towards a more effective and holistic system to support the mental well-being of New Yorkers.

Recognizing the diverse needs of our clients, as well as the fact that being placed in shelter can distance families from their support networks such as their family, friends, neighbors, houses of worship and daily routines, thereby increasing stress, we are onboarding social workers at each contracted shelter to serve as Client Care Coordinators; over 100 Social Workers have been hired thus far.

These Client Care Coordinators are Licensed Master Social Workers placed in shelter to work with families as they navigate multi-systems and cope with the stressors and anxiety associated with homelessness.

Through the use of the Client Care Coordinators, DHS seeks to:

1. Enhance the delivery and coordination of services to families with children in shelter.
2. Promote and model best practices for shelter social service provider staff.
3. Improve linkages to mental health and community-based services.
4. Increase the ability of shelter social services staff to address mental health issues in a culturally and linguistically sensitive manner that incorporates strength-based, family-driven and youth/child-guided care.
5. Strengthen overall permanency outcomes for families with children in shelter.

Aftercare

Currently, seven different non-profit agencies run Homebase programs citywide. Homebase has been dramatically expanded by the de Blasio administration, increasing the number of Homebase locations from 14 in fiscal year 2015 to 24 today and doubling the program's funding.

A total of nearly \$59 million annually starting in FY18 will support an enhanced HomeBase program that will provide coordinated preventive, aftercare, and community support services, including benefits advocacy, budgeting, employment, short-term financial assistance, and help with housing relocation. The new program includes the baseline funding for prevention programs previously in DHS totaling \$39.2 million as well as \$18.2 million in HRA that was added to the budget with the advent of the new rental assistance programs and as part of the 90-day review.

Between July 2016 and May 31, 2017, 25,492 Households (70,707 Individuals) were served by Homebase, citywide. Over 90% of these households remain in the community and do not enter shelter within one year of services.

Homebase programs craft housing-focused individualized service plans that can contain the following core services:

- Eviction prevention
- Tenant/landlord services
- Mediation
- Assistance with relocation
- Employment and training
- Social service referrals
- Flexible short-term financial assistance
- Rental assistance screening and application

HRA is currently completing a new RFP process for Homebase non-profit providers that added aftercare supports to households leaving shelter and five new service areas to the Homebase network. These new awards will be announced this summer and the additional services will begin in September.

Homebase's aftercare services are available to all households leaving shelter through a rental assistance program, as early as possible in their tenancy, followed by a thorough assessment, the development of an individualized service plan, and intensive services for the most at-risk households. Services include long-term support as well as engagement with households in the midst of short-term housing crises.

HRA workers are also onsite at Homebase to assist with the tenants' public benefits issues and emergency rent arrears grant applications. Homebase also offers regular workshops, inviting at-risk community members, including former shelter residents, and providing information on affordable housing, subsidies, employment, work supports, and financial empowerment.

Outreach

Many people do not reach out for help before they lose their homes—in part because they never knew help was available. That is why the de Blasio administration has deployed a multifaceted outreach strategy to reach the individuals and families most at risk of losing their homes. Posters on subways and buses, supplemented with printed brochures, are accompanied by social media marketing as well as television and radio spots. These campaigns also focus on local houses of worship, community events, schools, and elected officials, who can help make important connections between prevention services in their communities and the people who need them.

Homebase staff also conducts outreach by going directly into the city's neighborhoods to engage people in public spaces—outside supermarkets, check cashing businesses, and nail

salons or at buildings with many eviction notices. They attend community events, speak at places of worship, and build close referral relationships with neighborhood schools. Together, Homebase's efforts are a powerful component of the City's strategy to reduce the number of families and individuals in shelters.

For example, earlier this month, I joined Brooklyn Borough President Eric Adams at New Bridges Elementary School in Brooklyn in an effort to reach families that come from zip codes that have high rates of shelter entry to let them know about the services available to them so they can continue to live in the community and avert shelter entries. We know that every year when the last school bell rings in June families who are holding on in unstable housing to ensure continuity in their children's education have difficulty continuing to stay in precarious situations. We want families to know before they seek shelter that resources to remain in the community are available to them. Available resources include legal services to address wrongful evictions and unlawful actions by landlords, rent arrears payments to stave off an eviction case, or rent payments for family and friends who are making rooms available in their homes.

Putting Clients First

In totality, the goal of this Administration and all of our reforms is to remove real barriers to accessing vital City services and to ensure that clients have unencumbered access to these services when they need a helping hand. At HRA for example, we have reengineered access points for our benefits and services, expanded the use of technology for online transactions, and recently launched HRA's mobile app.

At DHS, through a comprehensive review of homelessness program services and restructuring our agency to improve the delivery of our services to clients, we are focused on improving client outcomes by recognizing that each family in need of our assistance has unique challenges. By adding additional social workers in shelter and increasing daytime programming in shelter, we are improving our ability to connect our clients to critical resources to help them move forward on their path to permanency.

As our work continues and we implement our reforms, we look forward working with this Committee as well as advocates to ensure we are serving the families and individuals within our system effectively so that they can return to the community and self-sufficiency.

Responding to Introductions

In each instance, regarding the package of bills before the Committee today, we look forward with working with the sponsors to address the concerns that underlie the proposed legislation.

Proposed Int. No. 855-A

The bill would require the Human Resources Administration to (HRA) to determine if public assistance recipients may qualify for additional forms of public assistance. When HRA determines that an individual may qualify for other benefits, the bill would require HRA to notify those individuals that they may qualify for additional forms of public assistance and send those individuals applications with instructions on how to apply for that assistance. The bill would also require HRA to pre-fill the application with any information HRA already has from the recipient's original application.

HRA has undergone significant modernization efforts since 2014 with respect to benefits access. To improve access to benefits and information on a pending or active case, we developed an online portal available to New Yorkers anywhere an internet connection is available. ACCESS HRA is an innovative tool that allows New York City residents to retrieve benefit information and apply and recertify for SNAP and other benefits. This portal allows clients to create an ACCESS HRA account to gain access to over 100 case-specific points of information in real-time, including application and case statuses, upcoming appointments, benefits account balances, and documents requested for eligibility determinations. Additionally, clients can make changes to contact information, view eligibility notices electronically, and opt into text message and email alerts. Clients can also request budget letters online. We continue to improve this tool to add new functionality and will soon allow recipients to submit their required Periodic Report in addition to reporting changes in circumstances. As of May 31, 2017 there are more than 300,000 HRA online accounts for SNAP households, and we receive over 33,000 submissions each month.

However, HRA's ability to utilize these approaches is the result of multiple Federal and State waivers in response to complex Federal and State regulations. As the City is focused on the reauthorization of the Farm Bill, including recently testifying before a House subcommittee on our technology innovations to expand access to benefits and promote program efficiencies, we are continuing to monitor the status of provisions of federal law that enabled us to obtain the waivers so that we can continue to receive them.

Given the continuing developments in Washington that can impact our benefits and services, we look forward to discussing with you steps that we can take to address the concerns that gave rise to this proposed legislation at this uncertain time. We also want to make sure that the proposed legislation takes into account the greater reliance we are placing on online transactions rather than paper transactions.

Proposed Int. No. 1461

The bill would require the Department of Social Services to provide customer service training twice per year to all employees that interact with members of the public.

As part of our reform initiatives, HRA has a robust training curriculum for all front line staff which includes a full day of client service training. Additionally, HRA conducts agency-wide trainings such as our new LGBTQI training.

Taking into consideration what we have already implemented to address the concerns reflected in the proposed legislation, we stand ready to discuss whether additional efforts are needed and feasible.

Proposed Int. No. 1577

The bill would require the creation of the Office of Case Management. The Office would be tasked with developing recommendations on how electronic case management systems used by City departments that provide direct services can be upgraded to facilitate information sharing among departments and increasing the use of digital tools to best serve clients. The Office would also develop recommendations on how systems which are required by the State may be updated to facilitate further information sharing. The bill would require the director of the Office to submit an annual report on all recommendations.

This proposed legislation broadly impacts many City agencies that provide case management services. In each instance the agencies and their case management systems are subject to different governing statutes and regulation from multiple levels of government. Additionally, agencies may be subject to different rules in respect to client confidentiality. The Administration and the Department of Social Services, in the instances in which HRA and DHS are impacted, are open to further discussions on what structures would make the most sense to move such a modernization effort forward, and we are always open to exploring technology solutions to better streamline client solutions.

Proposed Int. No. 1597

This bill would allow youths who have spent time in foster care to be eligible for rental assistance vouchers that would allow them to obtain stable housing. Eligibility would be limited to those 24 years old or younger.

As we have reported previously, we are in the process of streamlining our rental assistance programs in light of the recent FEPS settlement in litigation against the State. We expect the streamlining process to be completed this summer and we will consider the issues raised by the legislation as we do so. We also have to evaluate whether this well-intentioned legislation presents any legal issues.

Proposed Int. No. 1635

The proposed bill would require the Department of Social Services to create and issue a job center “visit receipt” for all individuals who visit job centers. The visit receipt would include the staff member’s name, staff member’s contact information, any documents received by the agency from the visitor, the reason for the visit, and a time stamp indicating the time and date a visitor was present at the job center. The bill would require the department to semiannually post to its website a report of the average constituent wait times at each job center. The bill would further require the department to display in job centers information on how to make a complaint and would require the department to issue a tracking number to track the status of a complaint. The bill would require the department to post semiannually to its website, a report of all complaints aggregated by job center and complaint type.

HRA looks forward to working with this Committee to address client service issues that are the focus of the legislation. However, consideration of the legislation should take into account the reforms in this area that we have already implemented. For example, HRA currently provides clients with receipts of visits at job centers and regularly reports on wait times. The “Confirmation of Contact with your Center” form was created to provide an individual who visits or contacts a Job or SNAP Center with a document that indicates the nature and date of the visit or contact.

As we have testified previously, we also rolled-out on-demand telephone interviews citywide, which allow clients to conduct their SNAP recertification applications at their convenience, rather than the old system of waiting for a call during a four-hour window, or having to come into a center and wait for an interview. In May, the current average wait time for an on-demand telephone interview was just a few minutes. As an additional enhancement, we plan to introduce on-demand telephone interviews for new SNAP applicants by the end of this year.

The bill would also require the department to semiannually post to its website a report of the average constituent wait times at each job center. We already post this information on the HRA website, <http://www1.nyc.gov/site/hra/about/facts.page>. For example, in April the Southern Brooklyn Center had a 22 minute wait time – the average wait time for all Job Centers in April 2017 was 42 minutes and the average wait at Non-Cash Assistance SNAP Centers was 30 minutes.

An HRA “Client Rights and Responsibilities” poster is already in use and outlines the client complaint process by phone and email. There is also signage which is prominently displayed in applicant/client waiting areas that addresses concerns such as “resolving a problem,” “what you should know if you have an emergency,” and how to contact the “HRA Central Complaint unit” and advises clients on how to file a complaint. Further, HRA’s website provides

information on how to initiate a complaint with the Commissioner and a SNAP discrimination complaint. In addition, for SNAP discrimination complaints the Office of Temporary and Disability Assistance requires that a “Food Stamp Complaint Procedure Poster,” be posted. And finally, one of the State Office of Temporary and Disability’s required information booklets, “What You Should Know about Your Rights and Responsibilities When Applying for or Receiving Benefits,” includes information on filing discrimination complaints. HRA has a tracking system for client complaints to make sure that they are addressed timely.

Proposed Int. No. 1642

The bill would require that any individuals or families receiving rental assistance vouchers established by the Department of Social Services, such as the current LINC, CityFEPS and SEPS vouchers, would continue to receive the assistance so long as the household continues to meet any other eligibility requirements. The bill would also require that the maximum rent toward which rental assistance vouchers may be applied annually increases at the same rate as the fair market rents set by the United States Department of Housing Preservation and Development. The requirements set by the bill would be subject to appropriation.

Currently, various of the City’s rental assistance programs that are City Tax Levy funded, including LINC IV, City FEPS, and SEPS for households with a disabled member or a veteran, have no time limit. In contrast, LINC I and II are joint City/State programs and would require State approval to change the program and eligibility requirements, including the rent levels. In addition, the recent settlement in the FEPS litigation against the State sets forth the rent levels for this rental assistance program, which must be taken into account when evaluating whether City Tax Levy-funded rental assistance programs should have rent levels set that are different than those for the State-approved programs.

As we complete the process of streamlining our rental assistance programs in light of the recent FEPS settlement in the litigation against the State, we will consider the issues raised by the legislation as we do so. Again, we also have to evaluate whether this well-intentioned legislation presents any legal issues.

Thank you for this opportunity to testify and I look forward to your questions.