Department of Investigation
Press Release

<p style="text-align:center; color:red">OPENING STATEMENT OF DOI COMMISSIONER EDWARD J. KURIANSKY
DEPARTMENT OF BUILDINGS MAYORAL TASK FORCE PUBLIC HEARING,
NOVEMBER 30, 2000</p>

First, I want to thank Mayor Giuliani for responding so emphatically to the urgent problems at the Buildings Department, and creating this extremely hardworking and committed Task Force under the very able leadership of Bart Schwartz.

In the quarter century I have spent in law enforcement, I have often had occasion to investigate and prosecute corrupt government officials, as well as literally thousands of dishonest and abusive users and providers of government services. Indeed, as Commissioner of the City Department of Investigation, these activities, more or less, make up my current job description.

Human nature being what it is, of course, we know that larceny - both in the heart and in reality- will always exist at some level, but hopefully at a manageable one. Most of the time, I have found that the arrest of individual wrongdoers is sufficient not only to punish those who have actually broken the law but also to deter others from doing so. Occasionally, however, corruption can insinuate itself so deeply in the fabric of a particular agency or area of government, that it resists every effort of law enforcement to keep it in check.

Regrettably, that is exactly what has happened at the Buildings Department over the last few decades - most notably, of course, within its inspectional services. Again and again, DOI, through the outstanding work if its DOB Inspector General, Dennis Curran, and together with various state and federal prosecutors, has successfully prosecuted dozens of corrupt buildings inspectors of every stripe. Indeed, in the past 10 years alone, we have brought criminal charges against more than 100 inspectors, their supervisors, and managers. In effect, more than one-third of the approximately 250 available inspectional positions were at one time filled by individuals who corrupted that very process.

This time, however, there was something quite different, something much worse. The unscrupulous conduct had reached into even the highest ranks of agency managers, and had also implicated the expediter-middlemen, and professional architects and engineers who daily ply their trade at the Buildings Department.

The history of government has repeatedly taught us that out of the ashes of scandal - whether it be Watergate, police corruption, or nursing home abuse - there often arises a burning desire for genuine reform. In my view, we not have - all of us - a once-in-a-generation opportunity to do what traditional law enforcement simply cannot; namely, to thoroughly re-design and re-invigorate a department of government that is critically important to both the economic vitality of the City and the basic safety of its citizens.

More specifically, since we know all too well that governmental inefficiency, bureaucracy, and delay inevitably breed corruption, we must, at a minimum, find ways to: 1) professionalize the management of the Department; 2) simplify and streamline its archaic administrative and record keeping procedures; 3) devise creative systems to block existing opportunities for fraud and abuse; and, 4) equally important, enhance the pride, proficiency, and training of the many good and decent agency employees whose expertise and dedication often go unnoticed and underappreciated, particularly in these difficult times.

Nor should we be reluctant to ask whether certain historical functions at DOB should be organized or done in an other way; whether some of its key operations could be better handled by a new or different City agency, or even by the private sector; and, conversely, whether certain activities in the private sector might themselves require tougher oversight and enforcement by the Department.

I very much look forward to hearing and learning from all of you today. There is absolutely no reason why, if we all put our heads together, we cannot draft a blueprint for, and ultimately construct, the finest Buildings Department in the world.

Thank you.