

**Testimony of New York City Human Resources Administration  
Oversight: HRA's System of Domestic Violence Shelters**

**Hearing before New York City Council's Committees on  
General Welfare and Women and Gender Equity  
September 19, 2019**

Good morning Chairperson Levin and Chairperson Rosenthal and members of the General Welfare and the Women and Gender Equity Committees. Thank you for this opportunity to testify and offer updates on our efforts to provide assistance and support for survivors of domestic violence. My name is Annette Holm, and I am the Chief Special Services Officer for HRA, I am joined by Natasha Godby, the newly appointed Deputy Commissioner for Emergency Intervention Services, who began on April 1<sup>st</sup> of this year.

As you know, next month is Domestic Violence Awareness month, and HRA welcomes the opportunity to inform our staff and providers about current issues related to domestic violence. This year, we will focus our efforts on client-centered decision making and self-care training for staff who are exposed to the secondary trauma related to those who provide services to domestic violence survivors.

HRA is the nation's largest social services agency, assisting over three million New Yorkers annually through the administration of public assistance programs including cash assistance, employment programs, food stamps, public health insurance and other supports that help New Yorkers remain in the workforce. HRA also plays a role in the administration of housing programs such as supportive housing and services, designed to assist individuals who are chronically homeless, coupled with HIV/AIDS, serious mental illness and/or are survivors of domestic violence, among others. Much of our work focuses on advancing one of this Administration's chief priorities: reducing income inequality and leveling the playing field for all New Yorkers.

We know that domestic violence is unfortunately far too common and blind to one's socio-economic status, immigration status, gender identity and sexual orientation – anyone, anywhere can fall victim to domestic violence. HRA addresses the scourge of domestic violence, a major driver of poverty and homelessness, by ensuring survivors and their families have access to a safe living environment and trauma-informed services, both within the shelter systems and as they transition back into communities.

Operating under the New York State Domestic Violence Prevention Act of 1987, the NYC Human Resources Administration (HRA) works with a network of providers to provide support services for survivors of domestic violence and their children. The law requires counties to provide shelter and services to survivors of domestic violence and establishes funding for these programs. The New York State Office of Children and Family Services (OCFS) promulgates and maintains regulations for licensure and the standards for the establishment and maintenance of residential and non-residential domestic violence programs. OCFS authorizes DSS/HRA to administer the financial and contractual requirements of domestic violence emergency residential service programs. The New York State Office of Temporary and Disability Assistance (OTDA) authorizes DSS/HRA to administer the financial and contractual requirements of the domestic violence Tier II system.

HRA administers the largest domestic violence shelter system in the country. The emergency domestic violence shelter system consists of 55 confidential facilities throughout all five boroughs. There are 2,514 emergency beds. The emergency beds provide trauma-informed shelter services to domestic violence survivors who are in immediate risk. Included in the 55 sites are 9 DV Tier II/transitional shelter facilities which account for 362 units. Only domestic survivors who are stabilized in the emergency system can be transferred to the Tier II shelters. In FY19, the HRA domestic violence system served 10,983 individuals, which included 355 single adults and 3,877 families.

In September 2015, Mayor de Blasio announced that the City would develop 400 additional DV Tier II units and 300 emergency beds – an unprecedented addition by the City to address capacity in the domestic violence shelter system. **All 300** emergency beds have been awarded. A domestic violence shelter which was constructed primarily to accept households with pets, opened last week, and we are actively working to fill the beds. Additionally, 295 of the 400 Tier II units have been awarded. Three Tier II shelters are currently scheduled to open in 2020. For the remaining 105 Tier II units, there is currently an open RFP and we strongly encourage providers to submit proposals.

### **Enhanced Domestic Violence Services**

Emergency shelter services are designed to address domestic violence survivors who are in imminent danger and in need of a safe housing. Programs are client-centered with a focus on managing the crisis and trauma of domestic violence, strengthening coping skills, and enhancing client self-sufficiency. Services shall include individual counseling, advocacy, psycho-educational groups, and trauma-focused interventions that address the dynamics of domestic violence. All shelter programs may include on-site or have linkages to childcare services, housing assistance,

benefit entitlement assistance, financial development service, and economic empowerment programs to maximize self-sufficiency.

Enhanced services which may be available include expressive therapies (art, play, recreational), stress reduction coping skills techniques, mental health/substance use counseling and linkages to community-based medical providers. DV shelter providers offer an array of services to children, including, but not limited to, individual counseling for children.

HRA conducts monthly meetings with DV shelter providers, the purpose of which is to discuss programmatic developments, share best practices and address matters related to shelter operations. This year, in collaboration with the Homeless DV Provider Coalition, HRA hosted three DV Residential Best Practice Forums. The latest one focused on child welfare services and policies. Previous forums included trauma-informed care for children, and presentations by the Mayor's Office to End Domestic and Gender-Based Violence (ENDGBV), the Administration for Children's Services (ACS), and Autism Speaks.

Over the course of the past six years, this Administration has advanced substantial policy changes that have had both immediate and long-term positive outcomes for domestic violence survivors accessing residential and/or non-residential services.

I'd like to take some time to highlight numerous developments that have been made to assist domestic violence survivors, improve their shelter experience, and assist them in transitioning out of shelter and back into the community.

- Inter-Agency Collaboration - HRA, in partnership with the Mayor's Office of Economic Opportunity, NYC Department of Health and Mental Hygiene, and the NYC Administration for Children Services received grant funding to transform 15 domestic violence (DV) shelters in New York City over three years. The initiative will engage survivors and staff to enhance environments in the shelters, promoting wellness and supporting the social-emotional needs of survivors and their children.
- Language Access Services – DSS offers to share, at no cost, telephonic interpretation and ASL interpretation services with all DV shelter providers. This helps ensure that all DV survivors have access to shelter and support in their language.
- NYC Well – HRA continues to explore ways in which it can strengthen the provision of trauma-informed mental health services within the Domestic Violence programs. Recognizing the importance of having access to mental health support outside of providers' regular business hours. HRA delivered over 5,000 posters, flyers and informationals to providers about services provided by NYC Well – a signature program funded through ThriveNYC. The posters are prominently displayed throughout the facilities so that clients have a connection to free, confidential mental health support. NYCWell enables callers the ability to speak with a counselor via phone, text or chat and get access to mental health and substance misuse services, in more than 200 languages, 24/7, 365 days a year.

- HRA collaborates with ENDGBV to ensure that all domestic violence providers are aware of training opportunities for staff, as well as services offered to survivors at the NYC Family Justice Centers and in communities across the city. These services can enhance what is offered by shelter providers to inform a more robust service package to survivors.
- School busing – HRA and the Department of Education collaborated to ensure that DV shelter residents and their children are safely placed in schools and have resources to meet their educational needs. The school busing program upholds confidentiality and safety by not conducting pick-ups and drop-offs in front of the facility, but at a nearby location.
- We conduct presentations at ACS borough offices to inform staff of DV shelter rules and regulations, HRA partners with ACS to address complex case matters and assist with shelter needs.
- This July, we received 100 free cell phones for DV clients, provided by the DSS Emergency Management Office. This benefits survivors whose communication devices were linked to their abusers and can now have a safe means of communication.

### **Gender Equity Initiative**

I'd like to take an opportunity to specifically highlight our work on gender equity. Historically, domestic violence services were created with ciswomen and hetero-normative families in mind. Cisgender men, transgender and gender non-conforming people accessing domestic violence services may encounter obstacles related to shelter placement.

The DSS Diversity and Equity Team's Gender Equity Initiative engaged HRA's non-residential domestic violence providers in their interest in becoming more welcoming and inclusive spaces for people of all genders. In 2017, trainings were offered to increase knowledge around gender inequity and provide affirming and welcoming engagements for survivors of domestic violence. Subsequently, a gender equity survey was issued to non-residential DV service providers to assess their gender equity competency and identify gaps. We were encouraged by the surveyed providers' interest and measures taken to have LGBTQI and gender-nonconforming clients feel welcome, accepted, and treated with respect and dignity. We continue to support their efforts to improve services to these clients in need of DV services. Our next engagement phase will include training, technical assistance, and surveying HRA's residential domestic violence providers in the coming months.

### **Streamlining of Rental Assistance**

Within the HRA Office of Domestic Violence (ODV), the DV Housing Support Services Unit works with DV shelter clients who are eligible for HRA housing subsidy programs, issuing housing certifications, approving housing application packages, conducting lease signings, and renewals.

DV Housing Specialists also seek available housing, work with landlords, brokers, and clients to facilitate linkages to housing.

Earlier this year, HRA instituted an enhanced safety planning protocol, in which clients are able to self-determine safe areas in communities where they are seeking permanent housing. During the safety planning discussion, the client uses NYC zip codes and neighborhood maps to select their safe areas. This greatly eases limitations and expands housing options for DV survivors in the community.

### **After-Care/Wrap-Around Services**

As clients transition back into communities, it is essential to utilize programs and services designed to support and assist DV clients, particularly through the NYC Family Justice Centers and community-based services. These services include crisis intervention, case management and advocacy, counseling, support groups, housing advocacy, and economic security advocacy.

HRA contracts with nine providers to offer state-mandated non-residential services throughout the five boroughs. The goal of this program is to provide a range of supportive services to families of domestic violence. In addition to offering a series of core level services required by NYS regulations (telephone hotline assistance, information & referral services, advocacy, counseling, community education and outreach activities), these providers offer after-care services for clients transitioning out of shelter to ensure that when they enter permanent housing, they are safe, financially secure and on track for employment. In FY19, the non-residential service providers served, on average, 2,016 clients.

Other non-residential services include legal advocacy and assistance in obtaining orders of protection, securing U-visas, and navigating divorce and child support proceedings, as well as services for adolescent and child witnesses of domestic violence. We recognize that oftentimes clients wish to receive services outside of their residence, or even the broader community. It is our goal to ensure that clients are aware of the client-centered service options available to them throughout NYC and are able to access the services of interest to them through referrals and direct linkages to providers in the broader community, such as the Family Justice Centers in every borough.

### **DV Legal Services**

Through its Office of Civil Justice (OCJ), HRA oversees, manages and monitors the City's programs that provide civil legal assistance to New Yorkers in need. Since 2014, the City has made great strides in increasing, enhancing, and making more efficient the delivery of civil legal services to

low-income New Yorkers facing legal issues that may jeopardize the “essentials of life,” including things like housing and immigration status. As a result of these important efforts, New York City is a national leader in providing civil legal services for low-income people.

Legal services programs that specifically address the legal needs of survivors of domestic and intimate partner violence are key components of OCJ’s and HRA’s work to provide access to justice. For survivors facing housing legal issues such as possible eviction, harassment by an unscrupulous landlord or other threats to the stability of their homes, OCJ and its non-profit legal services provider partners have made housing legal assistance available to survivors in all of the City’s Family Justice Centers. These legal services, launched in 2017 in partnership with ENDGBV, help to ensure that survivors have access to well-trained and skilled legal advocates to protect their rights as tenants and assist them to remain in homes that are safe and stable for them and their families. Through referrals at the FJCs, the program has provided legal assistance to over 3,000 survivors and other household members.

In addition, HRA supports legal services programs for survivors in need of immigration legal services. In FY18, the Administration’s immigration legal services programs, including ActionNYC, IOI and legal programs supported by federal Community Service Block Grant funding have assisted survivors in over 1,000 immigration legal matters. In addition, programs under HRA’s Division of Emergency Intervention Services include immigration legal services for survivors. Through this program, legal providers with expertise in domestic violence issues and experience in immigration law partner with local community-based groups that serve immigrant populations. Together they provide increased access to these services in communities and build capacity within community-based groups to identify and respond appropriately to these issues.

OCJ also administers legal services programs as part of the SAVE program funded by the City Council. SAVE - Supporting Alternatives to Violent Encounters – provides free legal services to DV and IPV survivors in areas including family, matrimonial and consumer law, as well as domestic violence prevention, counseling, advocacy, and social services referrals. SAVE also includes training sessions for pro bono attorneys on matrimonial and family law, addressing issues of orders of protection, custody and visitation, child and spousal support and divorce. We are grateful that in FY19 the City Council increased its funding for SAVE, enabling the three participating legal services provider organizations - Her Justice, Safe Horizon, and Sanctuary for Families – to increase services for survivors facing matrimonial and family law issues in Family Court and Supreme Court.

## **Prevention**

Along with addressing the needs of survivors of domestic and intimate partner violence with an array of services and partnerships to assist with their well-being, we recognize that in order to

prevent and lessen the incidence of DV, educational efforts need to continue targeting youth as they enter middle and high school, promoting the importance of healthy relationships.

For twenty years now, HRA's Teen Relationship Abuse Prevention Program (RAPP) has helped teens attending public high schools and middle schools develop healthier relationships. Social workers (MSW) deliver an array of relationship abuse services through four components: prevention classes, intervention counseling, staff development and training, and community outreach. RAPP fosters a school climate with zero tolerance for abusive behavior in all of its forms, thereby promoting a safe and productive learning environment for students and staff. For several years, RAPP has also focused on pregnancy-prevention efforts. Currently, 32 MSWs are serving 93 schools citywide. During the 2018-2019 school years, over 8,000 students received RAPP intervention services and counseling, and more than 5,500 completed the three-session curriculum.

### **Streamlined Transition**

State regulations require emergency domestic violence shelters to provide temporary housing and supportive services to DV survivors for a maximum of 90 days, and then two additional 45-day extensions may be provided for residents who continue to be in need of temporary shelter and emergency services. Every provider is expected to assist clients in developing a transition or exit strategy. The Office of Domestic Violence (ODV) works closely with providers to support staff and clients during each transition.

In 2017, HRA and, our sister agency, Department of Homeless Services (DHS) collaborated and implemented a streamlined process for survivors exiting DV emergency shelter who reached maximum length of stay to transition to DHS shelter. This process promotes a safer and more efficient path for DV clients to access DHS resources and simplifies admissions. This results in immediate placement in a DHS facility for DV survivors and their children, avoiding the PATH intake process and conditional DHS placement status.

While these clients are waiting for DHS placement, they maintain their placement in the domestic violence emergency shelter system, and as part of the streamlined process, they complete discharge plans which include linkages to after-care services.

### **HRA Domestic Violence Programs and Services**

The Office of Domestic Violence (ODV) provides temporary housing, emergency shelter and supportive services, and trauma informed programming to survivors of domestic violence and their children.

## **No Violence Again (NoVA)**

NoVA, established in 1991, addresses the needs of domestic violence survivors seeking emergency housing from DHS. When a family member discloses that she/he has experienced domestic violence during the DHS intake process (at PATH for families, AFIC for adults without minor children, and single intake centers), the family or individual is sent to NoVA for a domestic violence safety assessment and possible placement in an HRA-administered DV shelter. NoVA staff use a set of criteria to determine eligibility based on the following:

- Whether s/he is a domestic violence survivor in accordance with New York Social Services Law § 459 and the definitions and procedures specified in 98-ADM-3;
- Whether there is a relationship between the need for emergency shelter for current safety and the incident of domestic violence; and
- Whether the perpetrator meets the definition of “family or household member” in accordance with NoVA procedures.

## **Domestic Violence Liaison Unit**

The Domestic Violence Liaison Unit is a service mandated by the Family Violence Option Act, which is intended to protect survivors of domestic violence, both living in shelter and in communities, who could be further endangered through compliance with public assistance requirements, particularly those related to employment and child support.

Liaisons serve all HRA FIA Job Centers and determine eligibility for waivers from work and other requirements as the client’s confidentiality needs dictate. These waivers give some clients a greater opportunity to avoid activities that put their safety in jeopardy and give other clients an opportunity to safely comply with federal and state work requirements, so that they develop the skills and training necessary to locate a job, and quickly transition from HRA benefits and services in order to establish and maintain their financial independence. In FY19, the Domestic Violence Liaison Unit assessed 11,482 clients for safety and DV service needs and 7,365 waivers were granted.

## **Anti-Domestic Violence Eligibility Needs Team (ADVENT)**

In FY19, the Anti-Domestic Violence Eligibility Needs Team (ADVENT) provided specialized services to an average of 1,369 clients in DV shelter each month. ADVENT conducts routine and ongoing eligibility determinations, provides case management, and engages survivors of domestic violence in activities designed to address their individualized needs. ADVENT works closely with domestic violence liaisons to monitor and respond to the needs of survivors of DV and their families. The Unit also processes housing applications and lease ups for HRA housing programs for clients in DV shelter.



## **The Alternative to Shelter (ATS)**

The Alternative to Shelter (ATS) program minimizes the need to enter shelter by giving survivors of domestic violence – who have orders of protection – the option of remaining safely in their home. An ATS client’s safety needs are assessed and a safety plan is put in place with close coordination with the NYPD to ensure that the individual and/or family are able to quickly alert the authorities when in danger. The program provides clients with a personal electronic response alarm system linked to a 24-hour monitoring center that will notify authorities to dispatch police in the event of an alarm activation. Survivors of domestic violence also receive crisis intervention counseling, ongoing case management, advocacy and referrals to services. In CY18, ATS received 554 new referrals and had an average active caseload of 195 clients per month.

## **Response to Legislation**

Intro 1712 would amend the Administrative Code of the City of New York, in relation to reporting on the services provided to transgender and gender non-conforming individuals in domestic violence shelters.

We look forward to working with the sponsor to ensure that all clients are treated with dignity and respect. As drafted, we have some concerns, namely about ensuring that collection of such information about transgender and non-binary people does not create barriers to access, raise privacy concerns, and/or further traumatize a client in an already vulnerable situation. We look forward to better understanding the purpose of the data collection – for example, an interest in the number of TGNC people accessing DV services, or about service provision, and/or specialized DV services for TGNC people. There may be alternative means to meet our shared interest in ensuring gender-affirming services for transgender and non-binary people accessing our DV shelters.

Intro 152 would amend the Administrative Code of the City of New York, in relation to requiring the Department of Homeless Services to report on families with children in shelter. We look forward to working with the sponsor to better understand the intention and goal of such reporting. I’d like to remind the Committee that clients in domestic violence shelters are subject to strict confidentiality requirements and, as written, would require client consent for the collection and exact use of the data for this reporting purpose.

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