



**Testimony of Natasha Godby, Deputy Commissioner of Emergency and Intervention Services**

**NYC Department of Social Services / Human Resources Administration**

**Before the New York City Council, Committees on General Welfare and Women and Gender Equity**

**Oversight Hearing: Update on Human Resources Administration's System of Domestic Violence Shelters**

**November 29, 2021**

Good morning, I want to thank the Committees on General Welfare and Women and Gender Equity for holding today's hearing and for the opportunity to testify.

My name is Natasha Godby and I am the Deputy Commissioner of Emergency and Intervention Services (EIS) for the Human Resources Administration (HRA). I am joined by Elizabeth Dank from the NYC Mayor's Office to End Domestic and Gender Based Violence (ENDGBV).

Today, we look forward to updating the Council on our work to address domestic violence across the city, and our efforts to bring support and services to the most vulnerable New Yorkers. In the previous testimony before the Council in 2019, an update was provided on this topic, and a few short months later COVID-19 changed our environment and way of delivering services. While the pandemic brought on many challenges, we look forward to updating the Council on the critical work that continued uninterrupted by our staff and providers to ensure service continuity and support for survivors of domestic violence.

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 experiencing chronic homelessness, individuals with HIV/AIDS, individuals with serious mental illness and/or individuals who 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.

Our staff at HRA's Office of Domestic Violence work each day to address the life-altering effects of domestic violence, a significant driver of poverty and homelessness. This is achieved by ensuring that survivors and their families have access to safe living conditions and trauma-informed services, both within the shelter systems and as they transition back into their communities.

HRA works with providers across the city to connect survivors of domestic violence and their children to critical services and programs. This work follows the New York State Domestic Violence Prevention Act of 1987, which requires counties to provide both non-residential services and residential shelter services to survivors of domestic violence and establishes program funding. 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's administration of the financial and contractual requirements of domestic violence emergency residential shelter program. Additionally, 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 residential shelter system.

HRA's domestic violence shelter system is the largest in the nation. Our programs are designed to stabilize clients in a safe environment and are developed to address the trauma of domestic violence while at the same time increasing a client's self-sufficiency. The robust suite of services includes but is not limited to individual counseling, advocacy, psycho-educational groups and trauma-focused interventions. All domestic violence shelters are required to provide childcare services and assist clients with obtaining permanent housing, benefit entitlement application assistance, financial development services and workforce readiness services to enhance clients' self-sufficiency.

Our emergency domestic violence shelter system consists of 55 confidential facilities across the city with a total bed capacity of 2,451 emergency beds. These emergency shelter providers offer trauma-informed services to survivors of domestic violence who are in imminent risk and/or are fleeing a current domestic violence incident. Within the 55 sites, there are 10 DV Tier II/transitional shelter facilities, they include 447 units that serve domestic violence survivors who have stabilized over time in the emergency system and require extended services. In CY 2020, the HRA domestic violence shelter system served 9,439 individuals, which include 472 single adults and 3,626 families (comprised of adults and children).

These figures should be seen within the context of this Administration's ongoing efforts to increase support for survivors of domestic violence. Mayor de Blasio and Commissioner Banks increased shelter capacity. Under their tenure, 300 additional emergency beds were added and are operational and 400 Tier II units were awarded, of which 233 are operational, 62 Tier II units are scheduled to open at the end of this calendar year and 105 Tier II units are scheduled to open in FY'23. The last group of Tier II units were originally scheduled to open in calendar year 2021; however, they are delayed because of construction and operational-related delays due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Since 2015, emergency shelters have served approximately 25,000 individuals per year. During that same timeline, Tier II shelters have served between 7,000 and 10,000 individuals per year. Looking at occupancy, since 2015, emergency shelter occupancy increased by over 160% and by over 300% for Tier II shelters.

There are various entry points into the HRA Domestic Violence Residential shelter system. First, through the NYC Domestic Violence Hotline managed by Safe Horizon, where domestic violence

survivors can connect with advocates to receive services, counseling, and information about available resources to maintain their and their families' safety. HRA NoVA (or No Violence Again) operates out of DHS Intake Centers where trained social workers conduct intake for domestic violence shelter placement, offer crisis counseling and referrals for services. Lastly, community-based referrals are other shelter entry points for survivors. OCFS regulations permit one third of shelter populations to be referred from the community, such as local police stations and neighborhood hospitals.

### **Enhanced Domestic Violence Services**

Now, I would like to take this opportunity to shift and provide an update on our programs serving survivors of domestic violence. Our emergency shelter services are available and designed to assist domestic violence survivors who are facing imminent dangers to their safety and in need of safe temporary housing in accordance with State law. Our programs aim to help our clients manage the trauma of domestic violence and enhance their self-sufficiency. Specific services include one-on-one counseling, client advocacy, psycho-educational and trauma-informed interventions to address a client's individual domestic violence experience. Moreover, our shelter programs include housing and benefit assistance, financial development service, economic empowerment programs, mental health and substance use counseling and may include childcare services, provided on-site or via partnerships.

Our efforts to improve our services for survivors of domestic violence and sexual assault continue with the implementation of this year's Local Law 102, which requires DSS to provide survivor-centered responses to complaints of sexual assault or harassment made by a client or staff. We are working towards implementing the requirements of this local law and are coordinating the training and outreach steps to ensure survivors are aware of available resources. All domestic violence contracted providers were contacted and notified of their responsibility for developing and providing to HRA their policy and procedures to address sexual harassment, as per Executive Order No. 64 of March 2021. HRA in conjunction with ENDGBV developed a flyer with information and links to resources to assist survivors of sexual violence and provided the flyer to all domestic violence contracted providers to post and distribute in domestic violence shelters and non-residential contractor locations. We are working in conjunction with ENDGBV on the development of training and linkages and access to resources. We appreciate the Council's work and suggestions as we serve our most vulnerable New Yorkers.

### **Gender Equity**

We would also like to update the Committees on our gender equity work. Over time, programs for domestic violence survivors were originally created to service ciswomen and their children. The DSS Diversity and Equity Team's Gender Equity Initiative engaged HRA's non-residential domestic violence providers regarding ensuring that they are inclusive places for people of all genders. Currently, HRA is working in collaboration with the Director of Equity and Gender to develop training to address services for LGBTQI+ individuals.

The NYS Social Services law mandates HRA to provide emergency shelter and other services for survivors of domestic violence. The law does not make distinctions on the basis of sex or gender

identity and HRA requires that all services are provided to all New Yorkers regardless of their sex or gender identity. A domestic violence survivor is “any person over the age of sixteen, any married person or any parent accompanied by his or her minor child or children in situations in which such person or such person’s child is a victim” who experiences domestic violence.

Placements in domestic violence shelter are subject to the client’s designated safe area, family composition, availability of a bed or unit that can accommodate the client’s criteria, and any other special needs that the client may have, including but not limited to their specific medical needs, pets, employment and child’s school location. In CY2020, the population of clients served that were over the age of eighteen, including single and heads of household comprised of 143 clients who reported they identified as male and 2,925 who reported they identified as female. To date in CY2021 116 clients reported they identified as male and 2,744 reported they identified as female.

### **Rental Assistance Access**

Our Office of Domestic Violence, Housing Support Services, works with domestic violence shelter clients who are eligible for HRA housing subsidies, helping to issue housing certifications, reviewing and approving housing application packages, and conducting leases signings and renewals. As part of our efforts to enhance safety measures for our clients, clients have the ability to self-determine safe areas in communities where they are seeking permanent housing. This meticulous process helps ease limitations and expands housing options for domestic violence survivors seeking a safe home.

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

Our programs and services also support domestic violence survivors to transition back into their communities. These services include crisis intervention, case management and advocacy, counseling, support groups and economic security advocacy, and are delivered through the NYC Family Justice Centers (FJC) and community-based services. HRA works with nine contracted providers to offer state-mandated non-residential services across the city for survivors. This program offers a range of supportive services to families who are survivors of domestic violence, along with after-care services for clients transitioning out of shelter to ensure they are stabilized once they relocate to permanent housing. In FY2021, the non-residential service providers enrolled 21,538 clients.

### **Domestic Violence Legal Services**

HRA’s Office of Civil Justice (OCJ), which manages and monitors the City’s programs that provide civil legal assistance to New Yorkers in need, operates critical legal services programs that specifically address the legal needs of survivors of domestic and intimate partner violence. 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. This program has provided legal assistance to 210 survivors and other household members, through the referrals made at FJCs.

HRA also prioritizes immigration legal support services for survivors and their families. In FY2021, the City's immigration legal support services, which include ActionNYC, the Immigrant Opportunity Initiatives (IOI) and legal programs supported by federal Community Service Block Grants, have assisted survivors in 878 immigration legal matters. OCJ also manages legal service programs through the Supporting Alternatives to Violent Encounters, or SAVE, program, which is funded by the Council. The SAVE program provides free legal services to domestic violence and intimate partner violence survivors in areas including family, matrimonial and consumer law.

### **Exits from DV Shelter**

In 2018, Local Law No. 83 was enacted amending section 21-141 of the administrative code of the City of New York, in relation to exits from domestic violence emergency shelters. Local Law 83 requires HRA to submit an annual report to the speaker of the NYC Council and upload to the council's website, exits from domestic violence emergency shelters.

In accordance with OCFS regulations, emergency domestic violence shelters provide temporary safe housing and supportive services for up to 90 days and with additional extensions up to a maximum 180 days for clients in need of extended emergency services. Providers are expected to develop a housing plan with domestic violence shelter clients, while the HRA Office of Domestic Violence (ODV) works closely with providers to support staff and clients during each transition. In CY 2020, HRA DV shelters served a total of 9,439 adults and children – of which 2,341 were families with children and 386 were single adults that were discharged from domestic violence emergency shelters.

### **Streamlining Client Transition**

HRA and DHS have implemented a streamlined process for clients who have reached the State-set 90-day limit in the domestic violence emergency system with no available options for permanent housing to seamlessly transfer into the DHS shelter system. This process promotes a safer and more efficient path for DV clients to access DHS resources and eliminates the disruptions that can occur when families move from one system to another and simplifies the sharing of information for admissions purposes. HRA's Office of Domestic Violence works closely with providers, who are expected to assist clients in developing a transition or exit strategy, to support staff and clients during each individual transition. In 2020, 3 single adults and 446 families timing out of DV shelters under the State rule transitioned over to DHS shelters.

### **Human Trafficking Liaison**

As part of the responsibilities under the New York State Anti-Trafficking statute, HRA is mandated to establish a Human Trafficking Victim (HTV) Liaison. HRA's HTV Liaison is responsible for monitoring the application process of all state-confirmed human trafficking victims including minor victims who have been referred to HRA by OTDA contracted providers to apply for Cash Assistance, Medicaid and SNAP benefits. New York State assigns a contracted social service provider to assist the client with services. HRA has seen an increase in the number of referrals, in 2020 18 referrals were received and of that number 13 applied for and received benefits. In 2021, to date HRA has received 60 HTV referrals and thus far 17 clients applied for

and received benefits, our office continues to monitor the application process for the remaining referred clients. HTV's are able to seek shelter either from DHS or the DV shelter system if they are homeless. As an example in 2021, 7 clients had a prior history of visiting a DHS homeless intake site and were assessed by the No Violence Again (NoVA) program. Additionally, 4 had a prior stay in domestic violence shelter.

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

HRA's Office of Domestic Violence (ODV) provides several programs and services to survivors of domestic violence and their children, including temporary housing, emergency shelter and supportive services and trauma-informed programming. These programs include:

### No Violence Again (NoVA)

As mentioned earlier in the testimony, one point of entry into domestic violence shelter is through the NoVA program. No Violence Again, or NoVA, assists DV survivors seeking emergency housing from DHS. When a family member discloses that they have experienced domestic violence during the DHS intake process or DHS staff believes that DV may be an issue for the family, that family is referred to NoVA for a domestic violence safety assessment and possible placement in an HRA DV shelter. In CY2020 5,274 clients were assessed, of which 908 were determined to be eligible for placement under the State standard.

### Domestic Violence Liaison Unit

In accordance with OTDA public assistance regulations the Domestic Violence Liaison Unit works to protect survivors of domestic violence who are at risk of being endangered through compliance with federal and state public assistance requirements, particularly those related to employment and child support. Clients are served by liaisons at all HRA FIA Job Centers who help determine eligibility for waivers from employment, child support, and other requirements to meet the client's safety and confidentiality needs. These waivers help survivors avoid activities that may put their safety at risk, such as traveling to an employment location where their abuser could find them and/or participating in paternity and child support enforcement court proceedings. The waivers give clients the opportunity to safely comply with federal and state public assistance requirements, so they can continue to safely seek employment and receive child support. In CY2020, the Domestic Violence Liaison Unit assessed 6,920 clients for safety and 5,694 waivers were granted under federal and state rules.

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

The Anti-Domestic Violence Eligibility Needs Team, or ADVENT, conducts routine eligibility determinations and individualized case management for domestic violence survivors. The ADVENT teams also process housing applications and lease documents for HRA housing programs for clients in domestic violence shelters. In FY2020, ADVENT provided specialized services to an average of 311 clients in receipt of domestic violence services per month.

### The Alternative to Shelter (ATS)

The Alternative to Shelter, or ATS, which is transitioning to ENDGBV, is a program that helps reduce the need to enter shelter by giving domestic violence survivors who have orders of protection the option to remain safely in their homes. ATS assesses each client's needs and develops a safety plan, with NYPD coordination, to ensure the client and their family can quickly alert the authorities when in danger. Clients are provided with a personal electronic response alarm device that is connected to a system monitored 24-hours a day that notifies authorities to dispatch police when the alarm is activated. In CY2020, ATS received 747 new referrals and had an average active caseload of 192 clients per month.

### Teen Relationship Abuse Prevention Program (RAPP)

The Teen Relationship Abuse Prevention Program (RAPP) is a nationally recognized domestic violence primary prevention program. Located in public high schools and middle schools citywide, the program provides a comprehensive curriculum in which students learn to recognize and change destructive patterns of behavior before they are transferred to adult relationships. On average, 420 students a month receive individual or group counseling with, on average, 330 completing the 3-session curriculum.

### DV Mental Health Services

HRA, in collaboration with ENDGBV, will now have funding to establish a Mobile & On-Demand Mental Health Services program that will provide shelter-wide mental health support services to domestic violence clients and their children. The program will commence in 2022 and further enhance the current array of domestic violence services provided by existing contracted providers by incorporating approximately 30 licensed clinicians, psychiatrists and social workers that will immediately screen, assess and provide mental health-focused care to approximately 9,500 families entering DV residential services programs throughout the year.

The Mobile & On-Demand Mental Health Services will include:

- A multi-tiered approach to provision of mental health services to domestic violence survivors and their families residing in DV shelter.
- Mental health trauma-informed social work services that are delivered in a culturally relevant environment and sensitive to the effects of domestic violence.
- Mental health services with a focus on children dually affected by both vicarious or secondary domestic violence trauma exposure and the adverse effects of homelessness on children.
- A Universal Mental Health Screening tool which can be used for the evaluation of all newly admitted shelter residents.
- Delivery of secondary tier mental health non-pharmaceutical intervention via a Psychologist/Social Worker for domestic violence survivors with identified mental health needs.
- Crisis on-call mental health services that can be provided either in-person or via tele-health.
- The third tier of mental health services will be in the form of a warm hand off to NYC

Health + Hospital psychiatric services via linkages.

## **Responding to the COVID-19 Pandemic**

Now, we would like to highlight some of the essential work that HRA's Office of Domestic Violence staff performed during the COVID-19 pandemic as we continued to engage clients and all survivors to ensure the continuity of critical services efficiently, and without any disruption as the City transitioned to remote work.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, the Office of Domestic Violence continuously provided services to domestic violence survivors, including social services and shelter, in addition to new services to meet our different environment, such as internet connectivity for clients. The Office continues to provide these critical services and has worked to extend our public reach by breaking down barriers and meeting survivors where they are. For example, in collaboration with the Mayor's Office to End Domestic and Gender-Based Violence (ENDGBV), the Office is assessing additional means of communication via the Domestic Violence Hotline for initial assistance, such as text and chat communication functions, which may open other avenues for domestic violence survivors to seek help.

During the initial phase of the pandemic, from February to April 2020, the agency saw a decrease in the number of domestic violence referrals from the NYC DV Hotline. Since then, the referrals have increased to their pre-pandemic levels. To inform the public that domestic violence services were available during the pandemic, HRA and ENDGBV ran social media notifications to expand our outreach to vulnerable communities.

Several steps were taken throughout domestic violence shelters to maintain safety during the pandemic. Domestic violence shelters have been following Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) and NYC Department of Health and Mental Hygiene (DOHMH) guidance and protocols around safety to protect the health of our clients and their families. Domestic violence shelter providers have also been provided with free Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) from City and State agencies, such as hand sanitizer and masks for clients and staff. To safeguard the health and safety of our clients and staff at shelters, clients who tested positive for COVID-19 were quarantined in their individual shelter unit or at DHS Isolation Units.

Additionally, several initiatives were taken by our agencies and the City to improve our clients' time in shelter. To improve connectivity and remote learning, the City installed Wi-Fi in domestic violence shelters throughout the city beginning in 2020. Additionally, HRA worked closely with the NYC Department of Education (DOE) to ensure all school-aged children at domestic violence shelters received a device to access the internet. Clients and their families now have unlimited WiFi access for educational purposes, as well as to search for housing, employment, and related services (such as social services benefits using Access HRA).

From its onset and throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, HRA has advocated for and received significant temporary waivers from State and federal requirements to provide clients greater access to benefits and services. One of these waivers we obtained extended the 180-day State limit on domestic violence emergency shelter stays, giving our clients the flexibility and time to get back



on their feet. As we have reported to the Council previously, DSS/HRA/DHS also put in place several COVID-19 reforms and operational changes to better serve our clients. For example, we waived all in-person engagements for survivors of domestic violence and set up call-in numbers for assessment and crisis counseling.

In addition to being protected by the various eviction moratoria put in place due to the pandemic, on an as-needed basis, our clients were connected to pandemic resources such as the New York State Emergency Rental Assistance Program (ERAP). Resources such as these can assist our clients and their families transition from shelter and ultimately return safely to the community.

### **Legislation**

Intro 2732 recognizes the complexities of gender-based violence that may contribute to a delayed initiation of a civil legal remedy. We support the intent of this legislation to expand and strengthen access to resources and remedies for survivors, and we look forward to working with the Council on a final bill.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify today on our work to protect survivors of domestic violence. We welcome any questions you may have.