

Testimony of John Rojas, Chief Special Services Officer, New York City Human Resources Administration, New York City Department of Social Services
Oversight: Supporting Domestic Violence Survivors in NYC's Shelter System
before the New York City Council Committee on General Welfare and the Committee on Women and Gender Equity

October 9, 2024

Good morning Deputy Speaker Ayala, Chair Louis, and members of the Committee on General Welfare and the Committee on Women and Gender Equity. My name is John Rojas and I serve as the Chief Special Services Officer at the Human Resources Administration (HRA) within the Department of Social Services (DSS). My portfolio, among other things, includes oversight of the City's domestic violence shelter system. I would like to thank the committees for the opportunity to testify today on our work to support survivors of domestic violence that are experiencing homelessness. I am joined by my colleagues Rima Rivera, Deputy Commissioner, Domestic Violence Services, HRA, and Aqueelah Winston, Deputy Commissioner, Shelter Intake and Assessment, Department of Homeless Services (DHS), and by Jennifer DeCarli, Deputy Commissioner for Family Justice Center Operations and Survivor Services, the Mayor's Office to End Domestic and Gender-Based Violence (EndGBV).

As you are aware, October is Domestic Violence Awareness Month – giving us all an opportunity to lift up survivors, their loved ones, survivor advocates, and our shared communities' efforts as we work to create the positive change we must continually pursue. We salute their work and I welcome the opportunity to update the Council on our initiatives to support survivors of domestic violence in the domestic violence shelter system.

I would like to begin by sharing information with anyone in the public who may need help – if you or someone you know is experiencing domestic or gender-based violence, help is available. The NYC 24-Hour Domestic Violence Hotline is 1-800-621-HOPE; you can reach the Human Trafficking Resource Center at 1-888-373-7888; the NYC Gay and Lesbian Anti-Violence Project at 212-714-1141; and Barrier-Free Living, with a focus on assisting individuals with disabilities, at 212-533-4358. We understand the importance of centering the client, client family needs, and strive to be a resource linking survivors of domestic violence to culturally competent care during their time of need.

We welcome the opportunity to share our work to ensure survivors have access to a safe living environment and trauma-informed services – both within the shelter system and as they safely transition to community.

HRA administers the largest domestic violence shelter system in the country. The emergency domestic violence shelter system consists of 54 confidential facilities throughout all five boroughs – comprised of 42 emergency shelters and 12 family transitional shelters (Tier II). There are 2,290 emergency domestic violence shelter beds, which serve both individuals and families; there are 628 family (transitional) shelter units open systemwide. The emergency beds provide trauma-informed shelter services to domestic violence survivors who are at immediate risk. Only domestic survivors who are stabilized in the emergency system can be transferred to the Tier II shelters. In FY24, the HRA domestic violence system served 11,231 adults and children in emergency and family transitional shelters.

Shelters serve as an entryway to further services and assistance, including childcare services, housing assistance, benefit entitlement assistance, financial development service, and economic empowerment programs. Shelters also serve as an entry point for expressive therapies (art, play, recreational), stress reduction skills techniques, mental health/substance use counseling, and community-based medical providers.

Having provided that overview, I will now share an overview of intake, the array of services and linkages to care shelters provide, and the pathway to greater independence and safe moveout.

There are three pathways to intake. One pathway is through the Safe Horizon hotline. Survivors can connect with advocates to receive services, counseling, and information about available resources to maintain their and their families' safety; support can include crisis counseling, safety planning, information and resources, and assistance finding domestic violence shelters.

A second pathway is through No Violence Again (NoVA) screening at DHS' Prevention Assistance and Temporary Housing (PATH) intake center, Adult Family Intake Center (AFIC), or single intake center. A third pathway to intake is through a community-based referral – that can be local police precincts, neighborhood hospitals, Family Justice Centers, DV non-residential community providers, or other social service providers.

DV Emergency Shelter Providers are required to provide several essential services:

- Hotline Services include crisis intervention counseling, information, and referrals, including referrals to other available residential programs when the facility is at capacity.
- Safe and Secure Housing – shelters are required to offer housing with appropriate security measures, including safety locks and 24-hour security; housing must be clean and provide basic amenities.
- Supportive Services include case management services, counseling, support groups, advocacy, and assistance obtaining social services.
- Child Care and Education – services should include arrangements for childcare, offering age-appropriate recreational and social activities on a daily basis during regular business hours for children residing in the facility, the provision of appropriate counseling services to children residing in the facility, and educational support for children of survivors.

- Medical Services, meaning providers establish linkages with accredited medical institutions or clinics with qualified medical personnel (e.g. physician, nurse practitioner) for health examinations, follow-up visits, and mental health services.
- Transportation, meaning to the extent possible, arranging for transportation to the facility in an emergency; and making transportation available to residents in order for the residents to secure legal, medical, housing, employment, or public assistance services or assist residents to obtain available public or private transportation where possible.
- Referrals to other social service supports – that may be legal services, on-site or in-community education and outreach activities.

New York State OTDA regulations mandate that within ten days of admission to shelter, the provider and adult members of the resident family must develop an independent living plan (ILP). ILPs must be reviewed with the family at least once every two weeks and revised, as necessary, to assist the family in obtaining permanent housing. We are cognizant of the fact that in the sphere of human services, and particularly with respect to the individuals and families surviving DV, one size does not fit all. The services offered, including housing and benefits assistance, financial development, economic empowerment programs, mental health and substance abuse counseling, and childcare – whether provided on-site or through partnerships – are a key element in a pathway towards greater independence and moveout.

New York State imposes time limits on emergency DV shelters. Survivors have 90-days, then the potential for a 45-day extension, and then the potential for a final additional 45-day extension – meaning a NYS imposed maximum of 180 days in emergency DV shelter.

The 1.4% vacancy rate, coupled with the 180-day maximum emergency DV shelter limit, means that we do have exits from DV emergency shelter to DHS shelter. We are continually working to ensure that transition is as seamless as possible. That means bolstering our system to allow for more warm handoffs and establishing the back-office links so a housing shopping letter does not fall away in the transition from DV emergency shelter to DHS shelter. I can report that in 2025 we plan to make even further progress in strengthening the HRA-DHS links to provide even more robust support to survivors making that transition.

We operate under a regulatory framework that includes New York State and federal laws that seek to uphold the safety, privacy, and standards of service to our clients. The New York State Domestic Violence Prevention Act of 1987 requires counties to provide shelter and services to survivors of domestic violence; further, it establishes funding for these programs. The New York State Office of Children and Family Services (OCFS) promulgates regulations for licensure and the standards for the establishment and maintenance of residential and non-residential domestic violence 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. In addition, federal law also provides parameters for our operations, and the shelters, programs, and services we administer including the Family Violence Prevention and Services Act (FVPSA), the Violence Against Women Act (VAWA), and the Victims of Crime Act (VOCA).

We keep this regulatory framework in mind in service delivery and in examining legislative proposals.

Turning to the legislation under consideration at today's hearing, File number 2572 is an amendment to existing Local Law 83 of 2018, where DSS reports annually on "exits from domestic violence emergency shelters." File number 2572 would expand the current reporting requirements on exits from domestic violence shelters to include both domestic violence emergency shelter exits as well as domestic violence tier II shelter exits. This report would also be required monthly.

File number 2573 is a further amendment to Local Law 79 of 2022 (which was previously modified pursuant to Local Law 103 of 2023). File number 2573 would amend the existing reporting requirements regarding multi-agency emergency housing assistance to include reporting on applications for domestic violence emergency shelters and applications for domestic violence Tier II shelters by household size.

All reporting legislation, including legislation that amends existing local law mandated reports, requires careful consideration to assess for both the feasibility and the capacity to produce the report in a timely, accurate manner. What may appear, at surface level, as minor alterations to capture more information in preexisting reports, may ultimately require significant adjustments to workflows, IT systems, and processes. That is why we would like to continue a discussion with the Council beyond this hearing with a view to amending the parameters of this proposed legislation in a manner that best aligns with our ongoing obligations to uphold clients' privacy, our capacity to produce this information, our capability to report in a timely manner, and our ability to ensure the accuracy of data to truly reflect the metrics a given report aims to capture.

In terms of New York State legislation, I would like to draw the Council's attention to A. 2583-A / S. 15-A (Hevesi / Gounardes), legislation that would, "[authorize] certain shelters for victims of domestic violence to be reimbursed for any payment differential for housing a single individual in a room intended for double occupancy where a single occupancy room is not available." In the previous state legislative session the bill passed both houses and is pending approval by the Governor. We strongly encourage signing of this bill into law. In New York City, this legislation would increase the City's capacity to house single adult survivors of domestic violence.

I will conclude by expressing gratitude to our staff, our provider partners, and the stakeholders, including survivors, survivor advocates, and residents of our communities who are working to keep a keen focus on domestic violence and the further steps we can take to keep our fellow New Yorkers safe. As I said earlier, one size does not fit all – we are continually learning and taking onboard the insights you as a Council, the community of stakeholders, and public hearings like this offer.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify today. We look forward to your questions.