

Testimony of Reesa Henderson, Chief Housing Officer
New York City Department of Social Services

Before the New York City Council, Committee on General Welfare
Oversight Hearing on The CityFHEPS Program

December 3, 2025

Good morning, Deputy Speaker Ayala and members of the Committee on General Welfare, my name is Reesa Henderson and I serve as the Chief Housing Officer at the Human Resources Administration (HRA). Joining me today are Christopher Gonzalez, Chief Strategy Officer at the Department of Social Services (DSS), and Andrea Reid, Executive Deputy Commissioner of Housing Services Administration at HRA. Thank you for holding today's hearing on the CityFHEPS program.

CityFHEPS is the City Fighting Homelessness and Eviction Prevention Supplement. Today, CityFHEPS is the second largest rental subsidy program in the nation; more than 60,000 households, made up of more than 136,000 New Yorkers, are using CityFHEPS to support their housing needs. Eligibility for CityFHEPS depends on a variety of criteria including household income, housing situation, and history of homelessness.

CityFHEPS is one component of a larger strategy to provide an integrated continuum of client services and a path to sustainability for low-income New Yorkers. We continue to see that path as rooted in three pillars: streamlining access to social services; addressing homelessness and housing instability; and creating economic stability.

Though our focus today is on CityFHEPS, I do want to highlight our vision placing CityFHEPS in a broader context in assisting the more than three million New Yorkers we serve. In addition to CityFHEPS, the New York State Family Homelessness and Eviction Prevention Supplement (State FHEPS), the Housing Choice Voucher Program, also known as Section 8, and Department of Housing Preservation and Development (HPD) and New York City Housing Authority (NYCHA) housing, all serve as important tools in providing crucial aid and support to New Yorkers. In the broader policy context, it is also important to recognize that other levels of government share the responsibility to devote resources to support housing stability broadly, and through rental assistance in particular. As Commissioner Park has related to the Council, we underscore the need for further investment by our New York State and federal government partners; their shared investment in housing subsidies is essential to ensuring New Yorkers at risk of housing instability receive as many resources as possible.

DSS has done significant work to strengthen CityFHEPS, but it is important to note that this work is happening in a context that presents numerous ongoing challenges. The New York City vacancy rate of 1.4% is the lowest since 1968; furthermore, the vacancy rate is lower than 1.4% for

affordable rental units. For households searching for units under \$1,100, the vacancy rate was 0.39%. Those vacancy rates make it extremely difficult to secure affordable housing, even with a voucher. We recognize the urgent need to sustain efforts on the housing supply side of the challenge; even as a record number of New Yorkers are using CityFHEPS to pay their rent, there are more than 10,000 households with CityFHEPS vouchers in shelter looking for housing. In the face of these challenges the City and DSS continue to innovate and partner with sister agencies in mobilizing resources to assist our clients.

Despite the challenges, our City's investment in rental assistance has proven successful. FY24 saw over 12,000 households permanently housed through CityFHEPS, FY25 saw 15,000 households permanently housed through CityFHEPS. Counting by households served since FY20, CityFHEPS has seen more than 200% growth in the program. During the Adams administration, the program has grown even more rapidly with a 120% increase in the number of households using the voucher, and a nearly five-fold increase in funding for the program (FY21 at \$253 million to FY25 at \$1.1 billion). In FY25, CityFHEPS continued to be the primary driver for shelter moveouts, accounting for two-thirds of subsidized exits. In sum, CityFHEPS continues to be the most valuable, beneficial, and significant resource supporting shelter move outs. CityFHEPS outcomes serve as a testament to the steps forward DSS has taken in expanding access to CityFHEPS and expediting the processing of vouchers by streamlining systems, strengthening oversight, and implementing a technological overhaul to enhance efficiencies. The average days from submission to approval has come down from a high of 33 during 2024 to a recent low of around 23 days; that represents a decline of 33%.

This progress has been the result of deliberate, intentional work. For example, we established a Concierge Unit as a pilot program in the last year. The Concierge Unit focuses on working with shelters to assist in meeting moveout goals. The team engages with providers, both onsite and offsite, to share resources and best practices in the rehousing process. Sending support staff to shelters and providing "concierge" support has yielded promising results thus far, with the first two cohorts of participating shelters showing increases in subsidized exits (in the first two cohorts we saw an improvement in total placements for a majority of shelters that participated in the program). We aim to strengthen the unit in future.

With regard to the clearance process, which looks at administrative records (e.g. deeds, violations) in advance of package processing, we have taken steps to make that component of the larger process move more quickly. For instance, instead of simply failing offers that have incorrect owner information, DHS can provide the correct information to the submitter and offer guidance. Through taking various measures to further automate the clearance process and linking the process to tools like HPD Online, we have made progress in expediting this step in the larger workflow.

Another area we further refined, with an eye towards expediting the process, is processing Cash Assistance applicants for CityFHEPS. Previously, a household receiving Cash Assistance would have their CityFHEPS application sent for budgeting, that is processing and reexamination of household income information (e.g. pay stubs), potentially serving as a site of delay. Now, we are able to use the New York State Welfare Management System (WMS) and need not re-budget Cash Assistance cases. Cumulatively, taking steps like bolstering providers' capacity to engage the

system with a Concierge Unit, streamlining the clearance process, and taking advantage of WMS where practicable, results in fewer obstacles delaying the overall processing timeline.

Homebase serves as a key pathway for access to CityFHEPS in the community. HRA oversees 26 Homebase sites across the five boroughs. The Homebase program provides various homelessness prevention services as well as aftercare support services to families and individuals exiting shelter and moving to permanent housing. New Yorkers may be eligible for Homebase if they are at imminent risk of entering the New York City shelter system, are low-income, and want to remain stably housed in their community. Once in the program, dedicated Homebase staff are available in each borough to evaluate a household's specific needs and offer supports, such as: services to prevent eviction; assistance obtaining public benefits; emergency rental assistance; utilities and rent payment support to address arrears; short term financial assistance; educational job placement assistance; and help relocating.

Part of CityFHEPS' success stems from DSS-HRA-DHS provision of assistance to clients in their search to find permanent housing from day one. Beginning at the point of shelter entry, through the issuance of the Shopping Letter, and to the point of move-out from shelter our dedicated DHS and provider staff support clients in their housing search process. That process includes case management, connecting clients with the tools to obtain employment, the work of shelter housing specialists engaged in finding apartment leads, and the work of the HRA apartment search team and Public Engagement Unit making apartments available to all shelter providers. We are focused on working together to make sure subsidy applications are accurate and processed efficiently.

In addition to the work of our staff, I would also like to recognize the enterprising work of providers, advocates, and other stakeholder partners in the process; further, I would like to recognize the strong determination of our clients in being absolutely central to taking that next step in their path to housing stability.

At DSS, we understand the need to make the system of social services as navigable for clients, and those assisting our clients, as possible. We work to connect every New Yorker with the benefits and social services for which they are eligible. We also have to recognize that the needs and eligibility of households vary; for instance, eligibility for assistance for a given program for a veteran may differ from that of someone needing supportive housing. There will be documentation requirements involved because we are working to link people with the resources that serve their individual circumstances best, and because we are working with State and federal partners with their own requirements.

We continue to work to reduce administrative burden borne by clients as much as we can by designing innovative systems like Access HRA and CurRentNYC. We are also in the process of creating sensible workflows and automated linkages that assist our clients, our community partners, and our staff through the process. We recognize that doing so eases the burden and reduces the stress that our clients face as they endeavor to secure an affordable apartment in a housing market where there is short supply.

I also want to take this opportunity to recognize the Council’s June 2025 report which focuses on process improvements and streamlining access. We remain committed to working closely with the Council and hearing your ideas on creating efficiencies and improving our service delivery.

When assessing changes, we keep in mind that regulatory, operational, timeline, and cost considerations all need to be taken into account – that includes taking into consideration where our New York State oversight body, the Office of Temporary and Disability Assistance (OTDA), has offered direction or where federal authorities have issued mandates, where a given change may require significant technology investment, where stakeholders flag that a timeline may not be realistic, or where a change may be cost prohibitive.

Turning now to the legislation being heard today, Introduction 1366, sponsored by Council Member Salaam, would “require the Department of Social Services (DSS) to create web forms for any forms that must be completed by an applicant to apply for benefits and services through DSS. The web forms would allow applicants to directly input information and electronically sign applications and forms online. DSS would be required to continue to accept paper applications and forms that [are] mailed, faxed, or delivered in person.”

We are supportive of the aims of this legislation. That is why Access HRA, our online benefits portal and mobile app for New York City residents, has served as a critical tool in connecting New Yorkers to benefits. We appreciate the constructive dialogue we have had with the Council thus far on Introduction 1366 and look forward to continuing to share our insights about our processes to use technology at our disposal to link New Yorkers to benefits. Note that our systems operate in the context of New York State and federal laws, regulations, and directives on various aspects of the benefits administration process, including applications, processing, security, and confidentiality. DSS works within the guardrails that State and federal oversight bodies have established. In addition, the way DSS operationalizes some of our programs does not lend itself well to an external web form apparatus. In some instances, staff and providers guide clients through a process; in those instances, web forms are not necessarily the best and most efficient way to enroll clients for those services. Nevertheless, with amendments to recognize that legal and regulatory context, we can support this legislation.

Introduction 1430, sponsored by Council Member Cabán, would “require the Department of Social Services (DSS) to provide confirmation notice in hard copy or electronically to applicants of public assistance regarding their benefits interview. The notice would include a confirmation number, the date, time and location of the interview, the phone number from which the interview was conducted if the interview is via telephone, and any other relevant information.”

We support providing applicants with the information they need as they proceed through the benefits application process.

If I may briefly review the current process for interviewing for Cash Assistance (CA) and Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) application and recertification interviews; the process proceeds along two tracks. One track is for linked CA and SNAP applications and recertifications on the one side, and the other track is exclusively CA applications on the other side.

For CA and SNAP applications and recertifications the process is as follows:

- The client submits an application or recertification and calls for an on-demand interview.
- At the end of the interview, the system automatically generates the interview kept status and the receipt.
- The kept interview notification is available on Access HRA for SNAP immediately.
- The interview receipt (FIA-1173) is placed in the print-to-mail queue to be mailed and is electronically added to the case file for both SNAP and CA.
- The receipt is physically mailed within 1 to 5 days.
- The notice (FIA-1173) is available on Access HRA when it has completed the print-to-mail queue.
- Once mailed, the document becomes available in One Viewer and Access HRA.

For CA application and recertification interviews, the interview status is not currently available online. We would have to build the functionality to add interview status to our system.

We would like to have further discussion with the Council about the bill to clarify the scope of programs covered, to accommodate measures necessary to prevent phishing and fraud attempts targeting clients, and to flag the confirmation number, location, and phone number data points identified in the legislation which are at variance with current operations. For Cash Assistance, our assessment thus far is that ninety days for implementation would not be sufficient to make adjustments to information technology systems to implement the change this proposal requires.

Introduction 1458, sponsored by Council Member Brewer, is “in relation to the procedure for determining that a dwelling unit is habitable for the purposes of the CityFHEPS program,” laying out requirements for DSS deeming a dwelling unit habitable before approving CityFHEPS rental assistance for the unit. Introduction 1458 defines certain conditions as “major” and “minor,” and describes how DSS should proceed given such conditions.

DSS agrees with the spirit of this legislation as we too want to use the tools in our toolbox to sensibly and safely expedite habitability inspections. That said, we would like to have further discussions with the Council on this legislation. There are three points I would like to share in this forum. First, as written, this legislation would require DSS conduct more in-person inspections than is our current practice. At present, DSS uses virtual inspections in certain defined circumstances to speed the process. As written, we believe this legislation would roll back our ability to conduct virtual inspections and slow some of our efforts to accelerate the inspection process. Second, DSS is piloting an effort to expedite the unit inspection process. We aim to gain insights from this pilot to further refine our process for addressing habitability concerns. Third, if the aim of this bill is to impose NYCHA public housing habitability assessments on the CityFHEPS program, I would make the point that the two programs are incongruent. Therefore, having this checklist of requirements – including in-person inspections – would only serve to delay a process that we are doing our best to expedite as much as possible so we can get people housed quickly without compromising habitability and safety concerns for clients

Introduction 1459, sponsored by Council Member Brewer, would require DSS to submit to the Mayor, Council Speaker, and to include in the Mayor's Management Report (MMR), the average time it takes for an individual to secure housing after receiving a housing voucher.

We support transparency and delivering accurate, timely, actionable information to stakeholders to assist in making informed assessments, and ultimately, public policy choices. In the case of Introduction 1459, we would want further discussion with Council about the metrics involved in this legislation

Introduction 1477, sponsored by Council Member Brewer, would require DSS to respond to an application for CityFHEPS within 15 days after receiving the application; the response would inform the applicant of whether the application has been approved, denied, or requires correction or additional information.

There are many factors in managing the CityFHEPS applications. Although we would like to strive for the 15-day goal, legislating the agency respond within 15 days may be unrealistic, considering our current average is 23 days from completed rental application to decision. Once we receive an application, we work with the housing specialist and provider to make sure the information we have is as up to date as possible. Through that process, we do our best to keep the clients informed of the status of their application. Clients' check ins with case managers regarding their Independent Living Plans (ILPs) are a key avenue for sharing information and updates as to application status; ILP check ins occur biweekly.

On behalf of my colleagues, I would also like to take this opportunity to recognize Deputy Speaker Ayala's leadership of the Committee on General Welfare. The lived experiences you have shared and the deep knowledge and insights you bring to our work of benefits administration and human services will live on far beyond your tenure as chair of this committee and we are all thankful and better off for having worked with such a fierce advocate for New Yorkers in need.

We appreciate the opportunity to testify today and welcome your questions.