Human Resources Administration
Department of Homeless Services
Department of Social Services

Testimony of Scott French, Administrator of the Human Resources Administration, Department of Social Services
Before the New York City Council Committee on Oversight and Investigation

Oversight Hearing on the Right to Counsel in Housing Court

October 30, 2025

Good morning. My name is Scott French and I serve as the Administrator of the Human Resources Administration (HRA) within the Department of Social Services (DSS). Joining me today is Masha Gindler, who serves as Assistant Deputy Commissioner and Civil Justice Coordinator at the Office of Civil Justice (OCJ). I would like to thank Chair Brewer and the members of the Committee on Oversight and Investigation for holding today's hearing on the right to counsel in housing court.

I want to begin by acknowledging the dedication of advocates, policymakers, legal services providers, housing court employees, and the public who worked to create – and are working each day to implement – New York City's Universal Access Law, also referred to as Right to Counsel, Local Law 136 of 2017. Local Law 136 established New York City as the first in the nation to offer free legal services to tenants facing eviction. I also want to recognize the Council has built on that law with Local 20 of 2023, expanding legal representation to people over the age of 60. It bears repeating that prior to our City's right to counsel law, less than 1% of tenants had the benefit of legal counsel. This law has meant more tenants have the benefit of legal advice, an understanding of what they face in housing court, and the alternatives open to them.

Action by New York City resulted in numerous municipalities across the nation and several states following our City's lead in this critical policy area of assisting tenants through a profoundly vulnerable moment. At HRA, we understand the importance of assisting vulnerable populations and we take our stewardship of the Universal Access Law seriously. Universal Access has transformed the landscape for tenants facing housing court – whether the tenant faces eviction, public housing authority termination of tenancy proceedings, landlord harassment, or other threats to their tenancies. Paired with our efforts to assist people long before a case arrives at housing court, we are acting diligently to serve New Yorkers and keep people in their homes.

As of September of this year, OCJ sits within the Homelessness Prevention Administration umbrella within HRA, which includes Homebase and other homelessness prevention

efforts such as one-shot deals for rental arrears. Our restructuring allows us to better coordinate across prevention services to address housing instability for individuals in community and housing court to keep people housed.

Our journey in implementing the Universal Access Law has not been a simple path. Initially envisioned as following a targeted, zip code by zip code path of implementation, the Universal Access Law began with twenty zip codes in the first phase. Understanding the scale of the COVID-19 crisis, the City pivoted and dramatically accelerate our timetable to offer Universal Access to tenants citywide two years ahead of schedule. That accelerated timeline allowed us to assist low-income New York City tenants through a challenging tsunami of cases when the eviction moratorium was lifted. All of those responsible for navigating that process, including OCJ, legal service providers, and the Office of Court Administration (OCA) have continued to learn, make adjustments, and guide Universal Access to where it is today.

In addition to the partnership and input from stakeholders I have mentioned, we also welcome the insights and expertise the Independent Budget Office (IBO) and NYC Comptroller Lander's office have offered in their recent reports and look forward to on-going engagement as the program continues to develop. Universal Access, by force of larger events, has had to take account of dynamic circumstances and evolve over time. We aim to continue to bring a problem-solving ethos as we guide Universal Access through the years ahead.

We have reason to be optimistic. In fiscal year 2025, OCJ-funded legal organizations provided legal assistance to an estimated 110,000 New Yorkers in approximately 51,000 households across New York City. Furthermore, FY25 saw the highest number of clients receiving full legal representation in the program's history. Additionally, a higher percentage of tenants received full representation rather than brief legal services. Funding for Tenant services has increased by from $165M to over $228M, representing a 39% increase.

We recognize that important strides forward were made from FY24 to FY25. We also recognize we must continue to work to deliver on Universal Access for all those eligible. OCJ will continue to work hand in hand with civil justice system stakeholders to make legal assistance available and effective for NYC tenants in need.

There are two key focus points ahead I would like to briefly touch upon.

First, we anticipate publication of our next five-year strategic plan in the spring of 2026. This strategic plan will incorporate stakeholder input, lessons learned from the challenges right to counsel has encountered, and build upon recent successes.

A second key focus point ahead is our planning for the next round of legal services provider procurement. At present, we are in the middle of a three-year contract in which it is difficult to make large changes, but we will be approaching the procurement process for the next contract early in the new year. We aim to be thoughtful and intentional as we plan the procurement process. In addition to being sure tenants receive the legal services they deserve, we have to be mindful of being judicious stewards of the City funds we invest in making Universal Access a reality. That process includes hearing from IBO and the City Comptroller's team, as well as hearing from stakeholders, including the Council.

Both the five-year strategic plan and the procurement process aim to take into consideration prior pain points and community feedback, to further evolve the program to support the overall goal of providing full representation to those in need of the service while also addressing some key challenges including staff attrition, caseloads, and pay equity.

We welcome your questions.