Department of Social Services
Human Resources Administration
Department of Homeless Services

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Fair Fares Hearing
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Good morning.

My name is Rebecca Chew and I serve as Chief Program Officer of the Human Resources Administration (HRA) within the Department of Social Services (DSS). I would like to thank Speaker Menin, Chair Hudson, Chair Abreu, the members of the Committee on General Welfare, and the members of the Committee on Transportation and Infrastructure for convening today's hearing on Fair Fares. I am joined today by Monica Ealey, Deputy Commissioner for Fair Fares, Home Energy Assistance Program (HEAP), and IDNYC and by Christopher Gonzalez, DSS Chief Strategy Officer.

HRA's mission is fighting poverty and income inequality by providing New Yorkers in need with essential benefits. We understand the importance of transit access and affordability. We share the view that public transportation is an integral part of our City. Reducing transportation costs for low-income households means access to family and friends, healthcare and education, and the ability to more fully participate in the life of our shared communities. Transportation is a daily necessity that impacts the geography of opportunity low-income New Yorkers face; access to transportation is transformative and we want New Yorkers to be able to benefit from our outstanding transit system.

Fair Fares serves as a crucial component of driving those values forward. Since Fair Fares' inception, City Hall, Council, and DSS have worked tirelessly to expand its reach. Over the last six years, income eligibility has grown from 100% of the Federal Poverty level to 150%. The eligible population has expanded from those receiving CA and SNAP to open enrollment to all eligible NYC residents through an online application portal.

Fair Fares links low-income households with a 50% discount on subway and eligible bus fares, or 50% off Access-A-Ride Paratransit trips. For more information about this program, we encourage

New Yorkers to visit NYC.gov/FairFares, call 311, or visit one of the five Fair Fares NYC locations. New York City residents may be eligible for Fair Fairs if they are: between the ages of 18 and 64; are in a household that meets the income guidelines for the program; are not receiving funds to pay for the full cost of a subway or bus ride from the Department of Social Services/Human Resources Administration (DSS/HRA) or any other NYC agency; and if choosing the subway and bus discount, they are not currently participating in or eligible to participate in any other transportation discount program. For instance, if an individual is eligible or already participating in the MTA Reduced-Fare program, they are not eligible for the Fair Fares subway and bus discount; note also that Access-A-Ride customers may request the Fair Fares discount be applied to their Access-A-Ride fare.

People should visit the MTA's website (MTA.info) for more full information about their Reduced-Fare Program and how to apply; briefly, the MTA highlights their Reduced-Fare Program is available to any person aged 65 or over, or any person with a qualifying disability: receiving Medicare benefits for any reason other than age; serious mental illness and receiving Supplemental Security Income (SSI); blindness; deafness or hearing loss; ambulatory disability; cognitive disability; or other physical disability.

At present, Fair Fares has approximately 380,000 participants. Community-minded partners have served as an invaluable resource in pursuing our Fair Fares outreach strategy. In government for instance, DSS and MTA’s longstanding partnership includes participating in Transit Talk events in subway stations to promote Fair Fares and help people apply, DSS provision of outreach and enrollment assistance at Transit Talks, and the MTA partnering to promote Fair Fares online. Also in government, DSS has partnered with the Department of Youth & Community Development (DYCD), Administration for Children's Services (ACS), Department of Education (DOE), CUNY, Department of Probation, Small Business Services (SBS), NYC Health and Hospitals, the Public Engagement Unit, community boards, and elected officials. We have engaged community-based organizations in promoting Fair Fares, including VNS Health Community Center and the Street Vendor Project. Whether through training partners’ staff, community events, or pop ups, outreach remains an in-community endeavor for us, consistently meeting New Yorkers where they are.

In addition to engaging with partners, we have engaged in advertising campaigns to raise the public’s awareness about Fair Fares. In 2025, the City invested more than $2 million in targeted advertising. In 2026 we have an ongoing advertising campaign that began in March and runs through various channels through June; that campaign includes ethnic and community newspapers, TV, and radio spots in multiple languages (e.g. English, Spanish, Chinese, Haitian Creole, Bengali, Russian), social media, search engine keyword marketing, outdoor advertising, Link NYC kiosks, bus shelters, subways, ferries, and ferry terminals.

We continually look for ways to expand our outreach and educate the public about Fair Fares, raising the program's visibility and connecting people to this important resource.

I will now turn to the legislation on agenda for today's hearing.

Introduction 248 proposes that the Commissioner of Social Services create a system to automatically enroll individuals in City-created benefit programs, like Fair Fares NYC.

As the administrator of major benefits programs, DSS understands that public benefits do not exist in isolation; an individual who may be eligible for public benefit "X" may also qualify for public benefit "Y." To the extent possible, DSS seeks to connect clients with benefits they are eligible for. For instance, when an individual is determined eligible for Cash Assistance (CA) or the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), they are automatically evaluated for eligibility for the Home Energy Assistance Program (HEAP) and, where eligible, placed on an auto-enrollment file ("auto-pay") for the annual HEAP grant. Another example, during the course of case management for households in shelter, the client will be informed about options to pursue public benefits for which they may be eligible, like CA, SNAP, or rental assistance. With respect to Fair Fares, DSS currently employes a fast-track enrollment process whereby AccessHRA CA and SNAP clients can click a button to agree to the terms and conditions of the program, acknowledge the program's rules, and enroll. The process is quick and easy, taking only a few minutes at most. As of March 2026, roughly two thirds of Fair Fares clients are fast track, when counting as a share of overall enrollment volume (67.3% fast track, 32.7% open enrollment). Altogether, DSS understands the importance of outreach to potentially eligible applicants and efforts to reduce the administrative burden on applicants during the course of the benefits application process..

That said, informed consent and client privacy remain critically important components of the benefits application process. Benefits applications require access to personal information and clients authorizing review of their confidential information; such information is a requirement to proceed with most, if not all, benefits applications. An eligibility assessment for a benefit may interact with an array of protected information like residential history, household composition, income, documentation status, veteran status, pregnancy status, HIV diagnosis, or status as a survivor of intimate partner violence. DSS must be conscious of the fact that such sensitive information is subject to numerous privacy regulations and laws. Furthermore, were DSS to create a single repository for such information for the purposes of auto-enrollment, that database could pose risks to prospective automatic enrollees in benefits programs.

I would also want to highlight concerns around the feasibility of this legislation as currently written. For prospective auto-enrollees DSS does have an existing relationship with, it is important to note that other agencies and levels of government have restrictions on how we can use their data; the outcomes of discussion with those other stewards of government data are not a foregone conclusion. For prospective auto-enrollees DSS does not already have a relationship with, alongside consent to obtain and use their data for the purposes of auto-enrollment, it is unclear how DSS would obtain, independently and without permission or prior authorization, sufficient information to enroll them; as highlighted before, City benefits may include assessing income information, housing information, medical information, or status as a survivor of domestic violence.

To be clear, we want to connect New Yorkers to the public benefits they are eligible for. We would want to have further conversations with the sponsor around what is possible in this domain to include consideration of respecting clients' agency and privacy, obtaining requisite assurances on the current accuracy of the information, and efforts to connect clients to the public benefits that best meet their needs.

Turning to the second introduction on the agenda today, Introduction 825, sponsored by Council Member Marte, would require HRA to issue duplicate transit benefit cards under the Fair Fares program where a participant’s card was damaged, destroyed, stolen, or lost; HRA would be required to provide one replacement card free of charge, and would charge $15 for subsequent replacement cards.

We want the Fair Fares program to be client-centered and user-friendly. We understand that the unexpected happens and that a mode of payment could be lost, damaged, or stolen. That is precisely why we offer a free first replacement card via Access HRA. We would want to have further discussions with the sponsor about this proposal and why our policy is that after replacing one enrollment card each enrollment year, program participants can buy their own OMNY Card or add the discount to a credit or debit card. That operational consideration allows program participants some flexibility here; again, Fair Fares program participants can use their Fair Fare discount via one of the following: a debit card, credit card, cell phone, or OMNY card. Thus, there are alternatives if their current mode of payment is lost, damaged, or stolen. In limited cases, because our understanding is the MTA has a limited number of OMNY cards, we are able to take extenuating circumstances into consideration.

I would like to close by expressing our gratitude for the partnerships that make Fair Fares work, including our partners in government, like elected officials, policymakers, our sister agencies, and the MTA, and partners in our communities, like our transit advocates, our on-the-ground community based organizations, and engaged community partners committed to outreach, awareness raising, and enrollment. We take the responsibility of guiding the Fair Fares program into the future seriously and appreciate your thoughtful contributions to this ongoing dialogue.

With that, I welcome your questions.