

Testimony of Erin Dalton, Commissioner
New York City Department of Social Services

Before the New York City Council, Committee on General Welfare
Legislative Hearing

September 22, 2026

Good afternoon, Chair Hudson and members of the Committee on General Welfare, I am Erin Dalton and I serve as the Commissioner of the Department of Social Services (DSS). Joining me today are Human Resources Administration (HRA) Administrator Scott French and Andrea Reid, Executive Deputy Commissioner of Housing Services Administration at HRA. Thank you for convening today's legislative hearing and offering me the opportunity to provide feedback on the five legislative proposals on the agenda for today.

I want to begin by expressing my appreciation for our ongoing constructive dialogue on legislation and legislative proposals. To the extent that legislative proposals can benefit from more nuanced, detailed understandings of current practice and the impacts of proposals, we look forward to continuing these conversations with the bill sponsors.

Turning to the central topic of today's hearing, CityFHEPS. The City Fighting Homelessness and Eviction Prevention Supplement (CityFHEPS) was established in November of 2018 with the consolidation of several predecessor housing voucher programs. Today, CityFHEPS serves more than 71,000 households and 162,000 New Yorkers. CityFHEPS serves as a key component of a continuum of care that sets vulnerable New Yorkers on a path towards permanent housing. While I am grateful to live and work in a city that cares for its vulnerable neighbors in this way, it is worth reminding all that CityFHEPS is one of several rental subsidies established to support low-income people in need of housing assistance, and I urge us all to continue to advocate for federal and state housing and rental subsidy investments, which have dropped considerably in recent years.

Briefly, before turning to the specific legislation on the agenda today, I would like to take a moment to share the agency and the administration's perspective on government efficiency and government excellence, which is at the heart of each of the bills being discussed today. The intent

of each of the bills is to improve timeliness, customer service and transparency of this critical government program. This is a key pillar of this administration, demonstrated in numerous ways but explicitly by aiming to accelerate the housing development and move-in process by issuing the SPEED (Streaming Procedures to Expedite Equitable Development) report announced in May of this year. Likewise, at DSS, we have taken several steps to improve the CityFHEPS review and approval process including shifting to a single staff review and supervisory approval for DHS cases and fine tuning our focus on eligibility for property, ownership, payee, subsidy type and clients. Through increased staff and provider training and landlord engagement, our goal is that this streamlining of this process will result in fewer returned packages, and a reduction in the time it takes clients to move into permanent housing.

I now turn to the legislation on the agenda today.

Introduction 98

Introduction 98 sponsored by Council Member Brewer would require the Commissioner of Social Services to deem a dwelling unit habitable before approving CityFHEPS rental assistance for that unit. All New Yorkers deserve safe and affordable housing. We share the goal of ensuring that CityFHEPS inspections are conducted quickly and result in safe, quality housing for the New Yorkers we serve. While we oppose some of the specific requirements of the proposed legislation, we are pleased to report on a pilot program that we think meets the intent of Introduction 98.

For the last nine months, we have been operating a pilot program that tests many of the approaches articulated in the proposed legislation. We believe that the lessons from this pilot program set the foundation for an approach that balances the desire to process applications quickly with the need to ensure safe housing conditions. This process allows for inspections to be conducted by providers in most instances, and HRA inspectors for more challenging units. We are also exploring the establishment of a prequalified list for third party inspectors to allow approved organizations to inspect and approve vacant apartments prior to occupancy in all newly constructed buildings. Like the proposed legislation, our approach now distinguishes between minor and major repairs and our expedited reinspection process offers an opportunity to promptly remedy the minor faults, and rapidly remedy and relay evidence to HRA of the fix. Landlords may send photos documenting that the failure has been addressed and that the unit now meets habitability standards. Virtual inspections have proven to be a valuable tool both in maintaining the agency's safety and habitability standards for CityFHEPS households and from an efficiency perspective. HRA uses virtual inspections and/or re-inspections (e.g., using WhatsApp or FaceTime) to help streamline the process. We will be ready to roll out these process improvements system wide in the first quarter of next year.

While unintended, if adopted as drafted, this bill would limit flexibility, increase burden and time to process, and require the addition of more HRA inspectors and inspections.

DSS/HRA is committed to responsible and expedited approval/move-in timelines for CityFHEPS clients and we think the current process well balances the joint goals of processing quickly and ensuring safe housing for the New Yorkers we serve. We look forward to the discussion of this proposed legislation and the changes we've made to the process and hope that they meet the underlying goals of the proposed legislation

Introduction 100

Introduction 100, sponsored by Council Member Brewer, would require the Department of Social Services (DSS) to annually submit to the Mayor and the Speaker of the Council, 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 share the aim of advancing transparency through timely and accurate reporting of relevant, data. We are able to report on the metric proposed in the legislation but we hope to have further discussions with the bill sponsor around the interpretation of these metrics and whether they are the best metrics to use to assess the CityFHEPS program. There are numerous factors impacting timelines from the time of receipt of the initial shopping letter to moveout, including a historically low vacancy rate for affordable permanent housing units. For instance, a survivor of domestic violence may be limited geographically to ensure safety. Another household may be focused on finding housing in a particular borough due to the location of their child's school and health services. In addition to the challenge posed by attempting to gain general insights from a nuanced metric, DSS already reports on various metrics (e.g., Local Law 79 of 2022's length of stay reporting) for rental assistance programs and we would want to explore with the sponsor the benefit of adding this additional metrics.

Introduction 101

Introduction 101, sponsored by Council Member Brewer, would require the Department of Social Services (DSS) to respond to CityFHEPS rental assistance applications within 15 days of receipt to inform the applicant of whether the application has been approved, denied, or requires correction or additional information. We understand the legislation's aim of processing applications in a timely manner to keep applicants informed. Our average processing time for CityFHEPS, defined as the time of the submission of the complete package to the approval, is **28** days, which has improved over the last month to **24.8** days. Currently, clients are informed about their application status by case managers at bi-weekly Independent Living Plan (ILP) check-ins. In addition, by the end of October, we will release an improvement to the AccessHRA client facing portal where

CityFHEPS application statuses will be posted and available to clients. We believe that taken together, these enhancements meet the goal of the legislation in providing timely and transparent information on the status of the CityFHEPS application.

Introduction 641

Introduction 641, sponsored by Council Member Restler, would require that DSS issue CityFHEPS rental assistance payments no later than seven days before the first day of the month to which the payments will be applied. DSS currently issues payment on the 26th of the month prior to when the payment is to be applied. For landlords enrolled in electronic fund transfer (EFT), they will receive the funding with 24 hours of that day, and for those who still opt to receive a paper check they will receive it on or around the first of the month. We believe this is a reasonable approach that is working well.

That said, we understand that landlords do not just receive rental payments from the City of New York. For some tenants, rental contributions are made from New York State's Welfare Management System which issues the shelter allowance payments in two parts – at the beginning and the middle of the month. While we understand that this may be frustrating to landlords, NYC/DSS cannot change how or when the State issues those payments. DSS is very clear with landlords up-front about the State payment system. Landlords agree to the terms of the CityFHEPS payment structure at the outset, acknowledging in writing – via a written and signed agreement - that payments received within the month are considered timely.

Preconsidered Introduction, File Number T2026-1424

Preconsidered Introduction, File Number T2026-1424, sponsored by Council Member Morano, requires the agency to create a portal for landlords who participate in rental subsidy programs administered by the Department of Social Services.

We agree with the aim of providing landlords a user-friendly portal to perform important administrative functions, receive updates, and register to receive payments electronically. That's why the agency launched the Service Now system back in 2016, and the Current NYC Landlord Portal and Apartment Offers portal – both launched in 2023. Since then, we have continued to take strides in making these systems more capable of meeting landlords' needs. As written, this bill proposes the landlord portal enact the provisions outlined in the legislation by January of 2027. We hope to discuss with the sponsor the significant additional lead time we would need to accomplish the elements this legislation proposes. While we have substantial IT work underway to pursue many of the functionalities this bill seeks to establish, we do not believe it would be feasible to have all these functions up and running by January 2027. For instance, today our portal allows landlords to upload some of the documents, but not all the documents they are required to submit.

At present, some documents are presented as part of the application submitted by a provider. Over time, we plan to transition to a system where our portal can collect all the required documents. Altogether, this work represents part of a larger IT buildout process that requires time set aside for testing, quality assurance, and the ultimate release that we do not see accounted for in this proposed legislation.

Conclusion

DSS supports the intention of the bills to improve timeliness, customer service and transparency. We believe that further dialogue between the agency and Council would contribute to crafting targeted solutions that accomplish those goals. I appreciate the Council's leadership and attention to ensuring vulnerable New Yorkers find stable, permanent, affordable housing. I also appreciate the opportunity to testify today and welcome your questions.

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