



Testimony of Deputy Commissioner Jeffrey Shear
City Council Hearing Regarding Administration of the New York City Rent Freeze
Program for Seniors (SCRIE) and Intro. No. 555
December 15, 2014

The Department of Finance under Commissioner Jacques Jiha has made effective administration of the Senior Citizen Rent Increase Exemption, or the Rent Freeze Program for Seniors a top priority. Having identified the number of potential enrollees both citywide and on a neighborhood basis, we are conducting an outreach campaign with the City Council, the Department for the Aging (DFTA), senior groups and other stakeholders to supplement our existing engagement efforts. We recently finalized marketing materials for our outreach campaign that we developed with program stakeholders, including City Council staff. We believe we can increase the number of SCRIE beneficiaries beyond the increases achieved over the past two years.

Our targeted outreach campaign is the latest initiative in our years-long effort to improve the administration of the program since the Department took it over in 2009. Our accomplishments in recent years include automating the application review process to reduce the time to review SCRIE applications from 30 days to approximately 11 days for renewals and 13 days for initial applications. We also established a seven-person Customer Service Group that works with 311, responds to letters and emails received directly from the public, handles walk-in customers, and performs translation services.

The Customer Service Group was designed to leverage the investment the City has made in 311 public recognition and capacity. As of this past Friday, December 12th, 311 representatives had responded to 61,252 inquiries relating to the Rent Freeze Program this calendar year. The top 311 Rent Freeze Program inquiries are requests for an application (16,200), status of an application (10,725), assistance for renewal applicants (8,174) and assistance for participants (8,143). As a result, the vast majority

of the 61,252 311 inquiries received were handled by 311 representatives, and only 7,993 inquiries were referred to the Department's Customer Service Group.

The Customer Service Group responds to all 311 customer service requests within 48 hours. It also has its own dedicated email, which is scrie@finance.nyc.gov. So far this year, through November, the Customer Service Group has answered 7,715 email inquiries. The unit also staffs a three-person Walk-In Center. As of the end of November, we have had 15,827 visitors to our Walk-In Center, which is more than double the 6,772 visitors we received in the six month period from July to December in 2013 (when we started keeping track of visitors to the center). Finally, we have ensured that the Customer Service Group has extensive translation capability. Not only do we have a Spanish-speaking representative in the Walk-In Center but also the entire Customer Service Group can assist in another 200 languages through vendor services. As of November 30, the unit had handled more than 1,720 requests for interpretation: 1,320 through our Spanish speaking staff member and more than 400 through our vendor.

Supporting our Customer Service Group is an Outreach Unit of four people within DOF's External Affairs Division. The Outreach Unit staff conducts events informing seniors about the Rent Freeze Program and personally works with seniors to enroll them in the program. This year alone, the Outreach Unit has held 77 SCRIE-related events in 48 different Council districts with 30 Councilmember sponsors in every borough of the city. In addition, we have held two events to train Council staff on the Rent Freeze Programs to help them better assist constituents. Both of these events had dozens of Council staff in attendance. Outreach events focused on seniors this year have surpassed last year's engagement by 200 percent. The External Affairs Division is also attentive to the needs of non-English speaking customers. One of our team members is certified as a translator and interpreter in Spanish. For all languages, they work with event organizers to understand language needs, bring appropriately translated materials, and recruit staff from the External Affairs Division or the citywide Language Bank if an interpreter cannot be found in-house. At these events, they also have access

to our over-the-phone interpretation service, which provides access to more than 200 additional languages.

In addition to outreach and customer service, we have refined our comprehensive guide to the Rent Freeze Program based on feedback from the City Council. This booklet has everything tenants, landlords, and new applicants need to know about the Rent Freeze Program for seniors. Our new guide will be available in early 2015 in English, Spanish, Russian, Chinese, Bengali, Haitian Creole and Korean. We will distribute these booklets at all of our outreach events and have them available on our website. We also work closely with elected officials' offices to ensure that they have the materials they need to help their constituents and will be mailing you these guides as soon as they are printed. Another tool that we provide to Council Members is a monthly list of Rent Freeze Program tenants in each councilmanic district who are at risk of losing their benefits because they have failed to renew.

The Department is proud of these many accomplishments in improving the Rent Freeze Program. Many of our achievements are due to the work of Sara Meyers, who is leaving the agency at the end of this year. We thank her for her service.

As you can see from the many advances we have made in administering the Rent Freeze Program, the Department is continually striving to be as effective and customer-friendly as possible. We therefore support the legislation before the committee today in concept, with some exceptions to particular provisions.

We support the codification of an ombudsman in the bill to provide additional assistance and oversight of the Rent Freeze Program for Seniors. We currently have a dedicated staff member who performs many of the duties of the Ombudsman outlined in the bill. Robin Bermudez, our Outreach Coordinator for Seniors, works within our Outreach Unit and handles countless Rent Freeze Program inquiries. In her role as coordinator, Ms. Bermudez communicates regularly with representatives from senior centers, elected officials' offices, and advocacy groups to ensure they receive the assistance they need and have the most up to date information regarding the programs.

She meets frequently with the SCRIE Unit Director to discuss issues that constituents and their representatives bring to the attention of the Outreach Unit. She also has flagged recurring issues that come up in her handling of the many inquiries she receives from many sources. For example, based on feedback she had received, she recommended changing the letters we send applicants requesting additional documentation. This change lets people know that they can disregard the letter if they have already sent in the requested information.

Robin's role, established two years ago, has enabled us to more effectively administer the program and to increase the impact of our outreach. She has conducted training events to help organizations enroll eligible seniors in the Rent Freeze Program. Earlier this year, in conjunction with City Council staff, Ms. Bermudez organized the training sessions for Council Members and their staffs referenced earlier in my testimony.

We welcome the codification of our existing practice of having a general email address for the inquiries as reflected in section 1b of the legislation. As mentioned earlier, it is scrie@finance.nyc.gov. We support putting this email address on the website and on all written materials.

However, more than 61,000 phone inquiries are made each year regarding the Rent Freeze Program for Seniors. It is not possible for an Ombudsman Office to handle all of these calls. 311 representatives ably respond to 87% of the SCRIE inquiries that come in, and refer the remainder to our Customer Service Group. This system is working well; large numbers of people are receiving quick, accurate information. This is why we do not support the part of Section 1b that calls for making public a phone number other than 311 for Rent Freeze Program inquiries. An Ombudsman Office would not be able to respond to the tens of thousands of calls we receive a year, many of which are routine, such as requests for an application. We feel it is important to have multiple channels for Rent Freeze Program inquiries so that we can effectively match the source and complexity of the inquiry with the appropriate DOF staffer. Constituents seeking

help may visit us in the Rent Freeze Program Walk-In Office anytime during the week, email us directly, call 311, or attend one of our many outreach events. Our External Affairs Outreach and Intergovernmental Affairs staff answers numerous Rent Freeze Program inquiries from elected officials on behalf of their constituents. We support the disclosure of an Ombudsman's name, title, and email address on certain types of communications such as denial notices, but not on all Rent Freeze Program materials. The role of an Ombudsman should be to intervene when a denial of benefit is challenged. Singling out one individual for all types of communications is inconsistent with the Administration's commitment to respond as quickly and efficiently as possible to Rent Freeze Program inquiries. 311 is a single, simple, well-branded phone number that the public easily recognizes. 311 representatives are effectively responding to the vast majority of Rent Freeze Program inquiries, many of which are routine and should not require the intervention of an Ombudsman, and they are effectively directing more complex inquiries to the appropriate Finance agency staff to handle.

Also, assuming Rent Freeze Program inquiries continue to be received and handled in large part by 311, the report required by the bill should measure all inquiries regarding SCRIE, including those handled by 311, rather than simply the subset received by an Ombudsman. An Ombudsman's office would just be one of multiple channels through which SCRIE inquiries are received. In addition, we would prefer to provide descriptive information regarding the specific activities of the Ombudsman rather than numerical data.

The Department also is concerned with the bill's requirement that all written notifications to Rent Freeze Program applicants or beneficiaries include the qualifications for the program. DOF already lists the qualifications at the top of page 1 in every application and renewal form. We are open to the idea of including qualifications in certain notices and correspondence but feel that including all qualifications in every notice would be confusing to applicants. For example, a list of all qualifications on a letter asking an applicant to send a copy of her lease might make the

applicant think that there was a problem with the documentation of her income or her age as well as her lease documentation. However, it would add value to include a list of qualification requirements on an approval letter, for example, to remind a beneficiary that if his status changes during the period of his lease, he may no longer receive the benefit.

Lastly, we have some technical suggestions on bill language that we can share with your counsel outside of this hearing.

I would like to end my testimony by emphasizing that the Department of Finance under Commissioner Jacques Jaha is committed to expanding the New York City Rent Freeze Program to reach as many people as possible. We look forward to our continued partnership with the Council as we increase our outreach efforts and sign additional people up for the program. We will be relying on elected officials, in addition to our many other partners, to help us reach our shared goal of enrolling every qualified household into the NYC Rent Freeze Program.

At this time, my colleagues and I would be happy to answer any questions you may have.