



City Council Committee on Aging Hearing
New York City Department of Finance

**Testimony of Timothy Sheares, Deputy Commissioner-
Property Division**

June 22, 2016

Good afternoon, Chairwoman Chin and members of the Committee on Aging. I am Timothy Sheares, Deputy Commissioner for the Department of Finance's Property Division. I am joined today by my colleagues Pierre Dejean, Assistant Commissioner for Property Exemptions; and Samara Karasyk, Assistant Commissioner for External Affairs. Thank you for the opportunity to testify and provide background on the New York City Rent Freeze Program, also known as the Senior Citizen Rent Increase Exemption (SCRIE) and Disability Rent Increase Exemption (DRIE) programs.

For the past year, the Department of Finance (DOF) has partnered with elected officials, community boards, and community-based organizations to raise awareness about these programs so that more people may enroll. We have targeted specific neighborhoods throughout New York City with the highest number of eligible residents but the lowest enrollment in the programs. While there is always more to do, we feel that a coordinated strategy for targeted outreach will yield an increase in enrollment numbers for these vital programs.

SCRIE DATA ENROLLMENT

According to a 2014 DOF report, there are roughly 69,500 seniors who potentially qualify for SCRIE. From July 1, 2014, to date, the department has received 24,522 SCRIE applications, resulting in 13,336 new participants. This indicates that we are successfully penetrating 19 percent of the potentially eligible population and have reduced the number of potential SCRIE participants to roughly 56,220. Currently, 51,715 New Yorkers are enrolled in the SCRIE program.

However, the growth of new applicants is offset by the natural attrition of current participants. Every month, on average, 164 participants fail to renew, 101 fail to meet eligibility requirements, and 31 fail to submit documents to prove eligibility, representing a loss of about 296 participants a month. In Fiscal Year 2015, DOF received 764 new applications a month on average. In the 2016 fiscal year, trends suggest we are receiving 404 applications per month on average. The decrease from 764 to 404 per month is attributed to the 46 percent drop in new applications received between Fiscal Year 2015 and Fiscal Year 2016. It should be noted that at the beginning of Fiscal Year 2015, the income eligibility requirement for SCRIE increased from \$29,000 to \$50,000. We saw a huge spike in the volume of new applicants because more people could qualify due to this change, in addition to greater enrollment efforts, publicity and a targeted mailing to prior applicants whose income exceeded the previous income requirement. In Fiscal year '15-'16, the number of new applications has more or less returned to what we had seen in the past, with approximately 107 new recipients per month. In terms of the Disability Rent Increase Exemption Program, 13,762 New Yorkers are currently enrolled.

SCRIE TARGETED OUTREACH PLAN

In December 2014, DOF issued a report citing enrollment numbers for both the Senior Citizen Rent Increase Exemption and the Disability Rent Increase Exemption programs, and concluded that there were potentially 94,000 households that qualify for Rent Freeze benefits and were not enrolled. To increase participation in both programs, the Agency developed a comprehensive outreach strategy, targeting 10 unique communities with high eligibility and low participation rates. The top ten (10) under-enrolled city neighborhoods are (in order of highest to lowest): Stuyvesant Town/Turtle Bay, Coney Island/Brighton Beach, Kingsbridge Heights/Mosholu, Upper West Side, Upper East Side, Highbridge, Flushing, Throgs Neck, Riverdale, and Kew Gardens.

In 2015, we created new outreach materials rebranding SCRIE and DRIE as the “NYC Rent Freeze Program” and using the “Freeze Your Rent” slogan and hashtag on social media. We also made sure our materials were multi-lingual to reach the diverse communities within the neighborhoods we wanted to target. Languages include Bengali, Chinese, French, Haitian Creole, Korean, Spanish and Russian.

We piloted this new approach in Brighton Beach, Brooklyn last summer. We developed partnerships with community organizations and senior centers; created a local presence; conducted multi-lingual outreach materials; engaged ethnic media and then developed and used a detailed map showing where eligible seniors live and which community centers and local organizations were located nearby. Using Brighton Beach as an example, we saw an approximately 4 percent increase in applications received from this area, versus an increase of 0.5 percent citywide. New enrollees from Brighton Beach represented 6 percent, or 650, of the 11,000 new enrollees last year.

In addition to our work in Brighton Beach, the Department of Finance launched a successful enrollment initiative in Chinatown through our partnership with the Chinese American Benevolent Association (CABA). We formally launched the effort with a standing-room-only event in 2015. The DOF outreach team held “train the trainer” events afterward for staff of the CABA. In addition, DOF had a dedicated staff person check in monthly in-person with CABA to help troubleshoot and get updates on applications. The CABA tracked all applications the office submitted for applicants starting in July. In the next six-month period, July to December, 64 applications were submitted. The work with CABA taught us that in all of our enrollment efforts it is key that our partner organizations have the capacity to help applicants complete their paperwork and collect completed applications on their behalf. Some seniors need assistance filling out their Rent Freeze applications, and working with a trusted community organization is helpful for them to successfully enroll in the program.

Building upon the model we developed with the CABA, we partnered this spring with the office of Council Member Peter Koo and local senior centers on “Flushing Senior Housing Month,” a series of SCRIE outreach events in May that resulted in 24 new applications for the program. We began Flushing Senior Housing Month with a press event. Along with our team at DOF, Council Member Koo and his staff were very instrumental in getting publicity for this initiative, which was covered by NY1 and the Queens Tribune. The press event announced the sessions we would be holding in the coming weeks at active senior centers in Flushing, that are committed to sponsoring enrollment events and supporting applicants before and during the enrollment process. The senior center had interpreters on-hand for all of the events, and worked with the Council Member’s office to make sure that people pre-registered for enrollment events, and brought all necessary documentation with them.

This summer we will pilot a new marketing and outreach approach to increase participation by raising awareness of SCRIE, enrolling more people through community partnerships and a mobile enrollment team, and better integrating all City tools while working with other agencies to amplify goals. We will have a mobile team of staff from our Rent Freeze processing unit that travels to enrollment events to collect applications and begins processing them on site. The Flushing events were the first time this mobile unit played such a crucial role in our enrollment events, and we will continue to grow and rely upon this new unit. Now that Flushing Senior Housing Month has concluded, we will continue to support our partners in Flushing to make sure that enrollments continue and that they have the tools they need to successfully assist community members with their applications.

This new enrollment model will be our baseline going forward, starting with building local relationships with key partners in all of our target enrollment areas where we believe there is a high volume of un-enrollment of eligible seniors. On June 9, along with the Mayor’s Community Assistance Unit, we held a press event in Harlem with Borough President Gale Brewer and the Community Service Society at the Hamilton Grange Senior Center in Harlem. Univision and DNA Info both covered this event. We handed out 3,000 flyers about the program to people at targeted bus stop locations near where un-enrolled eligible seniors reside. We went back to the Senior Center on June 10th, to train the senior center staff on the Rent Freeze Program requirements, handling pre-registration calls for the enrollment event on June 21st, and to field questions and collect applications on the Rent Freeze Programs. Additionally, on June 14th and 15th, DOF engaged in direct outreach by visiting the rent-regulated buildings in West and Central Harlem to post fliers, talk to residents, and to meet with tenant representatives. We visited more than 30 buildings and distributed an additional 1,500 flyers. The fliers, in English and Spanish, provided information about the Rent Freeze Program, and encouraged people to attend the June 21st event at the Hamilton Grange Library with our partner, the Community Service Society. Next, we will return to the Bronx for Rent Freeze outreach and enrollment

events. We held a Rent Freeze Day of Action there in November in partnership with the University Neighborhood Housing Program (UNHP), one of our new community partners in the Fordham Bedford area. At the end of this month, we will be holding a follow-up enrollment event with UNHP, and we will also be doing targeted outreach in Kingsbridge, Kingsbridge Heights, Fordham, Bedford Park, and Norwood. The Fordham Bedford neighborhood in the Bronx is one of the top 10 neighborhoods that we are targeting for enrollment. We will be rolling out this new enrollment approach throughout the City in the coming year and look forward to working with local elected officials on these efforts.

To increase enrollment, we are also working on new partnerships with community centers, houses of worship, medical facilities, the MTA through its Access-A-Ride program, the Visiting Nurses Association, AARP, and with patient advocates and social workers. We are partnering with the Department for the Aging on social media, and the Human Resources Administration to conduct outreach to their clients who may qualify for SCRIE. We will continue to partner with our sister agencies to reach every eligible household for the Rent Freeze Program through outreach events, social media, and cross-agency communications.

As we have worked externally to enroll more people in the programs, we have also embarked on several internal improvement projects to better serve our customers. It was found that our applications were confusing and posed difficulties for applicants to understand and complete correctly. We engaged with community advocates as well as internal staff to obtain feedback and found that a small font size, limited space to fill in requested answers, and confusion in income documentation requirements all proved to be burdensome for would-be enrollees. To address these issues, we have engaged with a vendor to redesign the SCRIE/DRIE applications to make them easier to understand and complete. We provided pre-qualifying questions, an income worksheet and clearer instructions. We also increased the font size to make the applications easier to read, and provided more space for responses. In addition, we are working with the Social Security Administration to obtain Social Security Income amounts to reduce the burden on applicants to provide this information.

We are also launching a new online tool: the Landlord Express Access Portal, which allows landlords to upload leases and file documents electronically, providing information that ultimately reduces the burden on SCRIE/DRIE enrollees to provide leases and other rental documents.

To enhance the customer experience at the 66 John Street SCRIE/DRIE Walk-In Center, we are renovating the entire space to provide a more efficient and comfortable environment. These enhancements include the installation of technology to improve customer service and provide additional service windows in order to reduce wait times.

We want what many want: To enroll as many eligible New Yorkers as possible in SCRIE and DRIE. We think our comprehensive enrollment approach is working, but as with any outreach effort, it takes time. This is why we are pleased that this summer we will be bringing on two additional outreach staff members and four processing staffers, who will travel on our mobile unit.

In addition to our efforts in the City, the Department of Finance has worked with the New York State Legislature, and has introduced many bills to increase enrollment in the SCRIE/DRIE programs. Just last week, the State Legislature passed S6214 (Golden)/A8228A (Cymbrowitz). This new legislation will allow SCRIE/DRIE participants to return to their previous frozen rent if they reapply after a non-recurring item of income, such as a pension, causes them to be ineligible for SCRIE/DRIE for a year. The Legislature also passed S8063 (Golden) A6702-A (Perry), a bill that would provide that any head of household who has been a SCRIE or DRIE beneficiary for five (5) consecutive benefit periods, would be eligible to file a short-form application certifying that they continue to be eligible for the tax abatement. This legislation would ensure easier and less-frequent applications.

The State has also supported the SCRIE and DRIE programs by passing legislation introduced by the Department of Finance to improve the efficacy of the programs. Specifically, in 2015, the State enacted Chapter 553 of the Laws of 2015, sponsored by Senator Savino and Assembly member Cymbrowitz, allowing current Rent Freeze Program recipients to be grandfathered in for renewal applications, and evaluated according to the same criteria as in previous years. New SCRIE and DRIE recipients, who began receiving benefits on or after July 1, 2015, will have their rent compared to one-third of their household income as required by state law. Additionally, the State enacted Chapter 580 of the Laws of 2015 sponsored by Senator Lanza and Assemblymember Simotas, which allows household members to take over the benefit of a deceased tenant or a tenant who permanently leaves the household.

I would now like to address the proposed legislation Intro 1024. DOF understands and agrees with the intention of the legislation to disseminate information about the SCRIE program as widely as possible. However, we have concerns with the implementation of dissemination and enrollment at other agencies. In particular, we are concerned that other agencies and community boards mentioned in the proposed legislation may not have the bandwidth or adequate resources to complete SCRIE/DRIE applications and to comply with the legislation.

In summary, the Department of Finance is currently engaged in an aggressive outreach strategy to target communities to increase SCRIE and DRIE enrollment. We know there is more work to do, and we are pleased to be partnering with so many advocates for seniors and people with disabilities to increase enrollment and retention in these two vital programs.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify today. We are happy to answer any questions the Committee may have.