

**Testimony Of Jordan Dressler, Civil Justice Coordinator, Office of Civil Justice at the
Human Resources Administration
Before the City Planning Commission
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Good afternoon Chair Lago. My name Jordan Dressler, the Civil Justice Coordinator and I oversee the Office of Civil Justice at HRA. Thank you for inviting me to appear before you today to discuss the work of the New York City Human Resources Administration (HRA) and our focus on carrying out the Mayor's priority of fighting poverty and income inequity and preventing homelessness. HRA provides assistance and services to three million low-income children and adults many of whom reside in and around the area considered within the East Harlem rezoning plan.

HRA is the nation's largest social services agency assisting over three million New Yorkers annually through the administration of more than 12 major public assistance programs as well as the nation's largest municipal identification program, IDNYC. Additionally, since June of 2015, HRA has been the home of the Office of Civil Justice, a permanent office created through a local law enacted by the City Council and the de Blasio Administration to oversee, manage, and monitor the City's programs to provide civil legal assistance to New Yorkers in need. Most recently, with the integration of the Department of Homeless Services (DHS) and HRA into the Department of Social Services in April of 2016, HRA now oversees HomeBase, which connects households on the brink of homelessness with an extensive network of neighborhood-based services to help them remain in their communities and avoid entering shelter. The entirety of these programs represents a comprehensive set of public assistance programs and preventative services to enable New Yorkers to stably remain in their homes and in their neighborhoods.

In administering these programs, HRA is at the forefront of this Administration's efforts to combat poverty and reduce homelessness. This administration has taken a prevention-first approach. Not only is preventing homelessness before it occurs critical to meeting the overarching goal of the City's Turning the Tide plan - namely, reducing the number of families and individuals living in shelter - it is also a cost-effective and commonsense response to New York's homelessness problem.

The provision of civil legal services for New Yorkers in need, in particular legal services for tenants facing harassment, displacement and eviction, is a critical element in that fight. By investing in these important services, we are already seeing results: in 2016, 27% of tenants facing eviction in housing court in New York City – more than one in four – had counsel, up from just 1% in 2013. At the same time, residential evictions by marshals have declined by about 24%.

These advances are products of the Administration's unprecedented commitment to increasing access to justice for tenants in need across the City. Since 2014, the de Blasio Administration has increased funding for free legal assistance programs for tenants from roughly \$6 million in Fiscal Year 2013 to approximately \$62 million in Fiscal Year 2017. This includes over \$33

million to support the City's Anti-Harassment and Tenant Protection legal services program (AHTP), launched at HRA in 2015 in several neighborhoods across the City in which tenants face acute pressures of displacement, potential loss of affordable housing and harassment through disrepair, buyout offers and threats by unscrupulous landlords.

One of those neighborhoods is East Harlem. Since October of 2015, our AHTP legal services providers – which include the Legal Aid Society, Legal Services NYC and members of the LEAP coalition including the Urban Justice Center, Lenox Hill Neighborhood House, Mobilization for Justice, New York Lawyers for the Public Interest and NMIC – have served over 900 households in the East Harlem zip codes of 10029 and 10035, providing legal assistance, advice and representation to more than 2,800 East Harlem residents in need, including over 1,100 children. In addition to legal representation in court including eviction defense and affirmative cases seeking repairs or court intervention in building management, the AHTP program provides resources for tenant outreach and pre-litigation services with the goal of preventing displacement. AHTP legal services providers also offer community education, landlord-tenant mediation, and counsel on cooperative tenant actions and building-wide lawsuits.

AHTP providers work closely with the City's Tenant Support Unit (TSU) to assist households identified through TSU's outreach campaigns as in need of legal assistance or other housing-related needs. TSU specialists have been on the ground conducting outreach to tenants in East Harlem and other target neighborhoods since July of 2015, informing tenants of their rights, identifying housing-related issues faced by members of the community and making connections for tenants with legal and other services. The TSU approach involves case management of all issues until their closure, which includes referrals to legal services providers as well as outreach to HPD and other City agencies. Since July of 2015, TSU specialists have knocked on nearly 19,000 doors in the East Harlem zip codes of 10029 and 10035 and have provided assistance to 1,500 households in need. In addition to on-the-ground outreach, TSU also has ongoing partnerships and collaborations with local elected officials. TSU holds regular monthly "office hours" in the district office of Speaker Mark-Viverito, and routinely receives referrals from the Offices of Manhattan Borough President Brewer and State Senator Serrano. And TSU participates in "know your rights" sessions and tenant outreach events in the neighborhood.

In total, since January of 2014, as the Administration's tenant legal services programs were brought under HRA's supervision and the investment and support for these services were dramatically increased, well over 100,000 New Yorkers in over 50,000 households have received free legal advice, assistance, and representation. And now, the City has taken an historic step in its commitment to providing access to housing legal services. Earlier this summer, the City Council under the leadership of Speaker Mark-Viverito and lead sponsors Councilmembers Levine and Gibson passed and Mayor de Blasio signed the nation's first Universal Access to Counsel law, making the City of New York the first city in the United States to provide access to legal services to all tenants facing eviction in court. Universal Access will provide free legal representation in court to New Yorkers facing eviction with household incomes at or below 200% of the federal poverty level (about \$50,000 for a family of four), and legal assistance and counseling to those earning more. The new investments to support Universal Access to Counsel will be implemented and phased in over the next five fiscal years, starting with an additional \$15 million in Fiscal Year 2018 that brings our current investment in tenant legal services to \$77 million, and reaching an overall investment of \$155 million by Fiscal Year 2022. At full

implementation, the City's tenant legal services programs are expected to provide access to legal services for 125,000 households, or 400,000 New Yorkers, and will level the playing field for tenants facing eviction and displacement.

And these programs are only part of the Administration's effort to preserve and expand the availability of affordable housing for New Yorkers. Affordable housing, a precious resource, is permanently lost to the City when tenants are evicted from rent-regulated and rent-controlled apartments and rent is increased above affordable levels. Protecting these affordable units throughout New York City for families and seniors and protecting tenants in non-rent-regulated buildings is critical. And the financial and human costs we avert when tenants avoid eviction and preserve their tenancies are substantial; every family that stays in their home spares the City the expense of emergency shelter services – but more importantly spares the family the trauma of homelessness, including disruption of education, employment and medical care. Our legal services programs are aimed at keeping these New Yorkers in their homes, preventing displacement, and preserving and protecting the City's affordable housing stock.

Homelessness in New York City

To provide context for the focus of our work, I want to talk a little bit more about homelessness in New York City, particularly over the last two decades. First, it is important to note that the average monthly census of Department of Homeless Services' shelters increased 115 percent during that time—rising from 23,868 in January 1994, to 31,009 in January 2002, before reaching 51,470 in January 2014.

This Administration has stemmed the tide of homeless shelter census growth in New York City and prevented the census from reaching a projected 70,000 in December 2016, and we are now focused on achieving a sustained reduction in the shelter census.

Nonetheless, as the Turning the Tide plan describes, while the structural forces driving homelessness in New York City — poverty and a lack of affordable housing — are similar to other urban areas of the U.S., the scale of the problem the City now faces is unique in its intensity and scope.

A few statistics from the Turning the Tide plan emphasize the severity of the problem. Between 2000 and 2014, the median New York City rent *increased* by 19 percent in real dollars and household income *decreased* by 6.3 percent in real dollars. Meanwhile, between 1994 and 2012, the city suffered a net loss of about 150,000 rent-stabilized units. Combined, these and other trends mean that by 2015 the city had only half the housing it needs for about three million low-income New Yorkers.

As a result, these New Yorkers end up sacrificing a great deal to stay in their homes and maintain their connections to their communities. Some 360,000 New York City households pay more than 50 percent of their income on rent and utilities. Another 140,000 households pay more than the 30 percent. This means a total of a half a million New York City households are paying an unaffordable amount of their income for housing.

Many people who face these rent burdens cycle in and out of poverty, living just one personal crisis away from homelessness. In fact, an ongoing longitudinal study suggests that nearly half

of all New Yorkers lived in poverty at some point between 2012 and 2014 (the three-year period studied).

As a result of these economic factors, 70 percent of the shelter system census now consists of families, and 34 percent of the families with children have an adult who is working.

At the same time, domestic violence is a major driver of homelessness, with some 30 percent of the families with children in the DHS shelter system having a history of domestic violence.

Prevention-First Approach

In the face of these challenges, the Administration has taken and is taking a “prevention-first” approach. In addition to increases in tenant legal services over the last few years, some of the most important prevention-related enhancements this Administration has already made include:

- Providing a greater amount of emergency rental assistance so that rent-burdened New Yorkers at risk of eviction can stay in their homes. In the first three years of the Administration, 161,000 households received this help;
- Expanding the City’s nationally recognized Homebase program so that more New Yorkers can maintain housing in their community.
- Developing the Tenant Support Unit, which since its launch has reached more than 194,000 New Yorkers through its proactive outreach on critical services to prevent homelessness among renters facing housing-related problems; and
- Creating a new Homelessness Prevention Administration (HPA) within the Human Resources Administration (HRA) – of which the Office of Civil Justice is a part - that brings homelessness prevention, rental assistance, and early intervention all under one roof to improve program management and effectiveness.

Homelessness Prevention Administration

By working to ensure that clients have access to the benefits they are eligible for, such as public assistance, SNAP (food stamps), Medicaid, and SSI, New Yorkers are connected to benefits that can weave a safety net to lift them out of poverty. The prevention programs HRA oversees expand and strengthen this safety net to include case management services like family mediation; educational advancement; employment; financial literacy services; early warning referrals from NYCHA, Adult Protective Services and City Marshals for tenants on the verge of eviction; and finally emergency grants and rental assistance to keep families and individuals in their homes and prevent and alleviate homelessness.

In order to prevent evictions and displacement, HRA provides emergency grants, to keep thousands of New Yorkers in their homes. In calendar year 2013, HRA provided rent arrears to 47,000 households at a cost of \$127 million. In calendar year 2016, HRA provided rent arrears to 58,100 households at a cost of \$214 million. The increase in spending resulted from increased monthly rents families and individuals have to pay, additional households being found eligible due to the increasing gap between rents and income, and enhanced targeting of these services to prevent homelessness through partnerships with community-based organizations.

From January 2014 through December 2016, about 161,000 households received emergency rental assistance to help them stay in their homes, averaging about \$3,400 per case, which is much less than the \$41,000 a year for a family in a shelter.

This “prevention-first” strategy streamlines and focuses already successful initiatives recognizing the many benefits of keeping New Yorkers stably housed and in their communities. These proven models represent a comprehensive set of tools aimed at achieving better outcomes for those who are most at risk of eviction and homelessness.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify today, and I look forward to your questions.