



**Testimony of Natasha Godby, Deputy Commissioner of Emergency and Intervention Services, and Nicole Doniger Strom, Chief of Staff & Acting EIS Executive Director of Special Projects
NYC Human Resources Administration**

**Before the New York City Council, Committee on Parks and Recreation and Committee on Health
Oversight Hearing: Hart Island and the City's Public Burial Process and Assistance Program**

May 5, 2021

Good afternoon. I would like to thank the City Council's Parks and Recreation Committee, the Health Committee and their chairs for giving us the opportunity to testify. Today, we are here to speak about the Human Resources Administration (HRA) and our work on burial assistance for New Yorkers in need and Hart Island operations.

My name is Natasha Godby, Deputy Commissioner, Emergency and Intervention Services. I am joined by my colleague Nicole Doniger Strom, HRA Chief of Staff and Acting Emergency and Intervention Services (EIS) Executive Director of Special Projects.

The New York City Department of Social Services/Human Resources Administration is the nation's largest social services agency. Each year we assist more than three million New Yorkers through the administration of twelve public assistance programs, including burial assistance. Every day, in all five boroughs, HRA provides essential programs and supports to low-income New Yorkers. In administering these programs, HRA is at the forefront of this Administration's efforts to combat poverty and address homelessness.

Burial assistance:

Today, we are here to update the Committees on HRA's burial assistance programs and their impact on New Yorkers in need during these challenging times. Pursuant to the New York State Social Services Law and regulations and City implementation rules, HRA provides financial assistance to individuals to help meet funeral expenses. These funds are made available when a resident of New York City passes away, who was either receiving or eligible to receive Cash Assistance (CA) or Supplement Security Income (SSI), and leaves no funds to cover their burial expenses, and there are no Legally-Responsible Relatives (LRR) able to pay such expenses.

This assistance is critical to many New Yorkers who lack adequate funds to support their loved ones and ensure a burial or cremation. Accessibility to these programs is important, which is why we have worked to reform the burial assistance program to ease the administrative and financial

burden of grieving families at a time when they are coping with the loss of their loved one. The crux of the burial assistance program is to ensure vulnerable New Yorkers have access to financial assistance. These reforms put us in good stead as our city began to face the impacts of the current public health emergency.

Burial assistance during COVID-19

Throughout the COVID-19 crisis, our agency has reviewed existing policies across the board to see where we can adapt most effectively and do more for New Yorkers in need. Over the past year, we have implemented sweeping reforms at a scale and speed never before seen to ensure the New Yorkers who count on us remain connected to essential benefits and don't have to worry about losing services, which is more important than ever.

For example, as part of our top-to-bottom overhaul to make services and supports easier to access, last Spring/Summer, we reviewed our burial services policies with a focus on how this program could go even further to support vulnerable New Yorkers. After a review of existing policies, and despite the fact that the State has not increased the grant level for the State-set public burial allowance in years, we took immediate steps within our City's power to make this vital resource available to more New Yorkers, including nearly doubling the value of this grant, ultimately providing more help to families when they need it most.

As this emergency continues, we are committed to continuing to do everything we can to adapt our policies to meet this moment. To that end, even in the absence of a State grant increase, we're making the reforms implemented last year permanent, so that the New Yorkers we serve can continue to access this increased amount of local burial assistance.

Prior to the policy shifts we implemented last year, the funeral allowance was \$900, which is the amount, set by State law, towards which the State will provide reimbursement. As noted, in response to the pandemic, in Spring/Summer 2020, we took immediate steps within our City's power to temporarily increase the value of this allowance from \$900 to \$1,700, with the increase funded by the City. This action nearly doubled this public assistance grant, making this vital resource go further for more New Yorkers in need during these unprecedented times. Moreover, we put in place several reforms, such as extending the application period to 120 days from death and allowed applications to be submitted by email and other remote means, in addition to in-person.

Under State regulation, local social services districts can only provide this burial allowance grant if the total cost of the funeral/burial is less than an overall local district cost cap. The City's cap for many years was \$1,700, and as we increased the monetary value of assistance we are providing to New Yorkers through the burial grant from \$900 to \$1,700, we also increased the required cap from \$1,700 to \$3,400. This increased cap is now a permanent feature of the program.

These reforms mean that HRA is able to provide up to \$1,700 in funeral allowance for funerals/burials, nearly twice the previous amount, where the related costs do not exceed \$3,400, or twice the previous cap, excluding certain expenses. This funeral allowance can be used for services such as: funeral arrangements, burials, cremations and services, and is responsive to New

Yorkers' range of unique needs. We are proud to announce that these reforms are all either already permanent or soon will be -- we have published a proposed rule that would extend the \$1,700 grant indefinitely, making it a permanent feature of HRA's burial allowance program even as we continue to advocate for an increase in the inadequate State grant reimbursement level.

Now, I would like to turn it over to my colleague Nicole Doniger Strom, who can provide updates on Hart Island.

Hart Island

Thank you, Natasha. I would also like to thank the Council for your work and advocacy on behalf of New Yorkers in need.

As we work to rebuild our City with a focus on equity, ensuring New Yorkers can access quality services, we must also bring this spirit of reform to end-of-life planning. We remain committed to ensuring New Yorkers are provided with an appropriate and dignified location to be laid to rest, regardless of background. To that end, HRA is procuring a vendor to continue operating Hart Island as the City's public burial grounds in the next fiscal year as well as a vendor to evaluate the ongoing capacity for burials on the Island.

For decades, Hart Island has served as a public cemetery for burials of indigent individuals, or for those decedents whose remains were either unidentified or unclaimed by next of kin. In the Fall of 2019, Mayor de Blasio signed local legislation transferring control of Hart Island from the Department of Corrections (DOC) to the Parks Department, with HRA formally assuming oversight of the burial operations on Hart Island.

As part of this transition, HRA solicited feedback via a public hearing and issued an RFI seeking information about alternative public burial practices, including other possible locations for a public burial ground in New York City. We did not receive any responses outlining a suitable location for alternative burial grounds. Both written and oral responses were overwhelming in favor of continuing to bury decedents on Hart Island.

As a result, HRA has issued a procurement to evaluate the ongoing capacity for continued burials on Hart Island, including assessing a range of potential best and alternative uses, and has issued an RFP to identify a vendor that can manage the day-to-day operations on the Island as the City's public burial grounds in the next fiscal year. Due to the competitive bidding process, we cannot discuss the request for proposals beyond what is in the solicitations.

The work behind bringing about change and operationalizing important reforms can be challenging, as is the case in Hart Island. However, we remain committed to the transfer of the Island as we continue to provide dignified burial options to those in need, and we look forward to working with the Council as we continue to make progress.

We want to thank the Council for your partnership as we continue to work towards an equitable recovery for our City. We look forward to answering questions you may have. Thank you for the opportunity to testify today.