

**Testimony of Erin Drinkwater, Deputy Commissioner for Intergovernmental and
Legislative Affairs
Department of Social Services**

**Before the New York City Council, Committee on General Welfare
October 25, 2021**

Good morning, I want to thank the General Welfare Committee and Chair Levin for holding today's hearing and for the opportunity to testify.

My name is Erin Drinkwater and I am the Deputy Commissioner for Intergovernmental and Legislative Affairs at the Department of Social Services (DSS).

The committee is reviewing several bills today impacting DSS and we look forward to learning the sponsors' intent and discussing them further. As we discuss these proposals today, we request that the Committee consider the impact that they would have on our existing programs and services, particularly around capacity, client safety, and improvements made to date. With this in mind, we look forward to today's discussion.

Intro. 2379

Introduction 2379 would require the Department of Social Services (DSS) to create a domestic violence shelter specifically designated for men. We look forward to working with the sponsor to better understand the bill's intent. DSS is the administering agency for New York State's Office of Children and Family Services domestic violence shelters in New York City. Under State Law, we are required to provide domestic violence shelters and services to all who qualify regardless of gender identity. In calendar year 2021 to date, the Human Resources Administration (HRA) Domestic Violence shelter system has served 77 households headed by individuals who identify as male. As drafted, the bill presents challenges that could have a negative impact on the capacity of our shelter system and the safety of those we serve. First, regarding capacity, we are obligated to provide domestic violence shelter and services to all who qualify and creating a men-only domestic violence shelter would limit access to survivors who would, apart from their gender identity, be eligible to enter this shelter, consequently reducing our ability to help those in need given the limitations presented by this proposal. Regarding client safety, establishing this type of shelter could exclude men who are not safe in the proposed shelter's area due to borough preclusions needed to be considered in placement determinations. Multiple men-only shelters would have to be created to address this safety concern, which in addition to fiscal concerns associated with expansion would be compounded by the low demand for a men-only domestic violence shelter based on systemwide use by men. Lastly, the bill requires a report analyzing the impact and effectiveness of such shelter. Given federal requirements in relation to client confidentiality, there would be additional steps required for client data collection. We look forward to working with the sponsor and advocates to ensure that the domestic violence system

continues to serve clients irrespective of gender identity in culturally competent and trauma informed approaches.

Intro. 1829

Introduction 1829 would preclude the Department of Homeless Services (DHS) from requiring a child's presence at an intake center when a family with children applies for shelter, regardless of individual case circumstances. To provide some background, before the pandemic, as a result of the Mayor's 90-day review of homeless services, DHS reformed the requirements for children to be present during intake at PATH to streamline the application process for families with children. The intent of this reform, which applied to families reapplying for temporary housing assistance within 30 days, was to preserve as much educational stability as possible for children (0-17 years old) by removing the requirement to return to PATH with the adult head of household for follow up appointments. We took this reform further during the pandemic to ease the shelter intake process for families with children. Since the pandemic, families with children applying for shelter must make an initial visit to PATH to apply, but children are not required to accompany the parent. Parents can use FaceTime or Skype to provide PATH staff an opportunity to observe the children, with follow up assessments being allowed in similar fashion. While we have implemented these systemic reforms and do not intend to reverse them, there are particular individual case circumstances that arise when having a child physically present at intake is needed in the placement process, for example, to confirm that the applicant actually has the child(ren) in their care and custody when there is a concern that they do not. DHS has made significant reforms at PATH to ensure a safe and welcoming environment for all as families seek shelter. We have taken particular focus in serving children who come to PATH and have on-site play areas as well as a mobile activity center intended to minimize the potential trauma when applying for shelter. We look forward to working with the sponsor on these matters.

Intro. 2405

Introduction 2405 is in relation to the eligibility for rental assistance for runaway and homeless youth. We appreciate the Council's support of the 12-month pilot program the City launched this summer to connect youth to CityFHEPS rental assistance vouchers. Given that the pilot just launched, the City needs time to assess the impact of these vouchers in connecting youth to housing and to consider any adjustments needed. We look forward to updating the Council on the progress of the pilot as we consider this bill.

Thank you for the opportunity to present our testimony today. We look forward to reviewing these bills and I welcome questions you may have.