



**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
September 15, 2021**

Good afternoon. I would like to thank the General Welfare Committee and Chair Levin for the opportunity to testify on the several bills being heard today.

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

The legislation being reviewed today presents several important ideas that we are carefully reviewing, several of which cover elements of programming and reporting topics that are already in motion or are in the process of implementation. Our staff at the Human Resources Administration (HRA) and Department of Homeless Services (DHS) work each day to improve the client experience of the New Yorkers we serve, and we take our existing reporting responsibilities to the City Council and other stakeholders seriously.

As we discuss these bills, we also want to stress the importance of considering the fiscal and staffing resources needed to maintain our current programs, including the many reforms we have made under this Administration, and the impact that these bills would have on our existing operations and staffing. With these considerations, we look forward to working with the Council on the several ideas proposed today.

Introduction 1641

Introduction 1641 intends to maximize the efficiency at HRA centers by proposing several staffing and management systems. The Administration is currently reviewing this legislation and its impacts. As we review this bill, we want to highlight the critical work and reforms that HRA has taken to improve the client experience across our system. Following the passage of Local Law 169 of 2019, we worked closely with the Council to conduct a comprehensive audit focusing on operations and procedures at HRA Job Centers and Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) Centers, with the goal of identifying efficiencies and improving the client experience at these centers. This audit, published in March of 2020, highlighted the many reforms HRA has put into place to improve center operations, and how we have advanced our “no wrong door” service-delivery approach, which focuses on breaking down benefit and services barriers for our most vulnerable New Yorkers.

Additionally, HRA has been implementing an aggressive plan to modernize the way our programs and services are accessed. With the launch of ACCESS HRA, we have opened up dozens of case-specific points of information online in real-time for our clients, which expands access, increases flexibility, and opens up resources at our physical centers for those New Yorkers who are most in need of individualized, person-to-person, attention. Our efforts to improve service-delivery have also extended to our Cash Assistance program. Earlier this year, we worked with the State legislature to make permanent our COVID-19 waiver allowing clients the option to have telephone interviews to apply and recertify for Cash Assistance, without the need to go into one of our centers. This change now provides Cash Assistance clients with the same option that SNAP clients have had through our on-demand telephone interview system since 2016, giving them the option to apply and recertify for benefits without the need to travel to a center. Overall, these ongoing efforts have enhanced the client experience, and we look forward to working with the Council and bill sponsors to build upon this progress – and ensure that modifications in local law reflect the changes in operations and client access that have occurred following the audit required by Local Law 169 of 2019, and that will be implemented pursuant to the recent change in State law expanding Cash Assistance access.

Introduction 1794

Introduction 1794 would require de-escalation and trauma-informed training for DHS employees and contracted providers. As reported in the client experience audit mentioned earlier, and as we have reported on previously, anti-bias and trauma-informed service provision training is being rolled out for all 17,000 DSS/HRA/DHS employees. The goal of these trainings is to improve staff professionalism and their response during challenging circumstances, all while being attentive to the needs of our clients. Given this background and based on a preliminary analysis, we support the intent of this legislation. We look forward to discussing this bill and its implications with the Council.

Introduction 2081

Introduction 2081 focuses on enhancing the application and transparency of the One-Shot Deal program, or the Emergency Rental Assistance Grant. Among several proposals, the bill focuses on promoting the program on the HRA website, updating the application process and conducting outreach. HRA has already taken several of the steps mentioned in the legislation, including promoting the Emergency Rental Assistance Grant on our website and agency flyers and advertising through various outreach channels. Moreover, through our Infoline, clients can call to receive information about the Emergency Rental Assistance Grant, oftentimes referred to as a One-Shot Deal, and other benefits for which they may qualify. Throughout this Administration we have testified to our efforts and investments in increasing not only the payment of One-Shot Deals but the amount paid to clients reflecting the increased cost of rent and utility payments over time. For example, we have doubled the annual expenditures for rent arrears payments that were paid in 2013 through these efforts. We also understand that this bill was introduced a year ago, before the federally-funded State administered Emergency Rental Assistance Program (ERAP) went into effect. Given the federal rental resources available through ERAP and the changing landscape brought on by the pandemic, we look forward to discussing this legislation with the Council to ensure New Yorkers have the most up-to-date information to assist them through these difficult times and that we maximize access to federal assistance as opposed to assistance with a City tax levy cost. In considering the legislation, we also need to take into account the fact that the

eligibility criteria for Cash Assistance one-shot rent arrears grants are set by the State and not the City.

Introductions 149 and 1642

Introduction 149 would update the report on utilization of, and applications for, multi-agency emergency housing assistance. The legislation would require the report under Local Law 37 of 2011 to be updated with a cover page listing the total number of all individuals utilizing emergency housing in the City. While we understand the bill's intent, we look forward to working with the sponsor to ensure the reporting requirements of this bill are not duplicative of pre-existing requirements and reflect an accurate picture of clients in DHS shelter and other emergency shelters serving New Yorkers. Introduction 1642, a reporting bill focusing on exits from City-administered facilities and the financings, starts and completions of permanent housing for those exiting city-administered facilities, presents similar challenges as Introduction 149. We look forward to working with the Council to ensure the reporting required is not duplicative of existing efforts and that the frequency of such new reporting requirements outlined in the bill are not burdensome to agencies.

Following the enactment of Local Law 37 of 2011, the Mayor's Office of Operations established a streamlined process to support compliance with requirements of this multi-agency reporting law. Each agency with reporting obligations separately collects relevant data from its program teams and compiles the data into tabular format. Each of the agencies then submits their data to both Operations and the Department of Information Technology and Telecommunications (DoITT). On a monthly basis, Operations combines the information provided by the agencies into a single pdf, and posts it to Operations' website. DoITT separately posts each agency's tabular information to the NYC Open Data Portal, in compliance with both this law and the City's Open Data law. Consistent with their distinct reporting obligations under Local Law 37, each agency maintains a spreadsheet containing the dataset it collects and reports, which also contains information directing the reader to the other relevant agencies' datasets for ease of navigation and transparency. After nearly ten years of data reporting, Operations and the agencies are comfortable with this process.

The additional requirements set forth in Intro 1642 will not be burdensome to Operations, which will continue to receive the data from the agencies on a monthly basis and post it to the Operations website. The agencies will also continue to submit the data to DoITT for posting on the Open Data Portal. Operations will continue to monitor this process to see that relevant data is posted in both places in a timely manner. It is important to note however, that the introduction sets forth new reporting requirements for the agencies. We are working to understand which data are available and the impact these requirements have on the agencies.

We appreciate the opportunity to testify today. We look forward to discussing these bills and how they impact our agencies. Thank you and I welcome your questions.