



**Testimony of Civil Justice Coordinator Raniece Medley, Office of Civil Justice,
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**Before the New York City Council, Committee on General Welfare
Oversight: Universal Access to Legal Services Law and Tenant Protection -
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Good morning. I want to thank Deputy Speaker Ayala, the General Welfare Committee, Chair Sanchez and the Housing and Buildings Committee for holding today's hearing and for the opportunity to testify about the Universal Access to Legal Services Law. My name is Raniece Medley and I serve as Civil Justice Coordinator of the Office of Civil Justice (OCJ). Joining me today are Marricka Scott-McFadden, who serves as Deputy Commissioner for Intergovernmental and Legislative Affairs at the Department of Social Services (DSS), and Bruce Jordan, who serves as the Chief Homelessness Prevention Officer at the Human Resources Administration (HRA).

Making the vision of expanded access to legal services a reality for those facing the threat of eviction has required the commitment of so many including the leadership of the Council, including both present and former Council Members. Much credit is also due to the team at DSS-HRA's Office of Civil Justice (OCJ) as well as the advocates and legal services providers, who put in the hard work representing and supporting those facing eviction. It takes precisely this broad range of stakeholders and expertise to guide the implementation of this ambitious law. HRA's Office of Civil Justice has launched and operated a wide range of civil legal services for New Yorkers in need, since the office's inception in 2015. At the center of this work is the implementation of New York City's groundbreaking Universal Access-Right to Counsel-Law. Over five years ago, in partnership with the Council, New York City made history by becoming the first city in the nation to enact a law ensuring that all tenants facing eviction in housing court or in administrative termination of tenancy proceedings in public housing have access to free legal services. Since the Universal Access Law was enacted in 2017, the landscape for access to housing justice for tenants in New York City has been transformed.

Upon implementation of the Universal Access law, residential evictions by city marshals fell by over 40% between 2013 and 2019, while nationwide evictions climbed. The percentage of tenants facing eviction in court with the help and protection of legal representation stood at 38% at the end of 2019, pre-pandemic and 62% at the end of FY22, up from a mere 1% in 2013. Moreover, in the overwhelming majority of cases, when tenants have lawyers in eviction proceedings, they get positive results: in resolved cases in FY2022, 86% of households

represented in Housing Court and public housing proceedings by OCJ tenant lawyers were able to remain in their homes.

In 2020, at the outset of the COVID-19 pandemic, OCJ accelerated the citywide implementation of Right To Counsel, more than 2 years ahead of the legal mandate to meet the needs of the most vulnerable in housing court. We understood that early implementation may not be the smoothest approach to the planned expansion of services, but we answered the call and providers showed up to support tenants citywide.

We are keenly focused on addressing the needs of those facing eviction in housing court and OCJ has continued to work closely with our network of legal services provider-partners and the Office of Court Administration (OCA) to address issues impacting the cases of New Yorkers who are entitled to free legal counsel as part of the City's Right to Counsel program.

Early on as staffing and coverage challenges presented, OCJ formally wrote to OCA to amplify provider concerns and to seek support and adoption of various measures, many recommended by providers themselves.

By July 2022, OCJ, working with OCA, was able to begin re-establishing presence in borough housing courts to screen for legal services eligibility and to facilitate tenant connection with counsel, to alleviate the draw on provider resources. We returned with enhanced visibility; OCJ staff wearing bright turquoise buttons announcing their presence for free legal services along with some provider staff circulating with distinctive tee shirts promoting services. Accompanying signage with the same bright turquoise is also visible in the halls of housing courts across the city where OCJ staff and providers are on-site for intake and connection with tenants at their initial court appearances.

Continued engagement with OCA and our provider partners grew into OCA standing up a Working Group. The Working Group led to job fairs with local law schools to connect providers to recent grads and has also been a space to consider court processes and tenant connection to resources, both of which have consistently been part of the discussion. Also, out of that Working Group came the Administrative Part pilot which has significantly increased HRA presence in Housing Court to ensure eligible clients get quick access to financial assistance that will allow them to stay in their homes.

HRA launched a pilot in Kings County Housing Court on February 21, 2023. The pilot co-locates HRA homelessness prevention services in the courthouse to further assist individuals in active eviction proceedings at their first appearance. Granted a 45-day adjournment by the court, individuals visit the HRA team at the courthouse who initiate an assessment for "one-shot deals," rental assistance or other benefits that could address their housing concerns.

It is important to note that here in New York, a tenant does not have to find themselves in court to receive help when rent arrears become a looming threat. Homebase is a citywide resource - tenants can access by visiting one of the 26 Homebase locations, learn more by calling 311, or by visiting www.nyc.gov/homebase. Through a variety of rental assistance programs, tenants can be connected to helpful resources including assistance with benefits, financial counseling, mediation

services, job search assistance, and links to useful community resources. We will continue to engage with Court administrators and other key stakeholders to uphold access to tenants.

As New Yorkers, we are and should be proud of the leadership shown in our Universal Access Law that supports underserved communities who have not had their voice heard. It works alongside the other tools we use to keep individuals and families in their homes.

Thank you again for giving us an opportunity to discuss this first in the nation initiative.