



**Testimony of Steven Banks, Commissioner
Department of Social Services**

**Before the New York City Council General Welfare Committee
Oversight Hearing: The Client Experience at HRA Centers
February 4, 2019**

Good afternoon Mr. Speaker, Chairperson Levin and members of the General Welfare Committee. Thank you for inviting me to appear before you today to discuss the client experience at HRA Centers.

My name is Steven Banks and I am the Commissioner of the New York City Department of Social Services (DSS). In this capacity I oversee the Human Resources Administration (HRA) and the Department of Homeless Services (DHS). Joining me today is HRA Administrator Grace Bonilla.

Notwithstanding the significant reform efforts we have implemented over the past five years, as painfully illustrated by Ms. Headley's testimony today and conversations I have had with individual clients, on any given day a client may experience challenges at any one of our offices that do not reflect the major policy changes we have made, our values or the dedication of the vast majority of our staff who came to work at DSS to help people in need.

As you know, at two Council hearings in December, I spoke about the actions we took following the horrible incident at HRA's DeKalb Job Center on Friday, December 7th, 2018, which culminated in the arrest of Ms. Headley. I would like to again apologize to Ms. Headley and her one-year-old son and to the people of the City of New York for the unacceptable actions that occurred that day.

What happened to Ms. Headley when she turned to us for help has caused me to look in the mirror to see what more I can do to deepen the reforms we have implemented so that nothing like that ever happens again.

Today I want to highlight two main areas. For context, I want to review the ongoing systematic changes we have made to reform social services policies and practices, improve technology to make HRA benefits more accessible, streamline the ways in which rental arrears are processed and paid, and provide reasonable accommodations for clients with disabilities – all of which are aimed at creating and promoting an environment and agency culture to ensure that New Yorkers in need are treated with dignity and respect as they apply for and receive assistance. Since 2014, DSS has implemented major policy reforms to change the prior 20 years of social services policies and practices that all too often left families and individuals without the assistance and services they needed. Among other impacts, these

DSS reforms have resulted in a more than 47% decrease in fair hearings at which clients contest agency actions before a State administrative law judge.

But first, I will discuss the actions that we have taken and additional actions that we will take to make sure that our actual program and service delivery for clients are aligned with our values with respect to how clients should be treated.

Immediate and Ongoing Actions to Address the Client Experience

We have already enacted a series of immediate reforms to address this horrible incident, and we are taking additional steps that I am describing today.

- Immediately following the incident, I placed two HRA Peace Officers on modified duty with no client contact. Consistent with their collective bargaining agreement, I suspended these two officers without pay for the maximum period of time. Following these suspensions, one officer has resigned from the Agency, and one has been assigned to administrative duties, pending disciplinary charges that have been filed which could result in termination.
- Going forward, unless there is an immediate safety threat, I have directed that HRA Peace Officers shall not request the intervention of the NYPD without first contacting the Center Director or Deputy Director or her/his designee to attempt to defuse the situation by addressing a client need.
- As part of this new procedure, we will be implementing a social worker pilot at one Job Center in each of the five boroughs to support the Center Directors in defusing such situations by addressing a client's need for immediate help – the pilot will enable us to test the effectiveness of this new approach at these five centers.
- Last month, DSS reinforced guidelines for staff to treat clients with courtesy and respect.
- DSS immediately began conducting retraining sessions for all HRA Peace Officers, with an emphasis on techniques for deescalating disputes in HRA Centers. 87 out of 97 current Peace Officers have received this enhanced training; the remaining 10 are on leave and will receive the retraining when they return to work. This will be a mandatory annual requirement for each officer.
- I have attended each of these retraining sessions to speak to the HRA Peace Officers regarding the importance of deescalating disputes.
- Going forward, we will be providing all HRA Peace Officers with body worn cameras.
- DSS has directed the City's contracted security services vendor to provide retraining sessions for all security guards assigned to HRA Centers, with an emphasis on techniques for deescalating disputes in HRA Centers. Thereafter, this training will be a mandatory annual requirement for any contracted security officer assigned to an HRA office. All but 15 of the contracted security staff have been trained and the rest will be trained tonight.
- In addition to existing DSS customer service staff training, DSS will begin implementing implicit bias training for all 17,000 DSS staff members, including both HRA and DHS, to promote diversity in the workplace and dignity-centered client services.

- Last month, I appointed Lawanna Kimbro to be DSS’s first Chief Diversity and Equity Officer (“CDEO”). In this new position, she will develop agency initiatives that address staff engagement, recruitment, and advancement and build capacity of staff at all levels to respond effectively to structural racism and individual bias. Further, she will promote culturally competent programs and inform policies, training, hiring practices, and service delivery to ensure continuity and sustainability in promoting equitable outcomes for clients and staff. As part of her immediate responsibilities, she will be focusing on the development of the implicit bias training.
- With support from the Open Society Foundations, DSS will host a Summit that will engage our leadership and staff, advocates, clients and other City agencies to develop systemic solutions to racial disparities across our programs.
- DSS has begun to implement a comprehensive intersectional anti-oppression training curriculum. Starting today, all new hires will receive a weeklong series of trainings covering topics such as the drivers of poverty and homelessness, including racism, income inequality, gender, sexual orientation, and disability, as well as a history of social services. The curriculum also includes best practices for addressing the needs of diverse and marginalized populations, including: intimate partner violence information, LGBTQI best practices, serving people with disabilities, Mental Health First Aid, and Equal Employment Opportunity. Previously, some of these trainings were optional or offered periodically. Transitioning to a compressed, weeklong curriculum sets the tone for our agency’s culture at onboarding and allows all new hires to reflect on the intersectionality of the client experience. The agency is also developing training on trauma-informed service delivery for all staff.
- Together with the NYPD Commissioner, we are taking the following actions:
 - DSS has developed a protocol for determining appropriate instances in which HRA Peace Officers in HRA Centers should seek the assistance of the NYPD.
 - The NYPD has developed a protocol to deploy an NYPD supervisor to be part of the NYPD response team for such HRA assistance requests.
 - Control of an incident will be transferred to the NYPD when the NYPD arrives at an HRA Center.

I welcome your further comments and recommendations at this hearing as well as in the negotiations regarding the various legislative proposals so that we can further improve both our ongoing policy reforms as well as our new initiatives to address the experiences of clients.

Making HRA Benefits More Accessible

For context, it is also important to consider where we began in 2014 and the changes that we have already made.

Reforming Social Services Policies

Given the major reforms that we made five years ago, it is sometimes easy to forget the major impact on the client experience that each reform has had.

Consider, for example, these policies that we changed to benefit clients:

- Clients used to have to “work off” their benefits in the Work Experience Program (WEP) at City and not-for-profit agencies – we eliminated the WEP program and replaced it with education and training programs to help clients move forward on a career pathway.
- Participation in four-year college was not a permissible employment activity for clients – we successfully advocated for a change in State law to permit clients to obtain college degrees that greatly enhance their ability to earn a living wage.
- Clients who were subjected to punitive sanctions for missing WEP assignments received appointments at the *Intensive Services Center #71*, and if they missed those appointments the entire family would be denied assistance – we closed *Center #71*.
- Clients used to be subjected to durational sanctions for Cash Assistance if they were charged with violating a program rule – we successfully advocated for a change in State law as applied to New York City to give clients the chance to “cure” a violation and avert a durational sanction. At the same time, we also advocated for and successfully reduced the State sanction period for SNAP/food stamps.
- Clients used to be subjected to churning due to unnecessary case closings which required clients to request State fair hearings to reopen their case – we put in place new protocols to prevent unnecessary case closings, and, as noted earlier, State fair hearing challenges decreased by more than 47 percent.
- Clients used to be forced to reapply for Cash Assistance if they failed to return mail questionnaires or submit requested documentation – we now make it easier for clients to continue their assistance if they submit what is needed within 30 days of a case closing.
- All homeless clients used to have to travel to a single HRA Job Center in Queens – we stopped that practice and homeless clients can now seek assistance at a Job Center in their home borough.
- All seniors used to have to go to a single HRA Job Center in Manhattan – we changed that and now seniors can receive services at a Job Center in their home borough.
- Previously, clients only received a center ticket that did not list the purpose of their visit. In 2017, we implemented the Universal Receipt – the “Confirmation of Contact with your Center” form was created to provide an individual who completes a visit at a Job or SNAP Center with a document that indicates the nature and date of the visit or contact. A copy of this receipt is also available, in AHRA, to clients that establish an account. This receipt is now codified into Local Law as a result of legislation sponsored by Speaker Johnson.
- Clients with HIV used to have to wait until they were diagnosed with AIDS to receive HASA assistance – working with Speaker Johnson when he was a Councilmember and Housing Works, we ended that counterproductive policy.
- Clients classified as Able-Bodied Adults Without Dependents (ABAWDs) were limited to SNAP/food stamps benefits for only three out of 36 months if they could not find work for at least 80 hours a month because New York City refused to accept a federal waiver of this rule that every other county in New York State and most other States accepted – we reversed this

policy and accepted the waiver that now covers most areas in NYC so that more clients can retain their SNAP benefits.

- Rental assistance checks used to be processed at each individual HRA Job center – in 2014, we streamlined the system by instituting a centralized rent arrears processing unit to ensure payment by the required due date.
- New York City Housing Authority rent payments used to be issued in paper checks – now we have a streamlined system for making these rent payments electronically and we are developing a similar payment system for private landlords. Using ACCESS HRA, clients can confirm that the rent was paid to their landlords pursuant to a reform now codified in State law to provide such confirmation.
- In 2014, 90 clients per year received reasonable accommodations – in settling the 2005 *Lovely H.* class action lawsuit, we began working with an expert consultant to develop tools to assess whether clients need reasonable accommodations as the result of physical and/or mental health disabilities – now 46,000 clients annually receive reasonable accommodations.

These significant reforms have been made possible by our staff who chose to work at HRA to help New Yorkers in need, many dedicating their entire careers to public service, with an average tenure of almost 14 years. HRA's workforce is diverse as indicated by this EEO information: 59% African-American, 18% Hispanic, 15% White, and 8% Asian; 70% of the workforce is made up of women.

And HRA workers are represented by DC37 Union Locals – Local 1549, SSEU Local 371, Local 2627, Local 1407, and Local 924 – as well as many other unions, including CWA Local 1180, Teamsters Local 237, the Civil Services Bar Association of Local 237, the Organization of Staff Analysts, the New York State Nurses Association, the United Brotherhood of Carpenters and Joiners, IBEW Local 3, and Local 30 of the International Union of Operating Engineers.

Our partnership with labor has been a key factor in what we have accomplished so far and will be essential to the success of the further reforms to improve the client experience that I have described today. Clearly, we have much more to do to improve the client experience, but these changes in social services policies show how much progress we can make by working with our staff to address client needs.

Benefits Reengineering

In January of 2012, this Committee held a hearing to focus on long lines, overcrowding, and long wait times at HRA Job Centers and SNAP Centers. And in 2014, this Administration began to build on prior efforts to address this problem through investing in significant reforms to modernize our technology systems, optimize operational efficiency, and improve the overall client experience. With federal and State approval, by removing real barriers to access and creating a self-directed service model for clients, we are now able to permit SNAP applicants and clients to conduct a broad range of transactions with the Agency without the burden of having to physically come to an HRA office.

Thus far, we have seen real results that reflect an improved client experience at HRA SNAP centers. For example, SNAP in-center foot traffic has declined 30 percent since 2014 because applications and

recertifications can now be submitted online and eligibility interviews can be conducted by phone. The percent of SNAP applications submitted online increased from 23 percent in 2013 to 87 percent in 2018 and the percent of SNAP application interviews conducted by phone increased from 29 percent in 2013 to 93 percent in 2018. As a result, in November 2018, while the citywide average wait time was 53 minutes for Job Centers, it was reduced to 26 minutes for SNAP Centers.

At the core of our modernization efforts is the ACCESS HRA (AHRA) portal. We will be providing a detailed update of ACCESS HRA at the upcoming Hunger Hearing, but I would like highlight a few facts that exemplify how this tool has improved the ways in which clients receive services:

- As of January 2019 there were more than 2 million ACCESS HRA online accounts for SNAP/food stamps households.
- We now receive over 20,000 online applications each month.
- Today, all SNAP eligibility interviews can be conducted at a client's convenience by phone, rather than in a rigid four-hour window under the old system, or clients can choose to come into a center for an in-person interview. On-demand interviews for SNAP recertification have been fully in place for more than two years, and as of September 2018 on-demand interviews for new SNAP applicants are available citywide.

The portal allows clients to create an ACCESS HRA account to gain access to over 100 case-specific points of information in real-time, including application and case statuses, upcoming appointments, account balances, and documents requested for eligibility determinations. Additionally, clients can make changes to contact information, view eligibility notices electronically, request a budget letter, and opt into text message and email alerts. We continue to improve this tool to add new functionality and now clients can submit their SNAP Periodic Report online using ACCESS HRA. This new feature allows clients to report changes in household composition, income and other circumstances.

Another component of our modernization efforts was the rollout of the HRA Mobile App, a self-service mobile app to give clients the ability to use their mobile device to better manage their cases by having immediate access to case details and the ability to submit required documents from their smartphones. Using ACCESS HRA is now as user-friendly on a mobile device as it is on a PC. This redesign will make transactions such as recertifying for SNAP even easier for clients who access the site from a mobile device because of the seamless integration between the ACCESS HRA mobile app to the ACCESS HRA Client Portal. Since the application's launch in March 2017, clients have uploaded nearly four million images and the app has scored a 4.6 app store user rating.

In addition, we have modernized our SNAP centers by providing on-site self-services. For clients who prefer to access our services inside one of our centers, we now have a suite of self-service tools, which includes self-service check-in kiosks and PC Banks to utilize ACCESS HRA and self-service scanning of documents.

Overall, by providing an enhanced client experience in SNAP centers, these lower-touch service models free up our eligibility workers' time so they can focus on those clients who need more support and assistance.

And learning from our progress modernizing our SNAP systems, we have begun to integrate technological improvements into our Cash Assistance program to similarly improve the client experience in Job Centers like the one where the December 7th incident occurred.

For example, beginning next month, we will be conducting an awareness campaign to remind clients that they can submit recertification questionnaires online, and submit documents from a smartphone, without the need to come into a Job Center. While clients will still conduct an in-person interview, as required by the state, these online transactions can reduce the amount of time spent in centers.

However, as was the case with many of the SNAP reforms, we require approval to make many of the Cash Assistance reforms to reduce the need for clients to come into Job Centers as opposed to transacting business online or by phone as SNAP clients can now do. To obtain the necessary approvals, in July of 2018, we launched the Bronx Cash Assistance pilot, designed to enable individuals to apply for Cash Assistance through the ACCESS HRA online portal outside of our office locations. The pilot structure supports staff in 14 community-based organizations (CBOs) who work directly with clients to provide benefits enrollment assistance. Along with offering the Cash Assistance application at their offices, these CBOs also have a DSS Community Engagement Liaison assigned to them who provides support and assistance to their staff. We hope that the success of this pilot will demonstrate the value of accepting Cash Assistance applications online so that we can obtain approval to modernize our systems and realize similar improvements for Cash Assistance clients as we have with SNAP.

Staff Training

In addition to the HRA reforms to enhance the client experience through programmatic and operational improvements, we have implemented and continue to sharpen our training curriculum for all front-line staff. The curriculum reflects a holistic approach designed to provide staff with tools to assist clients by recognizing their unique circumstances while also improving basic customer service. We have also collaborated with the New York City Council to enact Local Law 15 of 2018, sponsored by Council Member Levin, which codifies HRA/DSS's provision of customer service and professionalism training for all employees who interact with members of the public and work in Job Centers or Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) Centers, where individuals may apply for public assistance benefits. As noted earlier, the agency is also developing training on trauma-informed service delivery for all staff.

Taken together, these trainings improve interactions with clients and provide staff with the skills and knowledge necessary to treat clients with dignity and respect. Here is a brief overview of the curriculum:

- **Diversity and Inclusion: Everybody Matters:** Teaches how to create an environment where people can feel included and at the same time understand how to manage conflict across lines of difference.
- **Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Questioning, and Intersex (LGBTQI) Basics Training:** covers terminology and concepts, LGBTQI history, LGBTQI-related laws and policies, and best practices for working with LGBTQI clients and colleagues. This training has reached over 15,000 employees and sessions are offered on an ongoing basis.

- **Introduction to Disabilities: An Overview of Disability Awareness, Etiquette and Culture:** Public Facing HRA staff receive this all-day training which explores attitudes, discrimination, legal requirements under the ADA, current challenges, disability etiquette, appropriate language, and ways to assist individuals with particular types of disabilities. It also includes a segment on de-escalation techniques and covers how to request reasonable accommodations within our system.
- **Access for People with Disabilities – Ensuring Success through Supervision:** Supervisors of public facing staff also receive this half-day training, which includes interactive scenarios of challenging situations involving people with various disabilities, such as instances where clients are angry or dissatisfied with HRA services.
- **Domestic Violence:** This training teaches staff how to recognize signs of domestic violence – even if the client does not expressly disclose such information – and informs them of available domestic violence services.
- **Mental Health First Aid:** Teaches the skills needed to identify, understand, and respond to signs of mental health and substance use challenges and crises.
- **The Effects of Poverty and Trauma:** Teaches the connection between living in poverty, experiencing trauma, and the adverse impact on brain development.
- **Customer Service:** Establishes a distinct and direct relationship between client-based services and the agency’s mission, policies, and procedures. This training deals with serving the internal and external customer in addition to empathy, listening versus hearing, the value of respect, timeliness and quality.

Proposed Legislation

The bills attached to today’s hearing contain many important ideas that we are carefully reviewing, some of which we have already implemented or are in the process of implementing. We have made progress in improving the client experience over the past five years, but we know there is still much more work to be done. We look forward to working with you in the consideration of the many good ideas in these bills.

In considering these bills, we also want to point out that our prior and new reforms are imperiled by the potential loss of \$125 million in annual public assistance funding due to the State Executive Budget proposal to cut reimbursement of Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) funding to New York City by 10%. Given the impact of this potential budget gap, we need the support of the Council to prevent this cut from being enacted.

Our Commitment to Keep Improving

Overall, we have instituted comprehensive substantive reforms over the past five years to improve the client experience through benefits delivery enhancements and through new policies, procedures, and staff training protocols. However, even with these ongoing major reforms, we are prepared to learn from unacceptable client experiences and take the measures necessary to address client concerns. As Ms. Headley’s experience illustrates, there is a need to constantly reevaluate and reform our policies

and procedures, and we are committed to building on the major changes we have made over the past five years to improve services for New Yorkers in need to make sure they are always treated with dignity and respect and that what happened to Ms. Headley never happens again.

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