

Testimony of Aloysee Heredia Jarmoszuk
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Before the City Council Committee on Transportation
OVERSIGHT HEARING ON TLC's RESPONSE TO COVID-19 PANDEMIC AND
HEARING ON INTRO 18-2018, PRECONSIDERED INTRO T2020-6751, AND
RESOLUTION 98-2018

October 16, 2020

Good afternoon, Chair Rodriguez and members of the Transportation Committee. I am Aloysee Heredia Jarmoszuk, Commissioner and Chair of the New York City Taxi & Limousine Commission. Thank you for inviting me to speak with you about TLC's response to the COVID-19 pandemic and the support that we offered to licensees and the industry. New York City has changed since the last time I sat before you in early March to testify about the TLC's budget and our short- and long-term goals. However, one thing that has *not* changed is our agency's commitment to the health and well-being of the drivers we license and the passengers we serve. Despite the challenges that all New Yorkers have faced since March, I feel fortunate to share that we have maintained critical agency services while creating new opportunities for drivers to help New Yorkers in need.

Before I go into greater detail about the TLC's response to the COVID-19 pandemic, I want to remember the tragic deaths of TLC-licensed drivers over the past few months. We are aware of more than 50 drivers who passed away during this time, and we are terribly saddened to hear of these losses in our community.

The Taxi and Limousine Commission has remained fully operational during the COVID-19 pandemic, offering services to current and prospective licensees without interruption since March. We never stopped working or serving the City, and we are proud that we were able to do

so while having many of our staff work from home. Our Licensing and Vehicle inspection facilities and staff continued to serve drivers throughout the worst of the crisis, with over 50,000 vehicles inspected since March and over 400 vehicles licensed during this time. It was and is imperative to TLC that we continue keeping the public safe by making sure TLC-licensed vehicles meet our rigorous safety standards. Our uniformed officers and many of our office staff were re-deployed to staff food distribution sites across the City, to deliver critical PPE, and to assist the Sheriff's Office in keeping the City safe by ensuring that out-of-town visitors took measures to safely quarantine and protect New Yorkers. And throughout this time, our Call Center and External Affairs team continued to speak with drivers, answer their questions, and make them aware of critical COVID services and benefits to help them and their families.

In March, when the COVID-19 pandemic hit New York City, we were acutely aware of the toll this would take on our licensees, who depend on a consistent flow of tourists, business travelers, and busy New Yorkers to make ends meet. We also knew that thousands of New Yorkers were being impacted by job loss, furlough, and economic slowdown, with elderly and immunocompromised residents struggling to safely leave their homes to purchase food or medicine. I knew TLC-licensed drivers could help bridge this gap, an idea which turned into a massive food delivery program developed in partnership with the Departments of Sanitation, Parks and Recreation, Information Technology and Telecommunications, and of course, NYC Emergency Management. This program helped nearly 10,000 TLC-licensed drivers earn a total of \$39 million dollars while feeding thousands of New Yorkers at the same time. We have heard from our licensees that they are extremely grateful not only for the opportunity to earn some money during this trying time, but also to serve their City. I am grateful for and proud of the TLC uniformed officers who have staffed the food sites every day for seven months, and the TLC staff

from literally every division of the agency who helped run the sites by doing everything from helping drivers use the new City-designed delivery app to loading boxes into vehicles.

We knew that the food delivery program would not be a panacea for the struggles of TLC licensed drivers and owners during this tough time, and we worked to provide access to a number of other resources. Before the pandemic hit New York, TLC was planning to launch an in-person Driver Resource Center in Queens. Once it became apparent that it would not be safe to serve large numbers of drivers and owners in person, we quickly pivoted to provide remote, online, and phone-based assistance to drivers and owners in need. Since the remote launch in May, we have served over 600 drivers, which includes pairing close to 350 medallion owners with outstanding loans to financial counseling and legal services, as well as connecting them with available City and State benefits to help with payments for food and utilities. As soon as it is safe to do so, we plan to launch our in-person center. Of course, helping owners with debt requires cooperation from the lenders, and some of them are working with medallion owners. One lender has resolved tens of millions in outstanding unpaid loan amounts associated with 518 medallions, which has resulted in debt forgiveness of over \$70 million. This lender has also reduced monthly payments by an average of over \$1,000 per month. Many lenders have offered loan payment holidays during the COVID-19 pandemic, but borrowers will need extended relief as they try to get back to making regular payments and trying to make the backlog of deferred payments. Unfortunately, we are hearing reports that some lenders have ended payment holidays, referred owners to collection agencies, and begun court proceedings against borrowers who have fallen behind in payments. While the City does not regulate the lenders, we can say that taking action against borrowers in the middle of a global pandemic is unhelpful and may harm the medallion market.

Even with the tremendous disruption the City has experienced, I have been able to learn a remarkable amount through frequent communication with the drivers, owners, and businesses that we license. Since my tenure as Commissioner began in February, I have personally met with and spoken nearly every day to drivers, medallion owners, and other industry stakeholders about their ideas and concerns. It is my goal to be accessible to any TLC licensee, both during this pandemic and afterwards. We have also provided a wealth of information to our licensees regarding health and safety tips and policies, developed in consultation with the Department of Health and Mental Hygiene – reminding drivers to wear masks and clean their vehicles frequently, sharing COVID testing details, and offering updates on COVID-specific agency policies, such as the new option for FHV owners to install temporary partitions or place their vehicle licenses in storage. Besides our own policies, we have shared information on a number of local and State resources that may be beneficial to our drivers – unemployment benefits, food assistance and public benefits, legal services, housing and eviction prevention assistance, and much more. And of course, this work will continue – because the pandemic is not over, but our hardworking licensees will continue to serve our City in many ways, and they deserve our support.

I would like to speak briefly about what the TLC has planned for the future. The COVID-19 pandemic remains a very real threat to our drivers, both in terms of the public health impact and the economic impact. As the City continues to reopen, the TLC will need to think creatively about how to help the industries we regulate adjust to this new normal. We will work to help drivers transition from the Food Delivery program back to driving passengers. We are also well underway with our 90-day review of agency performance and processes, and we will have more to share in the near future about our findings. As part of this review, we will be working to become an even more client-oriented agency, notably in regards to interactions between our licensees and

TLC Enforcement. Staff who have been working remotely since March have begun returning to our offices in a staggered and safe manner, allowing us to continue serving licensees and the public. We hope to open the physical location of our Driver Resource Center in Long Island City as soon as safely possible. And we will continue meeting with drivers and other licensees, to learn from their lived experience and work to develop policies that better serve them.

Finally, I would like to discuss the legislative items on the agenda today - Intro 18 of 2018, Preconsidered Intro T2020-6751, and Resolution 98 of 2018. First, Intro 18 of 2018 would allow any TLC-licensed For Hire Vehicle to operate for up to 30 days prior to an initial inspection, provided that passengers in the vehicle are informed that the vehicle has not been inspected by TLC. Safety is one of the core values of the Taxi and Limousine Commission, and we have expressed a few safety-related concerns with the bill sponsor. We are committed to working with bases and vehicle owners to ensure the quickest possible inspection process, and we look forward to working with the bill sponsors on this important issue. Second, Preconsidered Intro T2020-6751 would suspend monetary liability for parking violations issued to essential workers. While we can only speak to the part of this bill that impacts TLC-licensed drivers, we do want to mention that many of these drivers are covered under a Traffic Rule recently promulgated by DOT that exempts drivers and vehicles delivering free meals to participants in the NYCEM/TLC temporary emergency food delivery program from parking and standing rules for a period of up to 20 minutes. With respect to the safety impacts of the legislation, we will defer to our colleagues at the Department of Transportation. Lastly, Resolution 98 of 2018 calls upon the New York State Legislature to pass, and the Governor to sign legislation making it a felony to assault a driver licensed by the TLC. Although in most cases a person who assaults a driver can be charged with a felony, the resolution supports legislation that would make it an automatic felony to assault a

driver, similar to assaults on New York City bus drivers. TLC licensed drivers perform an essential transportation service and are often vulnerable because of their work, and that is why we're deepening our cooperation with the NYPD to ensure drivers are able to provide critical information so that investigations can begin quickly as possible and that drivers have access to the available resources. We have issued guidance to drivers on how we are reporting assaults, and we encourage drivers to call 911 if they ever experience this horrible crime. We have observed that many driver assaults have occurred during the course of an unlicensed trip – either involving an unlicensed driver or vehicle, or involving passenger solicitation without a trip sent by a TLC-licensed base. I continue to encourage drivers to never take an illegal street hail, both as a way of protecting the public and upholding TLC rules, and also as a way to keep themselves safe.

Thank you for the opportunity to speak about TLC's response to the COVID-19 pandemic.

I am happy to take any questions.