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COMMITTEE ON GENERAL WELFARE

CITY COUNCIL  
CITY OF NEW YORK

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TRANSCRIPT OF THE MINUTES

Of the

COMMITTEE ON GENERAL WELFARE

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December 15, 2022  
Start: 10:26 a.m.  
Recess: 1:37 p.m.

HELD AT: Council Chambers - City Hall

B E F O R E: Diana Ayala,  
Chairperson

COUNCIL MEMBERS:

Tiffany Cabàn  
Crystal Hudson  
Linda Lee  
Chi A. Ossè  
Lincoln Restler  
Kevin C. Riley  
Althea V. Stevens  
Sandra Ung  
Nantasha M. Williams  
Shaun Abreu  
Carmen De La Rosa

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A P P E A R A N C E S

Jill Berry  
First Deputy Commissioner at the New York City  
Department of Social Services

Lisa Fitzpatrick  
Administrator of the New York City Human  
Resources Administration

Ramon Flores  
Assistant Deputy Commissioner of New York City  
Human Resources Administration

Kathleen Kelleher  
Staff Attorney at the Legal Aid Society

Marc Balestri  
Legal Advocate for Neighborhood Defender Service  
of Harlem

Nicholas Buss  
Food Bank

Jimmy Meagher  
Policy Director at Safe Horizon

Abby Biberman  
Associate Director at the Public Benefits Unit at  
the New York Legal Assistance Group

Jamie Powlovich  
Executive Director of the Coalition for Homeless  
Youth

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A P P E A R A N C E S (CONT.)

Juan Diaz  
Policy and Advocacy Associate at Citizens'  
Committee for Children

Benjamin Zibbet  
PhD

Towaki Komatsu

Camila Newton  
In support of the bills

Jason Fredrick  
Child currently living in shelter

Adriana Mendoza  
Benefit Supervisor at the Safety Net Project at  
the Urban Justice Center, SNP

Sara Wilson  
Formerly homeless, disabled and dual diagnosed

Ethel Brown  
City FHEPS voucher holder and a leader at  
Neighbors Together

Milton Perez  
Bronx Puerto Rico, member leader of Vocal New  
York

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SERGEANT AT ARMS: This is a microphone check.

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Today's date is December 15, 2022, on the Committee

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on General Welfare located in the Chambers recorded

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by Steven Sadowsky.

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SERGEANT AT ARMS: Good morning and welcome to

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the New York City Council Hearing of the Committee on

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General Welfare. At this time, can everyone please

9

silence your cellphones? If you wish to submit

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testimony, you may send it to

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[testimony@council.nyc.gov](mailto:testimony@council.nyc.gov). Again, that is

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[testimony@council.nyc.gov](mailto:testimony@council.nyc.gov). Thank you for your

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cooperation. Chair, we are ready to begin.

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CHAIRPERSON AYALA: Thank you. [GAVEL] Good

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morning. My name is Diana Ayala and I am the Deputy

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Speaker of the New York City Council and the Chair of

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the General Welfare Committee. I'd like to begin by

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thanking everyone for joining us here this morning.

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Today, our Committee is holding an Oversight

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Hearing entitled Timeliness of the Public Benefits

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Processing at the Human Resource Administration. We

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will also hear three bills, Introduction 641

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sponsored by Council Member Williams. Introduction

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703 sponsored by Council Member Abreu. Introduction

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704, also sponsored by Council Member Abreu.

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2 I will let my colleagues speak about the details  
3 of their bills, all which seek to improve efficiency  
4 as it relates to administering public benefits. Over  
5 the last several weeks, it was brought to my  
6 attention that there are chronic delays at the Human  
7 Resource Administration.

8 According to HRA, these delays are a result of  
9 unprecedented increase in applications and the end of  
10 the federal waivers that delayed many processes since  
11 the onset of the pandemic.

12 It is undeniable that many of these delays are  
13 also the result of short staffing, which we are  
14 seeing is an issue across all city agencies. As of  
15 October 2022, HRA has had a 20.4 percent vacancy  
16 rate. Coupled with the fact that the city is seeing  
17 such high numbers of applications, the current  
18 situation is unsustainable and further marginalizes  
19 New Yorkers. It is resulting in even greater food  
20 insecurity for those who are unable to process their  
21 SNAP application. It is also putting individuals and  
22 families at even greater risk of eviction while they  
23 await enrollment in cash assistance and receipts of a  
24 City FHEPS rental assistance voucher.

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Today, we are here to exam what the city is doing to ameliorate the current situation and strategize around solutions to ensure that New Yorkers have what they need to survive and thrive. This conversation literally is about putting food on the table. It is about ensuring that New Yorkers have the supports needed to prevent them from entering into shelter. We must do better.

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I want to thank the Administration, the advocates, legal service providers, volunteers and any individuals with lived experience who have taken the time to join us. At this time, I'd like to acknowledge my colleagues who are here today. Council Members Abreu, Williams, Cabàn, Lee, Hudson, De La Rosa, Ung, Riley, Ossè and Stevens who is on Zoom.

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Finally, I would like to thank the Committee Staff who worked to prepare this hearing; Aminta Kilawan Senior Counsel, David Romero Counsel, Cristy Dwyer Senior Legislative Policy Analyst, Julia Haramis Principal Finance Analyst, Rose Martinez Assistant Deputy Director, Nicholas Montalbano Senior Data Scientist, and my staff Elsie Encarnacion Chief of Staff.

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I will now turn it over to some of the sponsors of the bills that we are hearing today to give brief remarks. Council Member Abreu.

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COUNCIL MEMBER ABREU: Good morning and thank you to Chair Ayala for allowing me to speak on these two bills that will be heard today.

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Intro. 703 would require quarterly reports on whether rental assistance payments are being sent on time. Unfortunately, we have seen and heard instances where late payments cause hardships for tenants and prospective tenants and in the worse cases keep families in shelter longer than needed.

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By requiring a report on the reasons for late payments, we are sending a message to voucher recipients that we are serious about combatting source of income discrimination and doing whatever we can to ensure that the city's side of the street is clear. That monthly payments are paid in full and on time. Without clerical errors or other delays mudding up the process.

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Intro. 704 will further ease these efforts by allowing for electronic payments to landlords. It's 2022 and we don't have electronic payments allowed. Currently, landlords are paid by check. However,

1  
2 we've seen that many landlords are increasingly  
3 incentivizing electronic payment and many tenants  
4 prefer to ease of access as well.

5 By allowing electronic disbursement of these  
6 funds, we are furthering our efforts to ensure timely  
7 payment, ensuring landlords that despite what they  
8 may think, voucher recipients are a good tenant as  
9 any other. I have been in housing court as a tenant  
10 lawyer and I can't tell you the number of cases of  
11 nonpayment proceedings I've received. People are in  
12 housing court because of the failure of providing  
13 timely payments by government. And in cases, end up  
14 getting addressed or negotiated, or resolved once  
15 that payment is made. We shouldn't have that strain  
16 on Right to Counsel Lawyers in the first place and  
17 the idea that we should preclude this legislation is  
18 laughable. We've got a strong case for why these  
19 bills should be passed expeditiously. Per simply  
20 ease of payment, a smoother process for receiving  
21 funds and the benefits of participating in these city  
22 funded programs are the essential tools in our  
23 toolbox for combating source of income  
24 discrimination. Coupled with enforcement, which we  
25 hope to secure even more budget wins for this year,



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2 we have a real opportunity to make changes here.

3 Thank you and I look forward to hearing from the

4 Administration.

5 CHAIRPERSON AYALA: Thank you Council Member. We

6 will now hear from Council Member Williams.

7 COUNCIL MEMBER WILLIAMS: Thank you. I'm proud

8 to have introduced Intro. 641, a bill that require

9 all job centers and SNAP centers to have an expeditor

10 on site all times, in which clients are being served

11 or waiting to be served. This bill would also

12 implement a queue management system at every job

13 center and SNAP center. Such as system shall allow

14 clients to check in for each particular service. The

15 system will inform clients, how many clients are

16 ahead of them in the queue and the approximate time

17 that they may expect to be called to begin an

18 appointment for each service.

19 As someone who has worked really hard to ensure

20 that our city's policies and practices are fair, just

21 and equitable for all people, I know that this is

22 important for us to be able to evaluate these

23 facility practices at regular intervals, so that we

24 can ensure they are operating in line with best

25 practices. My office has received several negative

1  
2 feedback statements about their HRA office  
3 experiences. And our goal with this bill is to help  
4 mitigate and rectify these complaints.

5       When my office has tried to call the DSS office  
6 to ask questions regarding the heat application, my  
7 team was unable to get a hold of anyone and when we  
8 were finally able to get a live individual, the call  
9 was dropped. A constituent of mine who was just  
10 certifying her benefits, ended up missing payments  
11 for multiple months and it took our office at least a  
12 month and a half to get her benefits reinstated after  
13 being unable to get in contact with the  
14 representative.

15       Another one of our constituents contacted our  
16 office to ask for assistance in submitting the  
17 documentation needed for the City FHEPS voucher  
18 program back in September. She lives in a shelter  
19 with her children and due to an error, the  
20 constituent lost her voucher status and is currently  
21 unable to look for housing. She is still in the  
22 shelter with her family and we are still waiting for  
23 updates regarding the case. It has been open and  
24 pending since September.  
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At the Jamaica SNAP Center, constituents complained about the treatment such as, long wait times, unclear directions as to what needs to be done for their case, and staff who are not sensitive to their situations.

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Intro. 641 along with other bills being heard today, are important steps towards ensuring that all people receive the services they need in a timely manner, which is critical to helping them reach their full potential. This is a necessary step to ensuring that all people have access to the services they need. Thank you.

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CHAIRPERSON AYALA: Thank you. Thank you Council Member. I will now turn it over to Senior Counsel Aminta Kilawan to administer the oath to witnesses from the Administration.

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COMMITTEE COUNSEL: Would you all please raise your right hand? Do you affirm to tell the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth in your testimony before the Committee and to respond honestly to Council Member questions? Thank you, you may begin when ready.

24

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JILL BERRY: Good morning. I want to thank the City Council's Committee on General Welfare and

1  
2 Deputy Speaker Ayala for organizing today's hearing  
3 on Access to Public Benefits. We look forward to  
4 updating the Committee on our work to connect New  
5 Yorkers in need to our public assistance programs.

6 My name is Jill Berry, I'm the First Deputy  
7 Commissioner at the New York City Department of  
8 Social Services. I'm joined today by my colleagues  
9 Lisa Fitzpatrick, Administrator of the New York City  
10 Human Resources Administration and Ramon Flores,  
11 Assistant Deputy Commissioner at HRA.

12 The New York City Department of Social Services  
13 Human Resources Administration is the nations largest  
14 social services agency. Each year, we assist more  
15 than 3 million New Yorkers through the Administration  
16 of over 14 public assistance programs and services.  
17 Every day, in all five boroughs, HRA provides  
18 essential programs and services to low-income New  
19 Yorkers. In administering these programs, HRA is at  
20 the forefront of this administrations efforts to  
21 combat poverty and address homelessness.

22 We appreciate the opportunity to brief you and  
23 the public on the work that DSS HRA performs day in  
24 and day out to help vulnerable New Yorkers access  
25 critical social services. We are living in

1  
2 unprecedented times as we recover from a global  
3 pandemic that placed immense stress on all New  
4 Yorkers, particularly those with the least resources.

5       Moreover, as we have reported before, COVID-19  
6 challenged our agency like never before. As we  
7 quickly pivoted to alleviate the burden of insecurity  
8 for so many New Yorkers. While the nation continues  
9 to recover from the pandemic, we must keep in mind  
10 that not all communities are recovering evenly and  
11 that's the case in New York City. With a national  
12 unemployment rate of 3.5 percent as of September  
13 2022, New York City has been slower to recover from  
14 the COVID-19 pandemic with a current local  
15 unemployment rate of 5.6 percent. This, while we  
16 consider that the nation had a prepandemic  
17 unemployment rate of 3.5 as compared to New York  
18 City's 3.7 percent. There are many factors leading  
19 to these disparities and we are currently facing the  
20 challenges that come with a city that continues to  
21 recover from the repercussions of an unprecedented  
22 pandemic.

23       Given the extraordinary landscape, we have been  
24 seeing an equally extraordinary demand for public  
25 benefits from New Yorkers across the five boroughs.

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2 Looking at the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance  
3 Program or SNAP, the volume of applications received  
4 by HRA during the pandemic reflects the heightened  
5 need for food security.

6 During the height of the pandemic, in April 2020,  
7 the agency received 84,000 SNAP applications in that  
8 month alone. The highest number of SNAP applications  
9 in modern history. Reflecting a more than 200  
10 percent increase compared to the 27,000 applications  
11 received in April 2019. Moreover, from March 2020  
12 through June 2020, the period in which DSS, HRA  
13 experienced the greatest surge in SNAP applications.  
14 The agency received 121,000 more SNAP applications  
15 than in the same period in 2019, a 113 percent  
16 increase.

17 The trends for cash assistance were just as  
18 unprecedented. In March 2020, DSS, HRA, received  
19 approximately 12,745 more cash assistance  
20 applications than in March 2019, a 53 percent  
21 increase. Overall, between February 2020 and  
22 November 2020, there was an approximate 53,000 person  
23 or 16 percent increase in the cash assistance  
24 recipient case load and a more than 30,000 case  
25 increase or nearly 17 percent.

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2           It has long been the vision of this agency to  
3 breakdown barriers to benefits access. And pursuant  
4 to that vision, we have worked to modernize our  
5 service delivery model with our internet base  
6 platform and mobile app, Access HRA, where New  
7 Yorkers can apply on line for the public benefits  
8 they need to support themselves and their families.  
9 Strategies such as this one, not only allow us to  
10 expand our reach to more New Yorkers seeking our  
11 services but they also allow us to focus attention to  
12 those seeking in person services at our many centers  
13 located across the city.

14           We believe the increase in benefit applications  
15 demonstrates that benefits access is working. Our  
16 response to the pandemic was proportional to its  
17 gravity. DSS, HRA took swift steps to ensure program  
18 continuity during and throughout the pandemic. These  
19 program reforms and pivots were meant to ensure that  
20 no vulnerable New Yorker was turned away from the  
21 public benefits they needed to get through the health  
22 emergency and economic downturn. For example, it has  
23 also been a longstanding goal to improve client  
24 access by transitioning from using only in person  
25 interviews as part of the cash assistance application

1  
2 requirement and shift to allow for these interviews  
3 to occur by telephone at the clients choice, just as  
4 we are permitted to offer for SNAP. Clients pursuant  
5 to federal and state waivers that we previously  
6 received.

7 At the start of the pandemic, DSS, HRA was  
8 granted a state waiver with support from hundreds of  
9 reassigned staff members, the agency was able to  
10 promptly set up a system for New Yorkers to apply for  
11 cash assistance online and conduct their interview by  
12 phone. This was possible by following the effective  
13 blueprint developed in pioneering remote access for  
14 SNAP via Access HRA. Showing that our efforts to  
15 modernize benefit access overtime put it us in good  
16 stead as the pandemic arrived.

17 What's more? Following our persistent advocacy,  
18 a recent state law has made this remote cash  
19 assistance option permanent. Meaning that clients  
20 can conduct all business online and by telephone  
21 making it more convenient for New Yorkers to access  
22 the services they are entitled to.

23 Fast-forwarding to today, while New York City  
24 continues to recover, we are continuing to see  
25 immense demand for DSS, HRA services nearly three



1  
2 years since the pandemic began. And that is  
3 highlighted by the record-breaking applications and  
4 caseloads we are still seeing today. The average  
5 number of individuals that received cash assistance  
6 and SNAP each month, has been at its highest in the  
7 last five years. The fact is that we have seen an  
8 unprecedented increase in the average number of  
9 applications, which to stress once more, is also the  
10 highest in the last five years. And we are using  
11 every tool at our disposal to ensure that we are  
12 processing applications as quickly as possible.

13 This increase reflects the reality of the need on  
14 the ground as we continue to recover from the  
15 economic impact of the pandemic coupled with the  
16 expiration of the state's eviction moratorium and  
17 pandemic related federal supports. Consequently, the  
18 timeliness rates of services in FY22 were impacted by  
19 the expiration of key waivers active during FY20 and  
20 FY21.

21 Our application volumes have persisted at an  
22 unprecedented rate. In October 2022, we received  
23 over 50,000 SNAP applications which was an increase  
24 of 60 percent compared to October 2019 and the  
25 highest monthly application number since May 2020.

1  
2 We received over 41,000 cash assistance applications  
3 in October 2022. A 51 percent increase over the  
4 number we received in October 2019.

5 Despite the unprecedented increase in  
6 applications and related challenges, our teams  
7 processed more applications and connected more New  
8 Yorkers to benefits than in recent years. We are  
9 squarely focused on addressing the need on the ground  
10 and ensuring that we are serving every New York in  
11 need. To do so, we continue to hire staff to fill  
12 our vacancies, while also finding ways to better  
13 optimize our existing resources across the agency.  
14 We are also working closely with our state partners  
15 to request further waivers and easements that will  
16 assist in our ability to process cases more quickly.

17 We continue to further streamline processes  
18 related to our remote platform, such as Access HRA  
19 and phone interviews for recertifications to do  
20 everything we can to minimize delays. Unprecedented  
21 need has outpaced our resources and we are using  
22 every tool and strategy at our disposal from seeking  
23 program waivers to implementing technological  
24 solutions, reassigning and hiring staff to meet the  
25 demand.

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2           It is worth noting here that DSS, HRA staff were  
3 able to help get an unprecedented level of resources  
4 to New Yorkers throughout this economic and health  
5 emergency. Over \$5 billion in SNAP benefits were  
6 distributed to New York City residents in 2021.  
7 Nearly 50 percent more than the year before and we  
8 are on pace for similar levels this year due to  
9 pandemic relief.

10           Before I discuss the legislation under  
11 consideration, I want to take a moment to highlight  
12 the incredible work of DSS, HRA staff over the past  
13 three years. In the face of a global health  
14 pandemic, DSS, HRA staff work tirelessly to process  
15 benefits applications to ensure their fellow New  
16 Yorkers received essential benefits and supports.  
17 There were continues to this day to support New  
18 Yorkers impacted by the current economic realities  
19 and I want to thank each and every one of them for  
20 their dedication to vulnerable New Yorkers in need.

21           Moving to legislation, we are reviewing the ideas  
22 proposed within the bills on the agenda and we look  
23 forward to learning more about their intent.

24 Introduction 641 intents to maximize the efficiency  
25 at DSS, HRA centers are proposing several staffing

1  
2 and management systems. We are currently reviewing  
3 this legislation and its impacts based on preliminary  
4 review, the bill doesn't reflect the on-the-ground  
5 operations and needs of our centers, which raises  
6 concerns.

7 As we discuss these proposals, we want to  
8 highlight the work and reforms that DSS, HRA has  
9 taken to improve the client experience. Following  
10 the passage of Local Law 169 of 2019, we worked  
11 closely with the Council to conduct a comprehensive  
12 audit focusing on operations and procedures at DSS,  
13 HRA, benefits access centers and SNAP centers. With  
14 the goal of identifying and identifying efficiencies  
15 and improving the client experience at these centers.  
16 This audit, published in March of 2020, highlighted  
17 the many reforms DSS, HRA has put into place to  
18 improve center operations and how we have advanced  
19 our no wrong door service delivery approach.

20 DSS, HRA continues this work by implementing an  
21 aggressive plan to modernize the way our program and  
22 services are accessed. With the launch of Access  
23 HRA, we have created dozens of case specific points  
24 of information online, in real time for our clients,  
25 which expands access, increases flexibility and opens

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2 resources at our centers, for those resources who are  
3 most in need of individualized person to person  
4 attention.

5 Our efforts to improve service delivery have also  
6 extended to our cash assistance program. Earlier  
7 this year as previously mentioned, we worked with the  
8 state legislature to make permanent our COVID-19  
9 waiver, allowing clients the option to have telephone  
10 interviews to apply and recertify for cash assistance  
11 without the need to go into one of our centers. This  
12 change now provides cash assistance clients with the  
13 same option that SNAP clients have had through our  
14 on-demand telephone interview system since 2016.  
15 Giving them the option to apply and recertify for  
16 benefits, without the need to travel to a center.  
17 Overall, these ongoing efforts have enhanced the  
18 client experience and we look forward to working with  
19 the Council and bill sponsor to build upon this  
20 progress.

21 Introduction 703 proposes reporting regarding  
22 when rental assistance payments are made to landlords  
23 on behalf of tenants. While the bill seeks to track  
24 the timeliness of rental assistance payments, it  
25 doesn't seem to recognize the workflow, the nuances

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behind payment delivery at its various stages and the reasons for potential delays. We look forward to discussing this proposal further with the bill sponsor. We are also eager for the continued rollout of our new landlord management system current, which is underdevelopment and will include a landlord portal that will allow all New York City landlords to opt into electronic funds transfer and to see a record of payments processed.

Moreover, as our agencies have voiced before, we have concerns about the Administrative burden this reporting bill would introduce given the resource intensive demands behind collecting this information. We would like to focus our resources on improving the process for clients and landlords rather than engaging in an exercise that will not in and of itself make changes to those processes.

Introduction 704 proposes changes in relation to the streamlining of rental assistance payments. We look forward to discussing this proposal with its sponsor, as well as we believe that our ongoing efforts to streamline rental payments for landlords, including full implementation of current, will

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2 achieve the goals that we all share and may preclude  
3 the need for this legislation.

4 Thank you for the opportunity to testify today on  
5 our work to connect New Yorkers in need to public  
6 assistance benefits. We look forward to our  
7 continued collaboration and any questions you may  
8 have here today.

9 CHAIRPERSON AYALA: Thank you. So, I think  
10 today's hearing was really uhm, the need for today's  
11 hearing was made very clear. As our office started  
12 to receive a number of calls and concerns that were  
13 raised by colleagues. Specifically, it started in  
14 the Bronx. The Bronx colleagues were calling quite  
15 frequently with concerns that applications were not  
16 being processed. That even their stuff couldn't get  
17 through to staff at HRA. And so, it seemed at first,  
18 like you know maybe because of the staffing  
19 shortfalls, that may be contributing to some of the  
20 delays but then it become obvious that this was a  
21 bigger problem than even you know we had initially  
22 thought it was.

23 So, when did HRA and I get that during the  
24 pandemic, the number of applications increased  
25 significantly and the state and federal government

1  
2 did issue a I guess, you know allow discretion  
3 regarding recertifications and to push those further  
4 down the line but since then, at what point did HRA  
5 realize that we were in trouble and that application  
6 you know completion rates had dropped below a  
7 threshold that was alarming? Is your mic on, I'm  
8 sorry.

9 JILL BERRY: Despite the incredible work of our  
10 frontline staff, the unprecedented increase in  
11 application volume from the start of the pandemic and  
12 continuing through today, has we haven't been able to  
13 get to everything and we don't take this lightly  
14 right? The impact on New Yorkers who are in need of  
15 our benefits, we take this very seriously. We're  
16 working tirelessly to make sure that we're getting to  
17 every single application. We're working on them on a  
18 first in, first out basis. Prioritizing emergencies  
19 where we can but we recognize that there is a backlog  
20 that we are working to address.

21 CHAIRPERSON AYALA: I mean, for me it's really  
22 concerning because it is a safety net right system  
23 and it's intended to be there in times of crisis.  
24 And so, you know now you're not getting unemployment  
25 benefits but you're also not receiving your food



1  
2 stamp allotment or you're not getting cash  
3 assistance.

4 I mean, we have cases where peoples rents haven't  
5 been paid through the City FHEPS program for upwards  
6 of a year. That's problematic, so I understand that  
7 HRA and that the Commissioner solicited help from the  
8 state and the federal government. At what point was  
9 that help sought out? When did you reach — when did  
10 HRA realize okay, now, we need further aid here?

11 JILL BERRY: We've been working closely with our  
12 state partners throughout the pandemic. We recently  
13 reengaged them last month to ask for some additional  
14 assistance and we've been working really closely with  
15 them to try to figure out what can they do? What  
16 federal waivers are still permitted and available for  
17 the state and the city and we're working closely with  
18 them to implement as much as possible. In November  
19 and December, we were able to push out some more  
20 research, which is allowing us to refocus our efforts  
21 on applications and that's been a big help.

22 CHAIRPERSON AYALA: Can you explain what the  
23 benefit of the waivers would be to — I mean, I  
24 imagine that the staff is you know is pretty  
25 significant right because if they don't have to worry

1

2 about a recertification and we're pushing that  
3 recertification back six months a year, uhm, does  
4 that allow some time to focus on other applications?

5 But how does that impact the recipient? Are they  
6 then receiving the same level of resources? What  
7 happens if there's a change in the income, assuming  
8 you know I'm receiving SNAP benefits. My  
9 recertification hasn't happened. I become employed  
10 part time during that time and now, by the time that  
11 HRA - am I then penalized if you know HRA's looking  
12 retroactively at the past year? Like, what is the  
13 benefits of the recipient here?

14 JILL BERRY: So, SNAP and cash assistance  
15 recipients have an obligation to report changes of  
16 income to us, even when research happened on their  
17 regular schedule within a certain timeframe, so that  
18 we can take another look at their case, rebudget  
19 their case. Cash and SNAP recipients are able to do  
20 that today. They can do that easily through Access  
21 HRA. They can come into one of our centers.

22 Never should they have waited for a recert or  
23 need to wait for a recert in order to make those  
24 types of changes and we do take actions on them. I  
25 don't know if you want to add anything else Lisa.

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2 LISA FITZPATRICK: Yes, hi, good morning. First  
3 Deputy Commissioner Berry is absolutely correct.  
4 When it comes to cash assistance, if a household  
5 becomes employed, then if there are children on the  
6 case, then we have something that's called  
7 transitional SNAP benefits and they can still receive  
8 that same higher level of SNAP for up to five months  
9 after they report that change.

10 So, throughout this time, if anybody wanted to  
11 report a change, like additional income or a change  
12 in household composition, then they were free to do  
13 that even outside of the recertification period.  
14 Deferring to recertification, gives those households  
15 an opportunity to maintain benefits. And we've had  
16 the same thing happen with the Medicaid program,  
17 where throughout this public health emergency,  
18 Medicaid recipients did not have to, they were not  
19 required to recertify. And that helped to keep  
20 people connected with much needed health insurance  
21 benefits at a time when we were dealing with the  
22 COVID-19 crisis.

23 Advancing these cases, gives the same affect. It  
24 gives people an opportunity to stabilize their  
25 assistance while the agency has you know freeze up

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2 resources in order to focus on application cases.  
3 And from the start of the pandemic to now, many  
4 people you know feel that the COVID-19, the  
5 pandemic's over but it's not over for HRA right?  
6 We've had an increased number of applications  
7 consistently throughout these almost three years at  
8 this point. It started, we hit the peak in April of  
9 2020 for SNAP applications, 94,000. You know there  
10 is no way we could have staffed up to have 94,000  
11 applications processed. It was something that was  
12 alarming to all of us. We were really happy. I  
13 think we were victims of our own success because we  
14 were really happy that the public had an opportunity  
15 to access benefits without coming into locations.

16 Many years ago, there used to be lines around the  
17 corner, around people trying to access HRA service  
18 but because we now have Access HRA, you don't see  
19 that swell in the locations but the work is still  
20 there. The work exists on the back end and that's  
21 what we're struggling to process at this point  
22 because of the long and hard times that we've been  
23 dealing with this work for almost three years.  
24 94,000 in April of 2020 for SNAP applications. The  
25 cash assistance, it was equally high, 36,874

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2 applications in April of 2020 for the cash assistance  
3 program and that wasn't even our high-water mark for  
4 cash assistance. It continued to grow over months  
5 and months.

6 In September of 2021, we had 37,000 cash  
7 assistance applications. In September, just this  
8 past September of 2022, we had 42,000 cash assistance  
9 applications. So, for some people they think that  
10 you know, that the pandemic's over. HRA should be  
11 able to right size the program and get back on track  
12 but it's very difficult to plan for this. We have  
13 staffing. We're continuing to hire. We also still  
14 have redeployed workers who are helping us with the  
15 interviews but they can't help us on the backend with  
16 processing.

17 When it comes to processing, we have to have  
18 certified HRA employees who are trained in  
19 eligibility complete those transactions.

20 CHAIRPERSON AYALA: So, when we're hiring staff,  
21 how long does it take from the time that a person is  
22 hired and trained before they actually get to the  
23 part of the process where they are processing these  
24 applications?

25 JILL BERRY: The training process is six weeks.

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CHAIRPERSON AYALA: It's six weeks?

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JILL BERRY: Hmm, hmm.

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CHAIRPERSON AYALA: Okay, has there been any changes to that as of late, considering the fact that we are still understaffed?

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JILL BERRY: First of all, the training process changes and evolves constantly overtime as rules change, right? This is a complicated process.

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Constantly having tweaks and improvements to the program and the rules, so the training is constantly evolving. Training at one point used to take like 12-16 weeks even in some cases we've been able to streamline it down to the six weeks minimum.

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Anything less than that, doesn't train the staff well enough to do the right work to really make sure that they are making sure that every application who is eligible is getting their benefits.

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CHAIRPERSON AYALA: Do we know what the number of unprocessed applications is to date?

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JILL BERRY: So, the backlog numbers change every single day. Every single day as we complete application work and new applications are coming in the door. We can get back to you with the numbers as

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2 of today after the hearing but they're changing by  
3 the day.

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CHAIRPERSON AYALA: Do we have an idea of how  
long it takes? What's the longest amount of time  
between an application being uhm, a client applying  
for benefits and the application being processed.  
What is the longest amount of time a person has had  
to wait?

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JILL BERRY: So, typical application processing  
timelines are 30 days. For most applications, we  
should be getting them done within 30-days. A lot  
sooner obviously if there's an emergency and we're  
not - those are the timelines that we're not meeting  
but the delays are weeks after that not months.

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CHAIRPERSON AYALA: Weeks after 30-days, okay.

JILL BERRY: We can get back to you.

CHAIRPERSON AYALA: And for emergency, emergency  
like food services? What's the wait time for those  
processing applications?

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JILL BERRY: It should be either for cash  
assistance, I believe it's same day and SNAP within  
seven days.

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CHAIRPERSON AYALA: Cash assistance is the same  
day.

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2 JILL BERRY: Same day if there's an immediate  
3 need and for SNAP, we have seven days for an  
4 expedited food stamps.

5 CHAIRPERSON AYALA: Okay, okay. Okay, uhm, give  
6 me one second. So, regarding the phone interviews,  
7 is there any way, has HRA uhm, you mentioned that  
8 you're streamlining that process. Can you share a  
9 little bit more about that and why? I've always had  
10 the question you know this concern. I'm like, it  
11 doesn't make any sense that I have to sit at home and  
12 wait. If I have an appointment for 11:00 in the  
13 morning to speak to an HRA representative about my  
14 application, why you know and I missed that call  
15 right? Like we've heard repeatedly for years, I mean  
16 even before I was you know sitting on this committee  
17 about you know missed appointments.

18 Why hasn't there ever been an option that the  
19 client actually call in at 11:00 and have a number  
20 that they can call directly?

21 JILL BERRY: Yeah, completely agree with you  
22 Deputy Speaker. On the SNAP side, we do have on  
23 demand interviews. We recognize that clients waiting  
24 for us to call them. The process doesn't work  
25 efficiently. It just doesn't and the on demand where



1  
2 the clients can call us, is a process that works much  
3 better. We're actively working to implement an on-  
4 demand system for the cash assistance population.  
5 Just like we have for SNAP. We just got these state  
6 law change, the waivers, all that just over the past  
7 couple years. So, once we got those approvals, now  
8 we have to start the work.

9 CHAIRPERSON AYALA: I understand the need for the  
10 waivers, my concern is that we're kicking the can  
11 down the line and we're not necessarily addressing  
12 the root cause, right? Like the staffing issues,  
13 there's a problem and uhm, you know through no fault  
14 of your own but it's problematic.

15 Do we know what the number – so we know that the  
16 application rate has gone up. What are the number of  
17 staff currently assigned to process applications and  
18 what is the case load per staff?

19 JILL BERRY: We'll have to get back to you on  
20 those specific numbers.

21 CHAIRPERSON AYALA: Okay. And how many staff is  
22 it going to take to eliminate the backlog? If you  
23 could get back to us on that as well.

24 So, I mean we hear things sometimes at the  
25 Council and one of the things that was brought to my

1  
2 attention, I don't know if it's true or not was that,  
3 during the height of the pandemic when HRA was  
4 working remotely, that the application processing  
5 rate was significantly higher than they've been since  
6 staff has been required to work at the brick-and-  
7 mortar sites Can you confirm or deny that that is an  
8 accurate statement of what's happened?

9 JILL BERRY: I think the difference is that we  
10 had a lot of waivers in place during the pandemic  
11 while people were working from home that we just  
12 don't have in place today, right. We didn't have to  
13 conduct interviews for SNAP applications for example  
14 during the pandemic. Now we do. We have to do those  
15 things and I think that's the real key difference.  
16 It's not the working from home, working remotely  
17 versus working in the office, all of that coincided  
18 with the expiration of some really key waivers that  
19 allowed us to not have to do some work in the past  
20 that we now have to do.

21 CHAIRPERSON AYALA: When did the waivers expire  
22 again?

23 LISA FITZPATRICK: So, what First Deputy  
24 Commissioner Berry is referring to is the waiver of  
25 the recertification interview from March of 2020

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2 through September of 2020, we had an opportunity to  
3 focus exclusively on application cases because the  
4 recerts were moved up six months.

5 So, by advancing, having a waiver that allowed us  
6 to advance those recerts gave us breathing room and  
7 we had all of our staff resources focused on the  
8 application activity.

9 CHAIRPERSON AYALA: And what is the rate of  
10 completion to date of applications? What is the rate  
11 now?

12 JILL BERRY: The application timeliness rates?  
13 Is that what you're asking about?

14 CHAIRPERSON AYALA: Yeah.

15 JILL BERRY: So, for cash assistance right now,  
16 it's 61.4 percent are getting done on time. And for  
17 SNAP, uhm, 46.3 percent are getting done on time.  
18 But we are reviewing every application that comes in.  
19 No application is left behind and we're ensuring that  
20 as we get to each application, the clients receive  
21 all the benefits that they're entitled to.

22 CHAIRPERSON AYALA: Yeah, I mean I'm sure that  
23 you guys are as concerned as we are and I you know,  
24 we just learned about this whole new scandal with the  
25 fishing of the food stamp you know benefits as well

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2 and that is pretty alarming. Because there is no  
3 reimbursement base program to compensate those  
4 families and I don't, I don't even, I can't imagine  
5 how they are getting by.

6 I'm going to, I'm going to stop asking questions  
7 because I want to give my colleagues an opportunity  
8 but we have Council Member Althea Stevens who's on  
9 Zoom and unless we have quorum, she will not be  
10 allowed to ask questions. So, we're going to start  
11 with Council Member Stevens.

12 COUNCIL MEMBER STEVENS: Thank you so much. I  
13 really appreciate it. I have a number of questions  
14 but also starting with, my office is directly next  
15 door to an HRA office and people are constantly sent  
16 to the office to fill out their applications and not  
17 being helped. Like literally, my deputy had to walk  
18 someone over yesterday to the office because they  
19 were being refused help and service.

20 So, you know this is something that my office is  
21 dealing with consistently and constantly and it's  
22 really unacceptable. So, one of my first questions  
23 is really around like, I know we're talking about  
24 like staff and recruitment. Can you guys talk to me  
25 a little bit about what the hire rank and recruitment

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2 process for new staff is because I know it takes six  
3 weeks but what does it look like ongoing to continue  
4 to retain and recruit staff? What is that process?

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JILL BERRY: Yes, so thank you for that. HRA  
just like our CBO partners, we're all facing the same  
workforce challenges as employers around the country.  
We continue on a continual basis to recruit and to  
fill our vacancies.

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COUNCIL MEMBER STEVENS: But what does that look  
like. I know that you're looking, do you have a  
process? Is there a plan? Like, is there like a  
detailed mapped out situation because one of the  
things in the city I'm seeing more and more that  
workforce development is not something that we are  
prioritizing and it needs to happen. So, do you guys  
have like a recruitment plan and a strategy that you  
have in place currently?

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JILL BERRY: We're advertising all of our  
positions on LinkedIn. We get plenty of resumes and  
we're able to recruit regularly new staff. It's just  
an ongoing effort of going through the recruitment,  
going through the onboarding process, getting a start  
date, getting a class together and having them start  
into training. Uhm, it's part of our everyday

1  
2 regular process. It happens every single day. It's  
3 not like we're just doing a set amount each and every  
4 day and definitely OMB's listing of the two for one  
5 hiring is going to help us and allow us to move a  
6 little bit faster in that regard.

7 COUNCIL MEMBER STEVENS: Okay, has there been any  
8 analysis of total cost and impact of missed or  
9 delayed benefit payments including like delays in  
10 SNAP, City FHEPs, apartment loss and stuff like that?  
11 Have you done an analysis of that?

12 JILL BERRY: I'm not sure I quite understood the  
13 question. An analysis of the impact of the delays  
14 are?

15 COUNCIL MEMBER STEVENS: Yeah, like yeah, what  
16 has been the impact of like the delays and loss that  
17 folks have been receiving because of the delays?

18 JILL BERRY: We know every individual is impacted  
19 when we're delayed. It's an impact to that family.  
20 That family is not getting the benefit that they're  
21 eligible for on the day that they're eligible for it.  
22 It's taking us extra time. With all due respect, an  
23 analysis is just going to show what we already know.  
24 Even one family that we're late on is one family too  
25 many for us.

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COUNCIL MEMBER STEVENS: Yeah but the numbers actually help so that you can like start it. So, I think that you know just being like oh, we know it's an impact right but I think having numbers and data is always helpful.

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LISA FITZPATRICK: Yeah, I just want to add to that statement. Although the cases are processed late because of the backlogs, there are times when we are intentionally holding a decision in order to help the household. Many times, individuals are coming to us and they don't necessarily have all of the information that they need in order to process the case.

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So, what we've done instead of rushing to deny cases as we could do based on the state regulation, we've given people an extra opportunity. More time to be able to submit documentation, particularly when it comes to rent arrears. Some landlords are hesitant to give clients rent breakdowns. I'm not sure if that's a tragedy to try to evict them. So, it takes sometimes households a much longer period in order to get the information that they need for HRA to process the case. So, we do as much as possible to help those individuals.

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2           And if a case is processed untimely, we still go  
3 retroactive to the date of compliance. So, just  
4 because it's processed untimely doesn't mean that  
5 someone misses out on a benefit. We're still  
6 obligated to issue food stamps or SNAP benefits  
7 retroactive to the date of application if they're  
8 found ineligible and for cash assistance, we issue  
9 benefits retroactive to the date of compliance if we  
10 have done something to cause a delay in the benefits.

11           So, I just wanted to make sure that that's clear,  
12 that yes, there is untimely processing. Not all of  
13 it is unnecessarily a negative thing and then, even  
14 in the instance when we've done something to cause a  
15 delay, we do – we're obligated to issue the  
16 retroactive assistance.

17           SERGEANT AT ARMS: Time expired.

18           COUNCIL MEMBER STEVENS: Yeah and I know that  
19 that is important and I just want to also just say  
20 that having number and data also can tell you where  
21 you're doing well at and look at the deficiencies and  
22 you know even those stories right. So, data doesn't  
23 always necessarily mean a negative thing. I think  
24 that it would help with the process and also you can  
25 see where you're doing well, where you're not doing



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2 well. I mean in the same way that you were able to  
3 see that like 61 percent of the folks are getting  
4 cash assistance and 43 percent of the folks are from  
5 our food stamps right.

6 We know that those are numbers that we need to  
7 improve and how much you need to improve on. And so,  
8 I think that it's important that there is some type  
9 of analysis data and analysis around how this is  
10 actually impacting every day families on a regular  
11 basis because we know like, they're going to be  
12 impacted from that individual family but having the  
13 data would actually be helpful for us to move the  
14 needle.

15 JILL BERRY: Appreciate that.

16 CHAIRPERSON AYALA: Thank you Council Member  
17 Stevens.

18 COUNCIL MEMBER STEVENS: Thank you but I'll come  
19 back later if I can.

20 CHAIRPERSON AYALA: Alright, Council Member  
21 Williams.

22 COUNCIL MEMBER WILLIAMS: Thank you. I also had  
23 questions about [INAUDIBLE 49:05] and others, a lot  
24 of retention. So, actually I'll focus my questions  
25 around the OMB vacancy mandate and the letter from

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2 OMB. Is HRA eligible for any special exclusions  
3 under this mandate?

4 JILL BERRY: HRA has to comply with the mandate,  
5 just like all other city agencies but we will still  
6 have vacancies available even after the vacancy  
7 reduction is in place and we'll work very closely, we  
8 already are working closely with OMB to ensure that  
9 it doesn't interrupt - that this vacancy reduction  
10 doesn't interrupt any uhm delivery of service to New  
11 Yorkers.

12 COUNCIL MEMBER WILLIAMS: Okay, uhm you know  
13 there's a lot of different agencies that currently  
14 have a lot of vacancies and then also subject to the  
15 PEG's, so I don't know if it's a good practice of the  
16 Administration to sort of require agencies to further  
17 reduce when they already have such significant  
18 resource deficiencies. Like you said it best, the  
19 unprecedented need doesn't meet the resources that  
20 you have and if you're now subject to decreasing your  
21 resources, how will that help your agency be more  
22 efficient in your work?

23 JILL BERRY: Thank you for that. We do have  
24 vacancies though still today. We will continue to  
25 have vacancies even after the reduction and we've

1  
2 been working closely with OMB throughout the pandemic  
3 to continue to hire into these particular frontline  
4 positions.

5       The issue is really the workforce shortage and  
6 finding qualified people who want to do this work,  
7 has been a huge challenge. Not just for us but for  
8 employers across the country.

9       COUNCIL MEMBER WILLIAMS: Yeah, I think and you  
10 kind of had a spirited back and forth with Council  
11 Member Stevens about finding people to work but I  
12 guess what I'm saying is, as you try to find people  
13 to work, which is a problem and I understand the  
14 issue, you're sort of in a rock and a hard place.  
15 Administratively, if you're also then asked to reduce  
16 the resources, that you're saying you already don't  
17 have the resources, I just don't see how that's going  
18 to be an efficient practice.

19       LISA FITZPATRICK: So, there have been no cuts to  
20 the staffing that does processing for cash assistance  
21 and SNAP. So, these are critical HRA services and  
22 we've been fully funded for those services.

23       Throughout the pandemic, we have been recruiting  
24 new hires to do this work. We've had OMB approval in  
25 order to hire people but it really has boiled down to

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2 getting qualified candidates to do the job. We're  
3 advertising; Council Member Stevens asked about you  
4 know the strategies to recruit and onboard staff. We  
5 are posting our positions everywhere. If you go on  
6 Access HRA, anybody who is going on Access HRA to  
7 apply or recertify, they will see our announcements.  
8 We've had job fairs. We're doing as much as we can  
9 in order to find qualified candidates.

10 My colleagues here, Assistant Deputy Commissioner  
11 Ramon Flores, he's over the cash program. I have  
12 Assistance Deputy Commissioner Gregorio Morales, he's  
13 over the SNAP program. They have been going through  
14 resume's after resume's after resume's and we are  
15 continuously interviewing.

16 COUNCIL MEMBER WILLIAMS: No, I understand.  
17 That's why I didn't want to focus my questions on  
18 your recruitment process for new hires. I'm just  
19 talking about the overall machinations of your agency  
20 and the fact that you are being asked to reduce, for  
21 not further essential services – okay, great.

22 So, I'll turn my questions over the EBT card  
23 scam. There's been quite a few people that have  
24 called my office about the scams and they haven't  
25 been receiving proper information. Of course, it's

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2 been reported in the media. Can you tell us how HRA  
3 is proactively informing clients about the risk of  
4 benefit theft and steps to go through if they are a  
5 victim of benefit theft?

6 I can tell you again from our office, some of  
7 your clients have not received information. It's  
8 been a very frustrating process for them.

9 JILL BERRY: So, we've done things like, we have  
10 a social media campaign. We post it on Access HRA.  
11 We have flyers available in our centers but quite  
12 frankly, it's unconscionable that anybody would steal  
13 anything from anyone, let alone these really critical  
14 benefits from our clients. We're working really  
15 closely with law enforcement at the city and national  
16 level to identify perpetrators, to try to stop this  
17 from happening. Because we know right now under  
18 current federal and state law that we can't -

19 COUNCIL MEMBER WILLIAMS: What is the protocol  
20 that you have when a client notifies you that they  
21 are a victim of theft, benefit theft?

22 JILL BERRY: We take their information. We do a  
23 little bit of research to determine whether they were  
24 in fact a victim of scamming. In almost every case  
25 they are. We identify how much was lost and we take

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2 the information that we get in order to work with our  
3 law enforcement partners to try to identify and stop

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5 COUNCIL MEMBER WILLIAMS: So, is the client  
6 reimbursed?

7 JILL BERRY: Unfortunately, federal and state law  
8 currently do not allow reimbursement of any of these  
9 assets.

10 COUNCIL MEMBER WILLIAMS: So, are you working  
11 with the state around that?

12 JILL BERRY: We're working very closely. The  
13 state is just as concerned as we are.

14 COUNCIL MEMBER WILLIAMS: Thank you.

15 CHAIRPERSON AYALA: Thank you Council Member.  
16 We'll now hear from Council Member De La Rosa.

17 COUNCIL MEMBER DE LA ROSA: Thank you so much  
18 Chair Ayala for this important hearing. I have some  
19 follow-up questions around the same line of  
20 questioning that my colleagues have already asked. I  
21 am concerned about the 20 percent vacancy rate that  
22 is existing in the agency right now. We do have a  
23 breakdown here that the Committee provided on  
24 essential services and it does look like from the  
25 information we have here for example, domestic

1  
2 violence services has a 49 percent vacancy rate,  
3 according to the information we have here. The food  
4 assistance program seems like there are some  
5 vacancies there. Home energy assistance has 38.5  
6 percent. Medicare and homecare 30.6 percent. The  
7 Office of Child Support Enforcement 45 percent. So,  
8 I want to understand because what I'm hearing from  
9 you all is that the essential services are not going  
10 to be impacted by basically continuing to keep  
11 positions vacant. But there are existing vacancies  
12 in the critical functions of the agency.

13       So, how do we reconcile keeping those positions  
14 vacant because based on the PEG, you are not going to  
15 be allowed to fill some of those positions with  
16 delivering the critical services. Like, walk us  
17 through what that looks like in the event that there  
18 is some confusion in the way that I'm understanding  
19 this information.

20       JILL BERRY: Thank you for that. We're not  
21 holding - none of those vacancies are being held as  
22 vacancies. We are seeking to fill every vacancy that  
23 we have and OMB has been a really great partner with  
24 us.

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2 COUNCIL MEMBER DE LA ROSA: So, in the PEG plan,  
3 is there – there is going to be vacancies that will  
4 have to remain vacant in order for you to comply with  
5 the reduction plan, correct?

6 JILL BERRY: Right, I understand the question but  
7 right now, we have over 2,000 vacancies in DSS, HRA  
8 and even after the 50 percent reduction, we will  
9 still have nearly 1,000 vacancies left to fill.

10 So, it's not stopping us from filling our  
11 vacancies right now.

12 COUNCIL MEMBER DE LA ROSA: So, in the 1,000 left  
13 to fill, do you foresee that will be filled, will be  
14 filled in these critical areas that are now the most  
15 impacted by vacancies? Like domestic violent  
16 services, food stamp assistance program, home energy  
17 assistance, child support enforcement?

18 JILL BERRY: Yeah, absolutely. Core frontline  
19 critical services are our priority and OMB's priority  
20 and OMB's committed to working with us to make sure  
21 that those programs and those services are not  
22 impacted. As Administrator Fitzpatrick said before,  
23 we have not yet cut any of those programs.

24 COUNCIL MEMBER DE LA ROSA: Okay, and has the  
25 agency as a whole created a plan for hiring? I know



1  
2 that you mentioned LinkedIn. I know that you  
3 mentioned the receipt of resumes and going out and  
4 doing different job recruitment programs. Is there  
5 an overall plan right now in place to fill those I'll  
6 say the 1,000 vacancies that you're looking to fill?

7 JILL BERRY: It's part of our every day work.  
8 There's - if you're asking for is there one plan.  
9 Council Member Stevens maybe was asking for the same  
10 thing. It's just part of our ongoing every day  
11 activities that we're meeting about and talking about  
12 constantly. Making sure that we have a good inflow  
13 of resumes to review. That we are reviewing those  
14 resumes and onboarding people and bringing them into  
15 training classes.

16 COUNCIL MEMBER DE LA ROSA: Do you understand  
17 that it's hard to reconcile in our minds that with  
18 the current backlog as it exists for applications  
19 that are coming in, that you all are already under  
20 water on, that the agency would also be tasked and  
21 required to simultaneously fill these vacancies.  
22 It's hard to reconcile how that happens if the agency  
23 is already so behind on the day-to-day work of  
24 processing applications.

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2 Like, in my mind, it doesn't feel like the agency  
3 has the capacity at this moment in the way that it is  
4 staffed to be able to fulfill that mandate. So, I  
5 want to understand like, how that works within the  
6 processes that exist in the agency.

7 JILL BERRY: Yup, so staffing isn't the only tool  
8 at our disposal here. We're also working closely  
9 with the state to try to get more waivers and  
10 easements to allow us to do - to focus on the work  
11 that we need to. And we're working within our own  
12 agency to look at our processes, our systems, what  
13 else can we do to make that work go a little bit  
14 faster and be a little bit easier for our clients.  
15 We're not just relying on hiring. It's a  
16 comprehensive.

17 COUNCIL MEMBER DE LA ROSA: Okay, one other  
18 question on documents. So, I understood what you  
19 said about delaying decisions in order to make sure  
20 that clients have the documents that are needed. One  
21 of the things that we're hearing and I know I must  
22 not be the only one hearing this from our constituent  
23 services teams, is that often times constituents will  
24 upload documents. They will submit documents and  
25 then they receive a letter saying, we didn't get your

1  
2 documents. So, I want to understand sort of, how  
3 that process is reconciled and what can be done. How  
4 can the Council support in ensuring that when  
5 documents are uploaded or submitted, it's a more  
6 streamline process. Because for a constituent who is  
7 walking into our office, right, that's already not  
8 receiving their cash assistance. That's already not  
9 receiving their food stamps to find their way all the  
10 way to their Council Member's office to come in to  
11 say, I got this letter that these documents are  
12 missing but I submitted the documents and now my case  
13 is on hold. It's an additional burden and an  
14 additional obstacle for them to receive those  
15 services.

16 So, our staff want to understand, how do we  
17 better communicate with HRA? How do we better ensure  
18 that when we get the notice that documents are  
19 missing, we can ensure receipt of those documents?

20 LISA FITZPATRICK: Alright, thank you. That's a  
21 really good question and something that we've been  
22 focusing on for many months now. With the increase  
23 in the number of applications and recertifications  
24 came additional documents. So, a lot of people focus  
25 on the fact that you know, we had a lot more work in

1  
2 application volume and recert volume but also,  
3 whenever anyone whether they were coming into a  
4 location or using the mobile app to upload that  
5 document, all of those documents had to be identified  
6 and labeled and then associated with a particular  
7 case. So, that process is what we refer to as  
8 indexing and we had you know backlogs in the indexing  
9 process because of the sheer volume of work. We had  
10 the ability to hire temporary employees to help us  
11 with indexing and still, with the same issue that we  
12 are discussing about filling all of our other  
13 positions, it's been very difficult, even with the  
14 vacancies in temporary positions. To fill those  
15 positions, to get people to help us with the indexing  
16 so we can do it quicker. So, we used some redeployed  
17 staff in order to help with indexing.

18       And we're also looking at technology to see if we  
19 can make it possible so we can eliminate the number  
20 of steps it takes to identify and associate that case  
21 with a particular record. As First Deputy Berry  
22 mentioned, it's not just the staffing that we're  
23 leaning on. We are also looking at technology as  
24 much as possible and trying to use that technology to  
25 help to expedite processes.

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2

CHAIRPERSON AYALA: Thank you Council Member.

3

Council Member Ossè followed by Council Member Abreu.

4

COUNCIL MEMBER OSSÈ: Good morning and I just

5

want to start my questioning by thanking you all for

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the work that you do. It's not easy, especially

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given the testimony as well as you know what we

8

experience in our offices every single day. This

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isn't easy work. Being a public servant isn't easy,

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especially during this pandemic. Especially during

11

this migrant crisis and I know that you are you know

12

some of the frontline workers in terms of how we're

13

handling these problems in our city.

14

The first question that I wanted to ask and of

15

course, it pertains to the staff vacancies is, what

16

is the starting salary for a case worker?

17

JILL BERRY: Yeah, I think we're going to have to

18

get back to you on that but they're relatively, you

19

know they're starting salaries for sure. But I do

20

want to thank you for your words about our frontline

21

staff. You know, they're mostly long-term employees.

22

They've been around a long time and they're not happy

23

with the way things are going either.

24

COUNCIL MEMBER OSSÈ: Hmm, hmm, and what would

25

you say for those starting staff or those starting

1

2 case workers? How long is it until they you know  
3 throw in the towel and quit?

4

JILL BERRY: I think we're doing - I know we're  
5 doing everything we can to make sure that they don't,  
6 right. We're trying to make sure that they feel  
7 supported. That the long-term staff are treating  
8 them well because they need these people to stay on  
9 and help and work with them. It is something that is  
10 important. I know Administrator Fitzpatrick and  
11 Assistant Deputy Commissioner Flores, when they're  
12 out in the field, they're talking to the new staff  
13 onboard and encouraging them to stay and talking to  
14 people who have been around a long time to encourage  
15 them to mentor these new people, so that they will  
16 stay.

17

COUNCIL MEMBER OSSÈ: And what are some of the  
18 requirements that you are looking for when hiring  
19 some of these initial case workers in terms of, is  
20 there a college degree that is required? Uh, if you  
21 could expand on that, that would be great.

22

RAMON FLORES: Good morning, thank you. There  
23 are multiple requirements, they are either or, so one  
24 is a college degree. If there's no college degree,  
25 there's certain levels of experience interacting with

1  
2 the public. So, I think it's about three or four  
3 years. I'd have to get back to you exact on exact  
4 date, the exact timeframe.

5 And there are - or a combination of uhm not  
6 necessarily a college degree but some sort of  
7 intermediate school with some experience. So, we  
8 don't necessarily in my experience so far have too  
9 much trouble at least identifying individuals to  
10 interview and then, once we make the selection,  
11 that's when sometimes people either don't come  
12 onboard or decide to do something else or the like,  
13 but as far as identifying candidates to do the work,  
14 we have a pretty good handle on.

15 COUNCIL MEMBER OSSE: Right, thank you for that.  
16 So, just to lay down the ground work and I know we  
17 all are aware of the many different elements that  
18 exist in our society and our city right now but you  
19 know, there are folks that are good natured to want  
20 to go in this line of work and be a public servant.  
21 Say they went to college for four years, have student  
22 debt and thank you colleague Williams for - Council  
23 Member Williams for showing me the starting rate but  
24 I'm seeing that the starting salary can range from  
25 \$40,000 to \$47,000.

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2

It is expensive to live in New York City.

3

Inflation is a mess and for you know a college

4

graduate or someone that's you know been in the

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workforce for some time that wants to get into this

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line of work, that salary is not sustainable. Not

7

only in terms of you know allowing them to live a

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day-to-day life in New York City but to be doing this

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work that you all are doing, where the pressure is on

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every single day, so would you say that a struggle

11

that HRA or DSS has in terms of retaining, case

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workers are retaining staff or even a problem in

13

terms of addressing the vacancies could be the

14

salaries or the budget that you have for the salaries

15

for some of these starting case workers.

16

JILL BERRY: Absolutely. Uhm, we are making some

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changes to the job opportunity specialists. There's

18

no residency requirement for that title, which does

19

help with recruitment for sure. And that's for the

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cash assistance program. On the SNAP program, the

21

eligibility specialist, they do currently have a

22

residency requirement.

23

So, one of the things that we are working closely

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in partnership with the Office of Labor Relations and

25

DCAS, is can we make some changes there? Can we make



1  
2 it a little bit easier for people to be able to take  
3 those jobs and live with those salaries. It is  
4 definitely something that we are looking at very  
5 closely. You're right.

6 COUNCIL MEMBER OSSÉ: And I know something else  
7 that you said in your testimonies or even answering  
8 the question is that quality in staff is something  
9 that you are looking for and you know if I'm you  
10 know, experienced in this line of work, maybe in the  
11 private sector and I've made some money but I want to  
12 go into some type of public service and I see that  
13 you know, a case worker job for DSS or HRA is you  
14 know \$41,000 to \$47,000, I wouldn't apply for that  
15 job. Would it be something that you all would look  
16 into at potentially reducing - I know you have 20  
17 percent vacancy for staff. If you reduced it to 10  
18 percent and then increased the salary for those that  
19 wanted to be staring case workers, is that something  
20 that this agency would potentially look into or could  
21 you look into?

22 JILL BERRY: It's certainly something that we  
23 could look into in conjunction with the Office of  
24 Labor Relations, DCAS and OMB. It's certainly not  
25 something that's off the table.

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COUNCIL MEMBER OSSÈ: Do you think it would help?

JILL BERRY: I think that a lot of times getting through the volume of work at this point without more waivers and technology in place, we also need people to do the work. It might be a combination of things. That in and of itself might not be enough but that coupled with some other changes to processes, could potentially be a big help to the agency.

COUNCIL MEMBER OSSÈ: Sorry, I know I'm over time but the last thing I'll leave you with. The reason we're seeing a lot of staffing shortages countrywide, isn't because people don't want to work anymore. It's because of how expensive it is to be alive. To be able to afford rent, groceries and I know every single person or most of us in this room feel that pressure and when, you know compensation for a job as tasking as the job and work that you do isn't at the rate that it should be, I can see that as being a deterrence to wanting to even apply or stay in this line of work. Thank you.

Wait, one more thing, I also do want to shout out Jamar Hooks whose you know, give him a raise. He's consistently been -

[UNIDENTIFIED] Don't shut up. That's my friend.

1

2

CHAIRPERSON AYALA: He didn't ask. He didn't ask.

3

4

5

COUNCIL MEMBER OSSÉ: So consistent and in touch with our office and helping us with various different situations. So, I just want to acknowledge him.

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CHAIRPERSON AYALA: Thank you Council Member. We'll now hear from Council Member Abreu.

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COUNCIL MEMBER ABREU: Thank you to the Administration. Uhm, I saw in the testimony that you said there may be perhaps the need to preclude the legislation I'm proposing today. Uhm, I'm here to say that I'm going to make sure that the Council is behind this in full force and that this is going to be done legislatively. And even if it is something that is underway, it is always something that could be codified, just for the record.

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19

20

So, I will start off by asking, what percentage of rental assistance voucher payments made to landlords are made electronically?

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22

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JILL BERRY: Currently all NYCHA assistance payments are made electronically.

COUNCIL MEMBER ABREU: Okay and what about for non-NYCHA?

1

2 JILL BERRY: Uhm, we have some home TBRA payments  
3 that are also made electronically.

4 COUNCIL MEMBER ABREU: What percent?

5 JILL BERRY: We have to get back to you on that.

6 COUNCIL MEMBER ABREU: Alright, this is literally  
7 a hearing on timeliness of payments and whose getting  
8 payments electronically or not and you're saying that  
9 there's potentially no need for this legislation.  
10 What percentage are made by paper checks?

11 JILL BERRY: All the payments to private  
12 landlords are currently made by paper check.

13 COUNCIL MEMBER ABREU: So, that means that there  
14 is zero electronic payments to private landlords is  
15 the adverse answer to that?

16 JILL BERRY: Correct.

17 COUNCIL MEMBER ABREU: Alright, thank you. If  
18 most or all are not electronic, why aren't a greater  
19 number of payments made electronically?

20 JILL BERRY: So, we're currently working on our  
21 landlord management system current. We have a pilot  
22 running right now with a I guess it's not zero  
23 because we have nine landlords right now that are in  
24 our pilot. A very small number that we're working  
25 through developing our system. It's not – and the

1  
2 system is not going to electronic, just electronic  
3 funds transferred. It's going to be a comprehensive  
4 data system that will also allow landlords to not  
5 just receive the payment but receive all the  
6 information about the payment. Which tenant is this  
7 payment for? What unit does that payment live in?  
8 What unit does that individual – is the payment for?  
9 What time period? What individual? All of that  
10 information will be in the system, not just the  
11 transfer of the funds from us to the landlord.

12 And we think that that's really important to make  
13 sure many of our clients live in buildings.  
14 Landlords have many, more than one of our clients in  
15 their buildings and we want to make sure that every  
16 client gets credited for the payment that we made on  
17 their behalf and gets credited correctly.

18 So, we believe strongly and the system that we  
19 are in development on, we'll make sure that that  
20 comprehensive information is associated with every  
21 payment and we're planning on rolling this out to  
22 City FHEPS landlords in calendar year 2023.

23 COUNCIL MEMBER ABREU: How many landlords does  
24 HRA currently make payments to in the city?

25

1  
2 JILL BERRY: I'll have to get back to you on  
3 that.

4 COUNCIL MEMBER ABREU: Is it fair to say it's  
5 less than one percent? Is it fair to say that nine  
6 landlords of the ones that you're working with would  
7 be less than one percent of the landlords -

8 JILL BERRY: It's a very small number.

9 COUNCIL MEMBER ABREU: Okay, which speaks to the  
10 need to scale this and make sure that it works. When  
11 did this pilot program come about?

12 LISA FITZPATRICK: We've been working on the  
13 pilot. The current system has actually been in  
14 development for a number of years. Building it from  
15 the ground up and the pilot was started just in 2022  
16 with landlords. The goal is not to just have just a  
17 small number of landlords participate but to  
18 understand the kinks and the problems with the  
19 process and how it's programmed before rolling out to  
20 a larger scale. Because as we include additional  
21 landlords, there might be problems and we want to  
22 make sure people get their payments on time.

23 So, we sent out a communication to landlords to  
24 get them to volunteer, to participate in the process.  
25 We got some takers and we've been using that feedback

1  
2 from the landlords to understand what needs to be  
3 changed in the program, in the system in order to  
4 best address their needs. Some landlords have  
5 multiple agents that are managing multiple buildings  
6 and we have to take that in considering. It may not  
7 just be a one-on-one relationship, like we see with  
8 NYCHA or with Home TBRA, where it was easier to make  
9 those payments. And those were just truly just  
10 electronic payments. Those were not a landlord  
11 management system.

12 So, since we want to make this a more  
13 comprehensive system for landlords. We really do  
14 value the feedback and using that information in  
15 order to make sure that this scale -

16 COUNCIL MEMBER ABREU: Chair, can I get more  
17 time? Thank you.

18 So, it started a few years ago and it's only  
19 being built up to nine landlords as of right now. Is  
20 that fair to say?

21 JILL BERRY: For the electronic funds transfer  
22 portion of it. As we said, this system, it's a  
23 bigger system. It's also a system that is accepting  
24 applications for vouchers, allowing the voucher  
25 process and the approval of vouchers to go through

1  
2 the system. It is, it's a big complicated system.  
3 We make payments to thousands of landlords on behalf  
4 of clients every single month. We want to be really  
5 careful as we're transitioning those into an  
6 electronic system that we're not missing any  
7 payments. That there aren't delays in payments as we  
8 do that or missed payments as we do that.

9 We agree that this is needed. That's why we've  
10 invested so much into developing the system and it  
11 takes time.

12 COUNCIL MEMBER ABREU: And I find that the fact  
13 that it's scaled up to nine landlords only, speaks to  
14 a very dire need for this legislation. It speaks to  
15 a dire need to make sure that families aren't in  
16 housing court because HRA has submitted a late  
17 payment or did not provide the means for someone to  
18 submit this payment electronically.

19 I believe we can do this legislatively and  
20 working together. Thank you so much Chair.

21 CHAIRPERSON AYALA: Thank you Council Member.  
22 Council Member Lee.

23 COUNCIL MEMBER LEE: Hi, good morning I think  
24 everyone. So, I just wanted to say thank you as well  
25 because I'm a social worker and ran a nonprofit



1  
2 organization before I joined the Council and we  
3 actually did partner with HRA because you were at one  
4 of our DFTA funded senior centers I believe once a  
5 month and I just had a – I was just thinking about  
6 this in terms of the caseloads and seeing that  
7 obviously there's multiple factors and issues sort of  
8 happening at once, which is that the caseloads are  
9 increasing. I totally get the staffing issue,  
10 because even across the board, the number one issue  
11 in the mental health sector, health sector and  
12 nonprofit sector is finding people to fill these  
13 jobs. And so, that part I do fully get and  
14 understand it was tough for us to fill certain  
15 positions as well but, so in terms of the caseload,  
16 and I don't know what the legality is here but is  
17 there a way to perhaps expand some of the  
18 requirements to be able to partner with nonprofit  
19 organizations that have the built-in infrastructure  
20 and cliental and language capacity to help assist  
21 with some of the caseload work, perhaps that HRA has?  
22 And I just wanted to actually clarify the 84,000  
23 applications that were received. Is that only  
24 through your centers or is it also through the  
25 centers that you contract with externally?

1

2 JILL BERRY: So, that's all applications. We  
3 don't contract out the application work.

4 COUNCIL MEMBER LEE: Okay, so is that something I  
5 guess that could be looked into in terms of if you  
6 have – and I understand that this wouldn't help  
7 towards the count in your numbers for staffing and  
8 employees right but – and again, this is where I  
9 don't know what the legalities of it are and I'm sure  
10 there are issues there but for example, if someone  
11 was coming to our senior center once a month to help  
12 our clients? Is that something where perhaps certain  
13 pieces of the responsibilities could be parceled out,  
14 so that you know the groups could be for example, a  
15 nonprofit partner could be identified contracted with  
16 – contracting with HRA and the staff and the  
17 caseworkers at the nonprofit could help prepare  
18 everything and the person, when they do come once a  
19 month, it would help streamline that process?

20 So, I'm just trying to think through in terms of  
21 what can be done to help you know streamline and make  
22 that process more efficient given that there are  
23 staffing shortages?

24 JILL BERRY: Yeah, thank you Council Member Lee.  
25 You're 100 percent right. Your ideas are spot on and

1  
2 correct. Working, we have been and we continue to  
3 work with our CBO partners. We provide them with  
4 training and with tools to work with clients  
5 applicants and recipients to complete their  
6 applications and recertifications and the real value  
7 is, they can help make sure that the application is  
8 complete. That all the documentation is submitted.  
9 So, that makes our job a lot easier. Absolutely 100  
10 percent and to your point about the contracting, what  
11 this Administration is doing under the Adam's  
12 Administration is, benefits access is really  
13 important and we've spent a lot of time over the  
14 years making benefit to access easier for our agency  
15 through Access HRA and other tools as we discussed.  
16 But they have already added money and we will be  
17 contracting with CBO's specifically to do this work  
18 of helping even more people access our services and  
19 our benefits, doing exactly what you said.

20 COUNCIL MEMBER LEE: And quick question, one last  
21 quick question. In order to have someone come to an  
22 offsite location, I think there was a certain number,  
23 range of clients that needed to be there, that were  
24 at that center for example. So, is it something  
25 where you know if you build it they will come right.

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So, for example, I know some smaller groups that

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serve like the Bangladeshi community in Queens, they

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don't necessarily have numbers yet but I would

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imagine that once this service is offered there, they

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will have a lot more people that could potentially

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come to that site.

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So, is there something that also could be looked

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at in terms of the requirements of what it takes for

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someone to go to a site as well?

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JILL BERRY: Yeah, so thank you for that

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question. I would say two things about that. One is

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that just like all the other areas of our agency that

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they too are a little bit short staffed. But one of

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the things that we developed and developed well

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during the pandemic is to be able to help some people

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remotely through Zoom and that tool allows us to help

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places where there may not be the volume that would

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be needed to justify having somebody travel out and

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spend time. But through Zoom, it makes it a lot

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easier to help smaller communities to do that kind of

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work.

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COUNCIL MEMBER LEE: Thank you.

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CHAIRPERSON AYALA: Thank you. We will now hear

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from Council Member Restler.

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COUNCIL MEMBER RESTLER: Chair Ayala, thank you so much for your leadership of this committee, which has been just incredibly impressive. And I can think of no more urgent hearing topic than the one we're focused on today. I have a great deal of respect for the people who work at HRA. Administrator Fitzpatrick, First Deputy Commissioner Berry, I've had the privilege of working with you both and the teams at HRA who don't get enough credit for their competence and their hard work to deliver for low-income and vulnerable New Yorkers. If you need to find a city agency where you want to actually get stuff done, I don't think there's a better place to call than HRA. However, it's impossible to do your job if you don't have people. So, my first question is, how many years have each of you been working at HRA and DSS?

LISA FITZPATRICK: I'll answer. I've been with the agency for 38 years.

COUNCIL MEMBER RESTLER: 38, wow, God, that's got to be a record Ms. Fitzpatrick.

LISA FITZPATRICK: Yeah, thank you.

COUNCIL MEMBER RESTLER: And we're better served as a city because of it, yes.

1  
2 JILL BERRY: Yeah, I've been with the city for  
3 more than 20 years. HRA about 15 years.

4 COUNCIL MEMBER RESTLER: Okay and in your  
5 respective 38 and 15 odd years at HRA, so maybe I'll  
6 just ask this one to Lisa if you don't mind. Have  
7 you ever experienced a headcount of 10,410 people at  
8 HRA?

9 LISA FITZPATRICK: Thank you for that question  
10 and thank you for recognizing the great work that the  
11 team at HRA does on a day-to-day basis. The  
12 headcount issues are the fact that -

13 COUNCIL MEMBER RESTLER: But just you know how  
14 much I respect and admire you-

15 LISA FITZPATRICK: No, I haven't. I have not.

16 COUNCIL MEMBER RESTLER: Okay.

17 LISA FITZPATRICK: And we are, we are  
18 prioritizing the hiring of all frontline staff.

19 COUNCIL MEMBER RESTLER: I know you are. You say  
20 you are we'll see but 38 years, back then we even had  
21 other agencies that emerged into DSS. They've been  
22 merged, unmerged, we've seen a lot of changes but  
23 have you ever seen a headcount as low as 10,410 in  
24 your 38 years of experience at HRA?

25 LISA FITZPATRICK: No, I have not.

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COUNCIL MEMBER RESTLER: No, that's the key.

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LISA FITZPATRICK: But when I started in 1984, we also did not have the technology that we have in place now.

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COUNCIL MEMBER RESTLER: There have been lots of changes but in 38 years, never have we seen such austerity from HRA. By failing to fund HRA, we are hurting the most vulnerable New Yorkers. By failing to staff HRA adequately, low- and moderate-income New Yorkers can't access the critical, vital essential benefits they need to live. Too many people are on the margins in New York City and we are failing them because you all don't have the staff.

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And this commitment insistence on austerity by this Administration is a disgrace, plain and simple. So, I just have a few questions for how that's manifesting itself and again, I don't hold you all responsible for the broader policy decisions but we've got to staff up as quickly as possible.

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23

So, maybe I'll ask this one to the First Deputy Commissioner Ms. Berry. How many people did HRA hire in November, new employees?

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JILL BERRY: We're going to have to get back to you on that number.

1  
2 COUNCIL MEMBER RESTLER: 10? 20? Was it more  
3 than 100?

4 JILL BERRY: I don't have that number off the top  
5 of my head.

6 COUNCIL MEMBER RESTLER: Okay, well, we'll come  
7 back to it in writing. I'll tell you the information  
8 that we've informally received from advocates, 20  
9 people. I can't verify it. I don't know if it's  
10 true, so you all have a great HR operation. We'd be  
11 interested to hear it if that's accurate, but I'd  
12 like the hard number. And I'd like to understand  
13 what's actually happening day to day and the speed at  
14 which we're moving to staff up this agency.

15 I'd like to now just ask a little bit about the  
16 impacts of the lack of hiring. The lack of staff at  
17 HRA. SNAP recertification applications and I  
18 apologize that I'm late, so if I'm repeating  
19 anything, Diana you should just kick me. But SNAP  
20 recertification applications fully federally funded  
21 right? How many cases are delayed over 30 days?

22 JILL BERRY: We're going to have to get back to  
23 you with the number.

24 COUNCIL MEMBER RESTLER: So, don't know how many  
25 cases are delayed over 30 days, 60 days, fully



1  
2 federally funded operation, we just don't - fully  
3 funded benefit but we don't have the details. Okay,  
4 my understanding is, we're facing significant delays  
5 and certainly we've seen it reported in the press.

6 JILL BERRY: Council Member Restler, the benefits  
7 are fully, federally funded.

8 COUNCIL MEMBER RESTLER: The benefits are but if  
9 we don't have the staff to process it, then we can't  
10 even take a fully federally funded benefit and  
11 connect it to a New Yorker in need who doesn't have  
12 access to food, who is starving, who is struggling,  
13 who cannot pay their rent. Who cannot get by because  
14 we don't have the staff. It's just - I realize it's  
15 hard during a pandemic. Hiring has been challenging.  
16 Lots of city agencies are suffering from vacancies,  
17 but when we have a 20 percent vacancy rate at HRA, we  
18 are failing the New Yorkers who depend on us most.

19 And it's not that I question your all's  
20 competence. I admire you. I really do. I meant  
21 that. There's not an agency I'd rather go to for a  
22 complex new initiative than HRA to figure it out.  
23 But if you don't have the people, there's no point.

24 So, my frustration is real. It's not, so - next  
25 up. Can I just go for one more second? I know you

1  
2 all got to go too probably, so I apologize, I was  
3 late but uhm, expedited SNAP. My understanding is  
4 that everybody would be reviewed for expedited SNAP  
5 within five days. Is HRA still reviewing and  
6 screening all clients for expedited SNAP?

7 LISA FITZPATRICK: This is part of our process.  
8 When people submit applications through Access HRA,  
9 we do a screening for expedited Supplemental  
10 Nutrition Assistance Program assistance.

11 COUNCIL MEMBER RESTLER: And how many, and how  
12 many people do – do you have any data? I imagine you  
13 don't based on the previous questions but how many  
14 people received expedited SNAP within five days?

15 JILL BERRY: We'll have to get back to you with  
16 those.

17 COUNCIL MEMBER RESTLER: Because my understanding  
18 is right now, it's zero. And so, if that's not true,  
19 then tell me. Okay, Lisa's saying that I'm wrong.  
20 I'll accept that I'm wrong but we'd love to get the  
21 data.

22 Thank you to Committee Counsel for helping us  
23 follow-up on all of these things. We really  
24 appreciate it.

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Last question and then I just want to make one comment. Client scanned documents at HRA centers to be reviewed by staff. We're hearing from advocates that clients have been denied benefits because HRA says they don't have documentation despite clients scanning it. How long does it take for a document to be added to a client file after they scan it? Will HRA start providing receipts to clients who scan documents, so they approve that those items were submitted?

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JILL BERRY: The scanning process was also related to – the delays in scanning was also related to delays in processing because of the high application and recertification volume. We currently scan documents as they are received. We're looking into ways to automate this process even further to reduce the time that it takes to identify that particular document. But clients do get receipts after cases, after their information is scanned.

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COUNCIL MEMBER RESTLER: Okay, there seems to be – I'd love to learn a little more about the process because we're getting a lot of complaints about it in our office and from advocates. I hope that you all will consider for cash assistance – sorry, for

1  
2 recertification applications for cash assistance  
3 taking a similar approach as you do for SNAP benefits  
4 that allow HRA clients to call in for an interview.

5 We think this would make, improve operations  
6 significantly. I just - I will close in saying this.  
7 I really mean my comments at the beginning, about how  
8 much I respect the work and the people and the  
9 leadership at HRA. I hope that we can put all of the  
10 effort that you have put into such great initiatives  
11 over the years into hiring and that this  
12 Administration will not stop you from brining on the  
13 people that you need to fill these vacancies.  
14 Because vulnerable New Yorkers are suffering. They  
15 are suffering. They are unable to access the  
16 benefits they need. I know you can't be happy with  
17 the state of affairs that we are dealing with today.  
18 I know you all want to see those processing times and  
19 those approvals tighten up and get better. I know  
20 you do. I know that's why you do this work but you  
21 can't do it without staff.

22 And so, I really, really hope and I know many of  
23 my colleagues have asked questions about this today,  
24 that you are putting all of the effort of the agency  
25 into staffing up, so that you can do the work that

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needs to be done to help New Yorkers in need. Anything we can do from the Council's side to be helpful or supportive, just let me know because I'd be happy to identify folks across my district who would love, love, love to work at HRA if there was ever an opportunity. So, thank you for the work you do and you know, thank you Chair Ayala for calling attention to the absolutely dismal state of affairs that need to be addressed due to understaffing and austerity politics.

CHAIRPERSON AYALA: Thank you Council Member Restler. I mean, I agree, I think that for me, it was a little bit frustrating and I think a little bit unclear is really the sense of urgency right. And we want to be helpful. We want to be able to help you all you know staff up in a way that allows these applications to be processed in a timely manner.

I will tell you; I was a recipient of you know benefits many moons ago and I remember sitting at the HRA office for two days waiting just for someone to tell me that I was eligible for food stamps and then offering an appointment for a later date. And so, there's a lot of already bureaucracy within the department whether we want to you know admit that or

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2 not. There is. You know all the paperwork and the  
3 faxing and you know the clearance and we want to be  
4 able to make these - the processing of these  
5 applications as seamless as possible. But I'm just  
6 not convinced yet that the sense of urgency is there  
7 and I don't understand why.

8       So, if I'm a New Yorker and I'm applying for  
9 benefits today, uhm and I have cases too. I mean,  
10 it's not even just people waiting for benefits but on  
11 the rental assistance portion right of the work that  
12 you do, I have a constituent whose daughter was  
13 murdered, who is a City FHEPS recipient and now has  
14 to worry every month because she keeps getting  
15 notices from her landlord that her rent is not paid.

16       That's an undue burden right, right. That's  
17 unnecessary. If we were not only processing those  
18 payments on time but at least acknowledging and  
19 letting people know right. Because if I had - if I  
20 have the knowledge to be able to you know to  
21 understand what's happening and I can relay that  
22 information, it gives me a little bit of piece of  
23 mind. I may not like it but at least I understand  
24 what's happening. The worst thing is to be kind of  
25 in the dark and I think that you know, the clients

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2 are feeling like they're being left in the dark  
3 because they're not understanding you know what's  
4 happening internally.

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6 So, I know that HRA - I know I've spoken to the  
7 Commissioner about this that, there have been active  
8 conversations with the state and the federal  
9 government about the waivers. How comfortable are  
10 you you know, how confident are you that we're going  
11 to see a resolution to this you know soon?

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13 JILL BERRY: First of all, thank you for calling  
14 this hearing on this important topic because it is  
15 important. It is very important to ask. We are 100  
16 percent committed to this and it's very important to  
17 New Yorkers who need our services. So, please,  
18 please understand that we are taking this very  
19 seriously. We are very committed and we speak with  
20 our state partners near daily to try to come up with  
21 ways that are allowed under current, federal and  
22 state laws and waiver opportunities to make this  
23 process better. Better for our staff and better for  
24 our clients.

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26 CHAIRPERSON AYALA: Yeah, I just, you know I'm  
27 frustrated and that was not with you know with you  
28 all and not with HRA perse but I - this summer you

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2 know, we saw a staffing shortage at the Parks  
3 Department that meant that some pools wouldn't open  
4 because we didn't have enough lifeguards. It was  
5 like a national crisis right. It was a shortage of  
6 lifeguards and at some point, there was a level of  
7 interaction between the city and the state to allow  
8 for more expeditious you know process, right.

9 Waiving certain requirements and an increase in  
10 salary right, to ensure that we were able to attract  
11 and staff up as quickly as possible.

12 That was important, right. We want people to  
13 swim safely but it wasn't you know a necessity and  
14 you know I like to compartmentalize things that we  
15 like and things that we need and we need public  
16 benefits right. These are people waiting uhm, you  
17 know to pay rent maybe. To pay you know their  
18 cellphones and maybe that may be the only lifeline  
19 that they have right. The only way of communicating  
20 and how are they going to contact HRA and upload  
21 documents if they can't pay the phone? How are they  
22 going to feed their families? You know, I just, I  
23 really, I don't know what the solution here is but I  
24 would love to hear that we're on the cuff of you know  
25 figuring this out.



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2           It seems to me like it's been an ongoing issue  
3 since the pandemic and you know it began and it looks  
4 like at some point, there was some sort of at least  
5 relief because of the waivers and uhm, but have you  
6 received any assurances from the state? I mean, I  
7 just, I have made calls on this. You know, I've been  
8 putting in calls and I mean, I've been doing that  
9 already for almost two months. So, and I still  
10 haven't seen or heard anything that's positive. I  
11 haven't gotten back any responses that says hey, you  
12 know like this is happening. This is how we're going  
13 to remedy this.

14           JILL BERRY: Yeah, appreciate that. I mean we  
15 did get relief from the state to be able to advance  
16 some of the research in November and December, which  
17 has helped us tremendously, especially after not  
18 having that option in October. So, the state is just  
19 as committed as we are to helping to work through  
20 these backlogs.

21           CHAIRPERSON AYALA: Okay, now are we -- is HRA  
22 seeing applicants or is it like, I'm trying to  
23 understand. Is it, is it a salary issue? Is it  
24 unqualified applicants? I mean what is the  
25 applicant, the application pool look like? Are we

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2 able to – you know have you seen an increase in  
3 applications or is this just – these are jobs that  
4 people are not applying for?

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RAMON FLORES: Good morning Councilwoman. Uhm,  
6 we are seeing incoming applicants. We are seeing  
7 qualified applicants and we are able to interview  
8 them. We interview on a weekly basis. I know my  
9 counterpart in the SNAP program is interviewing as  
10 well on a weekly basis. We probably out of 20  
11 applicants that we are interviewing, 15 of them will  
12 show up and will likely be passed forward for –  
13 they'll be selected and then move on to the next step  
14 and then somewhere in between that process, they may  
15 get another job or they may get a different  
16 opportunity where we won't necessarily see all of  
17 them come back and actually be hired. But just from  
18 the applicant pool, I think we see a good amount of  
19 people showing interest and uhm, interviewing with  
20 us. And to that question, I think we have a descent  
21 applicant pool, good applicant pool.

22

CHAIRPERSON AYALA: Have you been working with  
23 any of the community colleges to try to recruit?

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RAMON FLORES: I'd have to get back to you on  
25 that one, I'm not 100 percent sure.

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CHARPERSON AYALA: I think that's a good resource, yeah, I would definitely go there and I have spoken to some of the presidents. I spoke to the president of Lehman a couple of weeks ago about this as well.

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But I was a graduate of Bronx Community College with a Human Resources Associates Degree and I would have loved you know, to go and work for HRA. I think right as a starting point, you know it's a great way to gain the experience necessary, right for other things. But definitely, I think you should use that as a resource.

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JILL BERRY: It's a great idea and if we're not already, we'll make sure we do.

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CHAIRPERSON AYALA: Yeah, definitely. Okay, so I have to ask some procedural questions because you know my staff worked really hard on these and I want to make sure that we get them on record but I'll try to be quick because I know that we're short on time.

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So, regarding the info line, what is the capacity of the info line and how many calls get dropped by the system on average and what is the average call wait on the Info Line?

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JILL BERRY: So, for Info Line, the current wait time is around 45 minutes, which you know, a little bit longer than we'd like but 45 minutes and we've expanded access on Wednesdays from 5 to 7 p.m., which is new for us. Allowing people who may be working to call into Info Line. It's been pretty popular to call in during that time.

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Calls are no longer being routinely dropped as they were during the pandemic. We were able to shift from an older technology to a newer technology, so that we're not routinely dropping calls anymore. That certainly was a thing that was happening in the past. It is not what's happening today.

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CHAIRPERSON AYALA: That's a good thing. Regarding the application recertification, so this relates to when cases get closed for recertifications and then clients must reapply. Per advocates, this is a waste of resources and ends up effecting clients negatively as they go without benefits for months until their cases get reopened. Churning also means that one shot deal applications require a repeat application process. Applications because HRA's delays are nonaction. Of the successful applications for cash assistance with a breakout for one shot deal

1  
2 applications, how many represent a repeat  
3 applications where more than one application was  
4 filed during the period, the prior three months or  
5 the prior six months?

6 JILL BERRY: We'll have to get back to you on the  
7 exact numbers but as Administrator Fitzpatrick  
8 testified earlier, we often cases hold one shot  
9 applications a little bit longer than we're required  
10 to. Specifically, so that people have more time to  
11 get us the documents that are needed. Like  
12 Administrator Fitzpatrick said, sometimes landlords  
13 aren't so willing to work with tenants to provide  
14 them with necessary documents. So, we try to keep  
15 those open as long as possible to get the documents  
16 in, so that they don't have to submit new  
17 applications for one shot.

18 CHAIRPERSON AYALA: So, if I'm applying for a  
19 one-shot deal and I'm in housing court facing  
20 eviction, is there a way that the court can determine  
21 whether there's a pending application for a one-shot  
22 deal to pay you know rent retroactively?

23 LISA FITZPATRICK: Yeah, we have HRA staff out  
24 stationed in all of the housing courts and they can  
25 refer clients to the HRA desk for the HRA room in

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2 housing court and they can get information on the  
3 spot about what's happening with that application for  
4 assistance.

5 And many times, even if we have to, go ahead and  
6 reject a case but the case is still, kind of still  
7 trying to get that documentation from their  
8 landlords. We don't require them to start the entire  
9 process all over again. We'll just reopen or  
10 reactivate that application, so then we can just go  
11 ahead and pay the rent arrears if the household is  
12 qualified for them.

13 CHAIRPERSON AYALA: Okay, uhm, is there a maximum  
14 amount that a person may be eligible for? Like is  
15 there a cap for one shot deals? Because I've seen  
16 pretty you know uh -

17 LISA FITZPATRICK: I think it varies. It depends  
18 on the household composition. The amount of the  
19 rent. Whether or not there is excess rent. The  
20 clients future ability to pay the rent. There are a  
21 lot of factors that are involved with determining  
22 whether or not households are eligible for that one  
23 shot assistance.

24 CHAIRPERSON AYALA: Hmm, okay. Uhm, new funding  
25 for supportive housing staff. In Fiscal Year 2023,

1  
2 is Executives Plan, HRA added \$5.8 million in  
3 baseline funding along with ten new positions for  
4 supportive housing staff. Can you please provide an  
5 update on the impact of this addition and any  
6 improvements that have been made and how many  
7 positions have been filled?

8 LISA FITZPATRICK: We actually had 34 positions  
9 that we were hiring for supportive housing and 76  
10 percent of those are already filled, which gives us  
11 about 26 new employees. We still have eight  
12 positions in the pipeline in various stages of  
13 recruitment before we can give them a start date.

14 CHAIRPERSON AYALA: Great. Regarding the New  
15 Benefits Access Project. Fiscal Year 2023 adopted  
16 plan added \$14 million in Fiscal Year 2023 for a new  
17 project to improve benefits to access. In our  
18 conversations with OMB and HRA, we have been told  
19 that this would include a media campaign and  
20 contracted services for CBO's. For the CBO's and RFP  
21 over the summer was put out over the summer seeking  
22 groups to provide benefit assistance, outreach and  
23 education. Submissions were due on September 13,  
24 2022. How much of the \$14 million will go towards  
25 the media spending?

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JILL BERRY: So, we'll have to get back to you with those specifics on the funding allocations but we're really excited about this initiative. CBO partners are an important part of benefits access for our programs and giving through this RFP, they will now get some funding to hopefully be able to expand a lot of the great work that they already do on the behalf of our clients.

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CHAIRPERSON AYALA: Okay, and so can you also share when you get back to us, how much of the budget will go towards contracting CBO's and what services will CBO's be contracted to do?

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Staffing for the benefits program. The exact number of budgeted and actual positions for the administration of key benefit programs such as SNAP, Medicaid, cash assistance and rental vouchers is not clear from publicly available budget documents. So, it is comingled in program areas and other programs. Additionally, unknown is the number of vacant positions that there currently are for each benefit program. Do HRA staff typically work on multiple programs? For example, SNAP, cash assistance, or do they specialize in a single benefit program such as SNAP?



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JILL BERRY: They absolutely specialize in a particular benefit program and part of that is each program rule is very different. Each technology tool that's used to develop eligibility is very different and the federal and state funding sources for these staff are very different.

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CHAIRPERSON AYALA: Okay, we'd also be interested in knowing how many positions will be required to eliminate the current processing delays. Which I know that Council Member Ossè referenced. I have two more questions.

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Regarding the Shelter to Action Plan, on November 14, 2022, the Mayor announced a new plan to move homeless clients into permanent housing more quickly and city funding for uh, it was added in the November 2022 plan. In Fiscal Year 2023, \$4.5 million was added to HRA's budget, including 62 positions. In Fiscal Year 2024, \$8.9 million was added, including 124 positions. What will the additional headcount be used for and what is HRA's hiring and training plan to get the positions filled?

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JILL BERRY: All of these additional headcount are going to help us to make sure that we have the staff and resources needed to process housing

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2 vouchers from applicants from the community and in  
3 our shelters. We need to get those City FHEPS  
4 applications and payments all processed faster and  
5 this will help us towards that.

6 CHAIRPERSON AYALA: Okay, is there a significant  
7 delay in the processing of vouchers as well?

8 JILL BERRY: Uhm, so the cash assistance  
9 backlogs, you have to; for many of these programs,  
10 you need to be on cash assistance in order to qualify  
11 for the programs. So, there's an impact there right  
12 but what we have done is we've partnered with DHS to  
13 make sure that they can flag for us cases that are  
14 pending a cash assistance application decision in  
15 order to move that City FHEPS voucher or other  
16 voucher forward, so that we can prioritize those in  
17 the queues.

18 CHAIRPERSON AYALA: Is there a way to track what  
19 the number of applicants that lost housing as a  
20 result of the delays? Do you capture that data?

21 JILL BERRY: We'd have to get back to you. I'm  
22 not sure that we do.

23 CHAIRPERSON AYALA: Okay, uhm and regarding the  
24 interviews. What is the number and the percentage of  
25 HRA staff with HRA telephones that can be called

1  
2 back. Namely phones that accept incoming calls, so a  
3 client can call back and get an interview?

4 JILL BERRY: So, the procedure is for all staff  
5 when they make the first and the second call to leave  
6 their phone number to be called back. You want to  
7 add?

8 RAMON FLORES: Sure. We made that change around  
9 June or July, so that staff are now told to leave  
10 their phone number so that if the client misses their  
11 interview call, they will be able to return the call.  
12 The only one's that we don't leave the phone number  
13 is if somebody's teleworking from home and using  
14 their personal device or the like. But the vast  
15 majority, once we started returning to the offices,  
16 we started making the change to leave those phone  
17 numbers because they are at their desk doing those  
18 interviews.

19 CHAIRPERSON AYALA: Okay, uhm, and last question  
20 just because it's still bothering me about the  
21 fishing scam. And your conversations with the state,  
22 have they mentioned anything about any level of like  
23 reimbursement, you know initiative? Like is there an  
24 opportunity to do that? I mean, I would imagine if  
25 an individual, it can you know can prove right? I

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2 mean maybe even get uh, what is it? What do you call  
3 that? Uhm, an NYPD report right, that they've been  
4 scammed. Would that be sufficient to qualify them to  
5 some level of reimbursement, even if it's not the  
6 full amount?

7 JILL BERRY: Yeah, so unfortunately federal and  
8 state law prohibit the replacement of benefits  
9 currently, so that's the real barrier.

10 CHAIRPERSON AYALA: I mean, I know that they do  
11 that but considering the circumstances, has there  
12 been any conversation about reviewing that policy?

13 JILL BERRY: Yeah, we continue to advocate with  
14 our state partners. It's on our legislative agenda  
15 as a high priority item. It's really important to  
16 us.

17 CHAIRPERSON AYALA: Okay, we'll be sure to bring  
18 it up as part of state legislative agenda as well.

19 JILL BERRY: Appreciate that.

20 CHAIRPERSON AYALA: Alright, thank you. Thank  
21 you all for coming today. I think that you know this  
22 is a really important hearing and I'm hoping that  
23 we're able to find a resolution you know as quickly  
24 as possible. We want to make sure that New Yorkers  
25 in need are no longer you know burdened with having

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2 to wait you know additional amounts of time to  
3 receive the services that they need to be able to  
4 thrive successfully in their homes. So, thank you  
5 all for coming in today.

6 JILL BERRY: Thank you Deputy Speaker Ayala and  
7 we are 100 percent committed to making this better.

8 CHAIRPERSON AYALA: Thank you and I also want to  
9 thank the staff. I know that they do work really  
10 hard and it isn't easy. So, any support that we can  
11 lend. Thank you.

12 JILL BERRY: Thank you.

13 RAMON FLORES: Thank you.

14 LISA FITZPATRICK: Thank you.

15 COMMITTEE COUNSEL: Alright, we're going to now  
16 move to public testimony for today and we are going  
17 to begin with an in-person panel. The first panel of  
18 public witnesses for today will be as follows:  
19 Kathleen Kelleher, Marco Balestri, Nicholas Buss and  
20 Jimmy Meagher.

21 And just for folks that are joining us virtually  
22 and to everyone, just a reminder that I'm going to be  
23 calling up individuals in the panels. For those who  
24 are going to be testifying virtually, which is the  
25 panel that will follow this current panel. Once your

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2 name is called, a member of our staff will unmute you  
3 and then you may begin your testimony once the  
4 Sergeant at Arms sets the clock and gives you the  
5 queue. For all public testimony, it's going to be  
6 limited to three minutes and remember for those who  
7 are joining us virtually, that there is a few seconds  
8 delay. At which point, you would be unmuted before  
9 we can actually hear you. So, please wait for the  
10 Sergeant at Arms to announce that you may begin  
11 before you start your testimony for those who are  
12 testifying virtually. And now, we will begin with  
13 our first public panel in person. So, over now to  
14 Kathleen Kelleher to begin.

15 KATHLEEN KELLEHER: Good morning. Thank you  
16 Chair Ayala and thanks to HRA for coming today and  
17 sharing their testimony on this crisis of delays.  
18 So, my name is Kathleen Kelleher, I'm a Staff  
19 Attorney at the Legal Aid Society. The oldest and  
20 largest civil legal services organization in the  
21 country and I'm going to cut, I'm not going to do a  
22 big intro because time is so short, I want to get  
23 right to the issues.

24 So, rather than actually give like a prepared  
25 statement, I would like to respond to HRA's testimony

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2 and talk about the crisis. So, the first thing I  
3 want to say is that I completely agree with all of  
4 the other questioners and panelists, which is that I  
5 don't question the commitment of HRA to serve low-  
6 income New Yorkers. But what is happening is that  
7 there is - what is happening is a crisis. I've  
8 worked at the Legal Aid Society for 30 years and this  
9 is the worst I've seen it.

10 So, what happened is COVID hit. There were some  
11 federal rule changes that permitted HRA to respond,  
12 thank God, so that New Yorkers could access benefits.  
13 Some of those rules went away. Demand remained  
14 because COVID is still a reality for our clients.  
15 The economy is still hit and HRA referred to that.

16 So, what we heard in their testimony is that they  
17 admitted that they do not have the resources to  
18 address the problem. So, what I'm puzzled by is that  
19 this was a hearing about delays. HRA had notice of  
20 the hearing about delays. They issued a repaired  
21 statement that included no statistics and the only  
22 statistics that they gave today were those that are  
23 published in the Mayor's Management Report.

24 They came today with no statistics other than  
25 what is available, which is horrible. What they

1  
2 plainly said is that they're violating the law. They  
3 are not providing SNAP benefits, federal SNAP  
4 benefits in over 50 percent of the cases. That is an  
5 outrage and they don't have a plan to address it on  
6 any month-by-month basis. What they told you is that  
7 there are 2,000 unfilled positions. At best, they  
8 think their going to get it sounded to me like 1,000  
9 and I think that they hired well less than 100 people  
10 last month to perform services for people who need  
11 SNAP and cash assistance benefits. I think they  
12 hired in the month of November 20 people.

13       So, we need, the City of New York needs a marshal  
14 plan to address the crisis that is facing low-income  
15 New Yorkers. People may get their benefits  
16 retroactive when HRA gets around to processing them  
17 when there are delays. But people can't eat  
18 retroactively. What are you supposed to do in the  
19 meantime? When people apply for benefits and they're  
20 not decided in a timely way, they are expected to  
21 just go without. The city needs a plan to address it  
22 and I didn't hear HRA give one.

23       So, I would urge the Council to demand that and  
24 also I just want to say; I know my time is up but I  
25 heard many of the Council Members mention FHEPS and



1  
2 City FHEPS and I want to make sure that's clear that  
3 those delays do exist in those programs as well,  
4 including with respect to the contractors, the  
5 homebase providers that serve that program. So, just  
6 like all of the other delay statistics, HRA should  
7 produce statistics on what the delays are for City  
8 FHEPS and FHEPS, which are processed by HRA itself  
9 and my homebased providers. Because that's a reality  
10 and I know all the Council Members are seeing that  
11 with their own constituents.

12 So, thanks a lot. I'm sorry that time is so  
13 short. I guess that's all I have time to fit in.  
14 Thank you.

15 COMMITTEE COUNSEL: Now to Marco Balestri.

16 MARCO BALESTRI: Hello and good morning. Thank  
17 you Chair Ayala. My name is Marc Balestri and I am a  
18 Legal Advocate for Neighborhood Defender Service of  
19 Harlem. Where we represent tenants in Northern  
20 Manhattan. We assist with public benefits  
21 applications, voucher applications. I want to  
22 quickly just highlight a few things that were  
23 discussed from HRA's testimony about the phone  
24 interviews and lack of responsiveness. The lack of  
25 disability accommodations and then to speak again on

1  
2 the issue with homebased providers that are handling  
3 the City FHEPS applications.

4       So, as highlighted, the understaffing,  
5 underfunding has put great strains on the public  
6 benefits application system. In our experience,  
7 housing court judges are simply not willing to wait  
8 for resolutions on these applications and have  
9 allowed evictions to proceed, rendering people  
10 homeless amid an ongoing shelter crisis. The initial  
11 application process, the interview that is now  
12 transferred over to the phone, HRA is required on  
13 their website to call within seven days of submitting  
14 a cash assistance application but we rarely observe  
15 HRA comply with this timeline and have seen it take  
16 upwards of four weeks in many cases. This is the  
17 same with emergency one shot deal applications as  
18 well for rental assistance.

19       After two calls, cases are closed requiring the  
20 process to start all over again and we received  
21 several one-shot deal rejections because of a failure  
22 to complete an interview with most, if not all of our  
23 clients reporting that they never received the phone  
24 calls in the first place. Reapplying for a one-shot  
25 deal can delay assistance by more than a month. We

1  
2 are also witnessing significant issues with clients  
3 who have disabilities trying to complete interviews  
4 and produce documents for their applications for cash  
5 assistance.

6 HRA's solution for requesting accommodations such  
7 as a home visit to complete and interview is to  
8 submit a reasonable accommodation request, however,  
9 we have found that these requests often take several  
10 weeks and months to be granted. In one particular  
11 case, a disabled client with severe respiratory  
12 issues who lives on the fifth-floor walkup, missed  
13 her SNAP recertification. The client did not have a  
14 working cellphone and could not travel to the HRA  
15 center. Our team submitted countless accommodation  
16 requests to schedule a home visit where emails and  
17 calls were never answered. The client then lost SNAP  
18 benefits and faced significant food insecurity and  
19 starvation for an entire month.

20 It was only after tremendous advocacy, months  
21 long advocacy that a routine case was resolved. I  
22 want to again highlight the issues with the homebased  
23 providers which are HRA contractors who handle rental  
24 assistance and the City FHEPS voucher application.  
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Homebase is the exclusive processor of the City FHEPS voucher. Unlike HRA centers, homebase providers are not subject to the same type of public oversight and regulation and they're severely understaffed and lack necessary resources. The understaffing combined with systemic inefficiencies and little oversight have created an insurmountable barrier for our clients seeking City FHEPS applications and in one instance, directly caused our client to become homeless.

These applications in our experience can take anywhere between six months to one year. This is time our clients simply do not have a pending eviction case. Thank you so much for the testimony.

CHAIRPERSON AYALA: Thank you. Thank you.

COMMITTEE COUNSEL: Over to Nicholas.

NICHOLAS BUSS: Hi, good morning Chair Ayala. Thank you so much for the opportunity to testify and make views from the Food Bank for New York City. You probably know the Food Bank from our food distribution. We serve 700 community-based organizations from our 90,000 square foot warehouse in the South Bronx. But we also run one of the biggest free tax assistance programs and we help

1  
2 people with SNAP, which is what I'm talking about  
3 today.

4 We do that on three fronts. First, we work  
5 directly with clients through our call center.  
6 Second, we train community-based organizations to do  
7 different types of outreach, assistance, all the way  
8 down to technical assistance for people who are  
9 Access HRA navigators or for paperless office system  
10 providers. And finally, we operate the New York City  
11 SNAP Task Force, which is a collaboration with HRA,  
12 the States Office of Temporary Disability Assistance,  
13 as well as 40-community-based organizations citywide.  
14 Through that taskforce, we operate what's called the  
15 mediation model, which resolves client issues often  
16 without having to go through the fair hearing  
17 process.

18 So, since we relaunched that process online, 92  
19 percent of clients are able to have resolution  
20 without going through fair hearings. So, it's an  
21 effective way for clients to get assistance.

22 Collectively that work brings in – brought in \$39  
23 million of SNAP benefits last year just within the  
24 Task Force community-based organization services.

25 So, it's really, uhm, of course these are federal

1  
2 dollars with an effective program. This work would  
3 not be possible without the direct help from the City  
4 Council from the Food Access and Benefits Initiative  
5 and a partnership with HRA.

6 So, we're a Food Bank. We know that food banks  
7 don't replace SNAP benefits but when benefits are  
8 unavailable, people turn to the Emergency Food  
9 Network and the reality of the Emergency Food Network  
10 right now is that the supply that we have is down.  
11 The food that we were distributing during the  
12 pandemic increased. The public and private supports  
13 increased during the pandemic but those resources are  
14 gone. So, citywide, the Emergency Food Network is  
15 strained. So, what I want to say today is, number  
16 one, thanks to you for the attention for this issue  
17 and processing. SNAP is the lifeline for people. It  
18 is the first line of defense against hunger. We know  
19 this as a food bank.

20 Secondly, thank you to Council Members for her  
21 Introduction 641, about expediting and providing  
22 assistance at SNAP centers. I also want to thank  
23 Council Member Lee for her questions and comments  
24 about providing assistance through the Community  
25 Based Organization Network. So, that's what I want

1  
2 to share is that we urge the city to help provide  
3 access to food by investing in community-based  
4 organizations. Of course, fortifying food pantries  
5 and soup kitchens to bridge the gap when SNAP  
6 benefits are delayed. Thank you.

7 COMMITTEE COUNSEL: Over to Jimmy.

8 JIMMY MEAGHER: Good morning and thank you Chair  
9 Ayala. My name is Jimmy Meagher, my pronouns are he  
10 and his and I'm Policy Director at Safe Horizon. The  
11 nation's largest nonprofit victim services  
12 organization. Safe Horizon offers a client centered  
13 trauma informed help to 250,000 New Yorkers each year  
14 who have experienced violence or abuse.

15 In 2022, Safe Horizon completed a listening tour  
16 of clients and advocates throughout our agency and we  
17 found the top two priorities for survivors are  
18 permanent housing and financial stability. Economic  
19 stability and independence are foundational to  
20 safety. So many survivors don't have the choice to  
21 leave their abusive partner, even if they want to due  
22 to economic reasons routed in systemic sexism and  
23 racism.

24 Unfortunately, our city's response to the needs  
25 of survivors and Runaway and Homeless Youth or RHY,

1  
2 has been inadequate and the system is designed to  
3 help our most vulnerable neighbors haven't always  
4 done so.

5 Our government should be providing compassionate  
6 and timely care but ultimately our clients experience  
7 significant delays, bureaucratic hurdles and  
8 impossible barriers to housing and financial  
9 wellbeing.

10 I'll focus my testimony on feedback from two our  
11 programs, our DV shelter programs and also our Street  
12 Work Project, which is our Runaway and Homeless Youth  
13 Program. Both of them work closely with HRA. From  
14 our DV shelters, HRA takes too long to issue housing  
15 vouchers, to update vouchers and to process housing  
16 packets. It is taking two to three months to process  
17 housing packets and most landlords cannot or will not  
18 hold vacant apartments that long. Delays are  
19 preventing survivors from leaving shelter.

20 A survivors time in DV shelter is limited under  
21 state law, so they're losing precious time looking  
22 for an apartment. We're advocating for HRA to be  
23 transparent with information and send timely  
24 notifications to clients. HRA housing inspections  
25 take too long. They don't respond to emails in a



1  
2 timely manner. Client information is not always  
3 accurate or updated and some landlords just choose  
4 not to engage with HRA due to these delays and  
5 headaches. Because HRA does not pay rent on time,  
6 landlords do not want to accept vouchers administered  
7 by HRA.

8 Our experience is, it's not necessarily source of  
9 income discrimination but just not wanting to deal  
10 with HRA at all. Survivors are losing out on  
11 apartments. We've experienced many issues with HRA's  
12 different systems detailed in our written testimony  
13 but ultimately we would recommend that HRA use the  
14 cap system, which works well instead of current.

15 From our Street Work Project, we have many issues  
16 with the interview process required to access  
17 benefits. Clients can apply remotely but must wait  
18 for a phone call. Sometimes that phone call never  
19 comes. Our runaway and homeless youth are answering  
20 unknown numbers, hoping it's HRA. Uhm, this could be  
21 stressful, dangerous and very scary to the answering  
22 unknown numbers.

23 It would be helpful if HRA allowed folks to  
24 schedule the day and time of the interview and to  
25 actually staff the on-demand interview phone number.

1  
2 Clients must repeatedly resubmit documents that HRA  
3 already has. I think we can all agree that's  
4 arbitrary. And in our experience, the city  
5 prioritizes unhoused New Yorkers residing in the DHS  
6 shelter system over survivors in the HRA DV shelter  
7 system and RHY in the DYCD shelter system. We're  
8 asking the Administration to put an immediate end to  
9 this siloed system and stop pitting unhoused people  
10 against one another.

11 The rest is in my written testimony but thank you  
12 so much for the opportunity to testify today.

13 CHAIRPERSON AYALA: Thank you. Uhm, yeah, it's  
14 uh, and you're right Kate, like people cannot eat  
15 retroactively. This has been weighing really heavily  
16 on my mind for the last you know few weeks and I just  
17 don't understand why you know, how we got to this  
18 point and you know I didn't hear any alarm being rung  
19 you know and that's the part that is frustrating the  
20 crap out of me because you know we're able to do it.  
21 We're able to pivot and to find ways to address  
22 emergency situations you know more efficiently and  
23 you know and I get it, we're in the middle, we're  
24 still in the midst of this pandemic that has left so  
25 many things uncertain. And every city agency at this

1  
2 point is seriously understaffed. And you cannot  
3 force people to take these positions but then, I  
4 think that we pivot right and we try to figure out  
5 well, what is it about this position that is so  
6 unattractive is that you know, do we need to you know  
7 maybe move to a remote you know system? Do we  
8 increase the starting salary rates? Like, what  
9 exactly are the impediments that are keeping folks  
10 from wanting? And I know that you know, I do credit  
11 HRA and I know they've been working with DCAS because  
12 we've also organized a number of job fairs with them  
13 but I'll tell you, it's not just them and this is the  
14 workforce development issue citywide. The city has  
15 to really invest time and really analyzing what the  
16 root cause of this crisis is because nobody wants a  
17 job in the city anymore and that speaks volumes.

18       These are often times very overwhelming cases  
19 when you're working with the public and families that  
20 are being evicted, families that are victims of  
21 crime, right. It's heavy work and you know on top of  
22 that, if you have to worry about being able to make  
23 your own rent and buy your own food and pay you know  
24 back your student loans because you know the work  
25 that you're doing is you know pretty time and

1  
2 emotionally consuming. It doesn't pay enough then  
3 we're doing something really, really wrong here but  
4 you know, so do you have any recommendations that  
5 maybe we're not looking at other than you know trying  
6 to staff our way out of this crisis? And this is for  
7 any one of you.

8 KATHLEEN KELLEHER: Yes, I think that they're -  
9 well first of all, I think that HRA needs to  
10 acknowledge the crisis and they need to actually  
11 create a corrective action plan to detail how they  
12 will get out of the backlog because I really haven't  
13 heard that yet.

14 CHAIRPERSON AYALA: I haven't heard.

15 KATHLEEN KELLEHER: And that's number one.  
16 Number two, there are some federal waivers that HRA  
17 has not sought and I don't understand why, that would  
18 give them some relief, I think.

19 So, that one of the waivers that got previously  
20 from USDA was to waive interviews for certain SNAP  
21 applicants and the waivers that they had expired and  
22 subsequently, USDA put out a rule that said that they  
23 would consider additional waivers because of the  
24 workload that was created, not just because of COVID  
25 but also related to COVID, the public health

1  
2 emergency. So, they acknowledge the agencies that  
3 also have to administer Medicaid, like HRA are so  
4 jammed up because all of them on the Medicaid side of  
5 the agency, they have to renew all of those Medicaid  
6 cases.

7       So, what they said was, we will entertain new  
8 waivers that can be extended for up to 12 months of  
9 any kind. So, what we have asked HRA to do and  
10 inexplicably they have not done it is, why don't they  
11 go back and ask for a waiver to get rid of, to reduce  
12 the number of cases that have-to-have application and  
13 recertification interviews? It wouldn't solve  
14 everything but any steps that they can take to reduce  
15 their work load, should reduce the backlog. You  
16 know, like we are sympathetic to the idea that you  
17 know, they should fight on every front. And I don't  
18 know why they have not requested that waiver. I also  
19 don't know why, I think there should be like a louder  
20 drum beat because we understand that this is a crisis  
21 nationwide that our clients, who are eligible for  
22 SNAP benefits are not getting them in a timely way in  
23 lots of places, not just New York City. But it's  
24 just hushed up. You know it's a benefit that people  
25 are entitled to and I was so struck by the example

1  
2 that you gave of the lifeguards and I mean, I was  
3 thinking to myself, a city service sanitation. What  
4 is someone said, the sanitation – you know we're  
5 going to cut sanitation by over 50 percent. Would  
6 people just shut up about it and say like, well  
7 hopefully it will get better? I don't think so.

8 CHAIRPERSON AYALA: You're right.

9 KATHLEEN KELLEHER: I don't think so. So, but  
10 that is one; they should do that and they also think  
11 that HRA should also be required to on a monthly  
12 basis, report the delay data.

13 So, now, they are only reporting because it's in  
14 the Mayor's Management Report. There are timeliness  
15 statistics in the Mayor's Management Report for cash  
16 assistance and SNAP application timeliness. I'm  
17 quite sure that's why that's the only statistic they  
18 gave because it's the only one that's already  
19 publicly available. They also need to give the  
20 statistic for how many cases are delayed for  
21 recertifications every month. Because what that  
22 means for people for example, who have filled out a  
23 recertification that included SNAP benefits, because  
24 federal law – uhm, under federal law, a SNAP  
25 certification period is a defined period of time. It

1  
2 has to end after 12 months. So, if you do not  
3 recertify, you're actually done with your benefits  
4 and they terminate. So, what that means if HRA has  
5 not gotten to your recertification case on time,  
6 suddenly, you go to get your benefits and there are  
7 not SNAP benefits there. They're just missing. You  
8 didn't get a notice. Nobody told you you weren't  
9 getting them. They're just not there and you have no  
10 idea when HRA is going to get around to completing  
11 your recertification and HRA should be you know  
12 obliged to report how many thousands and there are  
13 thousands of cases every month that are delayed like  
14 that. Because every one of those cases is somebody  
15 that's not eating and they should have been able to  
16 tell you that today because they know the numbers.

17 So, they should have to release that also on a  
18 monthly basis so that the Council has the ability to  
19 match up what you are all trying to do today. To  
20 match up the resources to the backlog. This is just  
21 a math problem. And I was also disappointed that  
22 they couldn't tell you how many staff they have and  
23 what their caseloads are.

24 All of these are math problems that you know are  
25 solvable and if it was another kind of service that

1  
2 people cared more about, it would be solved. I mean  
3 sorry to sound skeptical but I just think - I'm not  
4 going to stop thinking about your lifeguard example.

5 CHAIRPERSON AYALA: You know when I heard about  
6 the lifeguard shortage, I was like, this is the  
7 craziest thing ever. I never thought that I would  
8 still be talking about it in December but it's just  
9 mind blowing you know how quickly people you know  
10 were able to mobilize around that issue and get a  
11 resolution that worked. You know, I don't know, I  
12 don't get it but I appreciate you know the  
13 recommendations. They're really good and I also, I  
14 do want to add that they have been - I don't know  
15 that they've requested the waiver from the federal  
16 government but I know that they have been in contact  
17 because I've been talking to my congressional rep as  
18 well and you know I've been in communication with the  
19 state. So, I know that there has been conversation.  
20 I just think that - I don't know that - I'm not  
21 comfortable saying that those conversations started  
22 early enough. You know I think that we were in the  
23 midst of you know the crisis that was within the  
24 crisis when the requests were made. And I think that  
25 you know, they need to do better about you know being



1  
2 able to foresee right what's coming. Especially,  
3 because it hasn't gotten any better since you know  
4 2020. So, they should have been able to anticipate  
5 that it was going to lead to this and those waivers  
6 would expire and they should have made the request  
7 before they allowed that to happen, not you know  
8 after. Well, you know application rates continued to  
9 climb. So, we'll continue on our end.

10 KATHLEEN KELLEHER: Well, just one more thing I  
11 was going to say is, follow-up on what you just said.  
12 They do, they have asked for other waivers. They've  
13 gotten extensions to push some recertifications off  
14 but the other thing that the Council could do that I  
15 think would be helpful, also along the lines of more  
16 transparency is, why not make all the waiver  
17 information also publicly available? It should be  
18 easily available. Look, we actually have a standing  
19 foil where we get HRA policies and procedures and  
20 actually we end up posting them on a website that  
21 lots of people use that we worked with the Western  
22 New York Law Center and if you go on that website,  
23 you'll see HRA policies and procedures are posted.  
24 And those are actually from the Legal Aid Society  
25 foil. But we post them because HRA doesn't.

1  
2 But HRA should post their policies and procedures  
3 and their waivers. You know, it would be so helpful  
4 for you to be able to know what they have and what  
5 they've asked for.

6 CHAIRPERSON AYALA: Yeah, absolutely. Thank you  
7 so much. Thank you all.

8 COMMITTEE COUNSEL: Thank you to this entire  
9 panel. We are now going to shift to virtual  
10 testimony. The next three witnesses on the following  
11 panel will be Abby Biberman followed by Jamie  
12 Powlovich followed by Juan Diaz.

13 And just a reminder that there may be a few  
14 seconds of a delay before you may begin. Please wait  
15 until the Sergeant at Arms lets you know that you may  
16 begin and then you can begin your testimony. Over  
17 now to Abby Biberman.

18 SERGEANT AT ARMS: You may begin.

19 ABBY BIBERMAN: Deputy Speaker Ayala, Council  
20 Members and staff, thank you for the opportunity to  
21 speak today. My name is Abby Biberman, I am the  
22 Associate Director at the Public Benefits Unit at the  
23 New York Legal Assistance Group. NYLAG, public  
24 assistance and SNAP practice represents clients  
25 having trouble accessing or maintaining these

1  
2 benefits. We represent our clients at Administrative  
3 fair hearings who connect advocacy with DSS, benefits  
4 access and SNAP centers and bring impact litigation  
5 to ensure that our clients are obtaining and  
6 maintaining benefits to which they are entitled.

7 I don't have to tell you about the delays because  
8 the agency has already testified about being under  
9 staffed and unable to get the cases in time but I'm  
10 going to. HRA is persistently delaying in processing  
11 application certifications for SNAP and benefits and  
12 our clients are left without benefits to feed and  
13 care for their families. HRA is also failing to  
14 maintain the system that enables these applicants and  
15 recipients to obtain and maintain benefits.

16 The three major problems are failure to process  
17 the actual recertification and application forms.  
18 Failure to conduct the interviews and failure to  
19 index documents. First, they're failing to process  
20 the forms that our clients submit online, by fax, by  
21 mail, and in person. HRA testified about the  
22 unprecedented need but HRA has a duty to these New  
23 Yorkers in need and there are laws and regulations it  
24 must follow in serving these clients. We have had an  
25 unprecedented number of clients over the past year or

1  
2 two years, three years, who have submitted their SNAP  
3 recertifications on time only to find out the  
4 following months that HRA has failed to process the  
5 paperwork and discontinue their benefits. Often  
6 without notice.

7       These clients must challenge the action at a fair  
8 hearing to have this reversed. They must reapply for  
9 benefits and even if they have a hearing immediately,  
10 they have no right to age continuing under the  
11 regulations. So, they are without benefits until  
12 they are able to have their recertification  
13 processed. As others have already said, people  
14 cannot eat retroactively. So, even when HRA does get  
15 around to processing these recertifications, our  
16 clients are simply left with nothing while they wait.

17       The other delays we're seeing have to do with one  
18 shot deals. We work closely with our Tenants Rights  
19 Unit to help clients get arrears they need to help  
20 stay in their apartments. Clients report to us that  
21 they submit applications and never receive a decision  
22 from HRA. When NYLAG intervenes, we're usually told  
23 that the application was never received by HRA's  
24 homelessness diversion unit or that there was some  
25 other problem that caused the delay but it's not fair

1  
2 to us and they're not transparent about where the  
3 breakdown occurs. We are often told the clients must  
4 reapply, even when they have proof that they've  
5 already delayed application.

6 Delay and processing these applications for  
7 benefits impedes clients ability to apply for rental  
8 assistance program to help pay arrears for ongoing  
9 rent. And for both these emergency assistance cases  
10 and rent subsidy cases, the clock is running in  
11 housing court and our clients are at serious risk of  
12 eviction when HRA delayed in processing these  
13 applications.

14 SERGEANT AT ARMS: Time expired.

15 ABBY BIBERMAN: Okay, I just also want to -  
16 please refer to my written testimony but we do  
17 support the bills. We think that they could go a  
18 little bit further in improving the in-person  
19 experience for client centers but you can refer to my  
20 written testimony for more. Thank you.

21 COMMITTEE COUNSEL: Thank you for your testimony  
22 Abby. Now, over to Jamie.

23 JAMIE POWLOVICH: Good afternoon. My name is  
24 Jamie Powlovich and I use she/her pronouns and I am  
25 the Executive Director of the Coalition for Homeless

1  
2 Youth. CHY is advocated for the needs of runaway and  
3 homeless youth for almost 45 years and has as  
4 statewide membership including 29 members here in New  
5 York City. Thank you to Deputy Speaker Ayala and the  
6 rest of the Committee for holding today's hearing.

7 CHY is in full support of the important pieces of  
8 legislation being heard today. I will be submitting  
9 longer written testimony but during my time today, I  
10 would like to focus on City FHEPS voucher access for  
11 youth experiencing homelessness and the DYCD funded  
12 Runaway and Homeless Youth programs, as well as youth  
13 transitioning out of the ACS care. In November 2021,  
14 Council passed two groundbreaking pieces of  
15 legislation. Intro.'s 2405-A and 148-B. In April of  
16 last year, Local Law's 170 and 157 went into effect  
17 making youth experiencing homelessness and DYCD  
18 programs as well as youth transitioning out of ACS  
19 care eligible for City FHEPS vouchers without having  
20 to first enter DHS shelters.

21 For runaway and homeless youth specifically, this  
22 was celebrated as a significant victory by the  
23 Council and the communities. Since runaway and  
24 homeless youth have historically been left out of  
25 almost all of their housing resources targeted to

1 support individuals in exiting homelessness.

2 Unfortunately, we have been informed that DSS, DHS is  
3 not moving forward with what we believe is required  
4 under the laws and that they are instead going to  
5 continue to force young people into DHS shelter  
6 systems before they access vouchers, even if they are  
7 otherwise eligible.  
8

9       Something that was already allowed for runaway  
10 and homeless youth through an MOU. Let me be clear,  
11 youth in the runaway and homeless youth system are  
12 homeless period and by the city requiring them to  
13 move from one shelter system to another to access a  
14 way out of homelessness is not only cruel, it makes  
15 no sense.

16       At a time when the DHS shelter system is at an  
17 all time high, why is the Administration forcing  
18 young people into the DHS system unnecessarily?  
19 DSS's interpretation of the laws is not only a slap  
20 in the face for the youth programs and advocates that  
21 fought for these bills to be passed, but it is also  
22 another clear example of how New York City  
23 homelessness equals DHS. When in fact, homelessness  
24 is a traumatic experience that far too many people  
25 endure in this city and we believe resources should

1  
2 be based solely on that lived experience and not the  
3 system that you enter.

4 Since the city initially promised youth  
5 experiencing homelessness in the NYC system, access  
6 to vouchers in 2016, 8,102 youth have been discharged  
7 from the youth shelter system into another homeless  
8 shelter situation that we know of. That is over  
9 8,000 missed opportunities the city had to change the  
10 outcome for a youth experiencing homelessness and  
11 they failed. Thank you. I'm happy to answer any  
12 questions you may have.

13 COMMITTEE COUNSEL: Thank you Jamie for your  
14 testimony. Now, I'm going to turn to Juan Diaz.

15 JUAN DIAZ: Thank you Deputy Speaker Ayala for  
16 holding today's hearing. My name is Juan Diaz and I  
17 am a Policy and Advocacy Associate at Citizens'  
18 Committee for Children. A multi-issue children's  
19 advocacy organization dedicated to ensuring that  
20 every New York child is healthy, housed, educated and  
21 safe.

22 The 2022 Annual Mayor Management Report showed  
23 that only 60 percent of SNAP applicants receive  
24 timely application and approval services. This is a  
25 huge drop off because considering that in 2021, 92



1  
2 percent of applicants receive services in a timely  
3 manner. Additionally, as we heard this morning,  
4 several city agencies have staff vacancies near 20  
5 percent. These figures are concerning because  
6 staffing at HRA program isn't sufficient to meet the  
7 needs of low-income communities considering that we  
8 are facing a 40-year high inflation rate.

9       The recent acknowledgement for the Mayor's Office  
10 of PEGS for upcoming budget year, raises concerns  
11 about the impact that staff reductions can have on  
12 public benefit applications. We urge the city to  
13 increase their efforts in ensuring that HRA and DHS  
14 staff vacancy rates are addressed immediately. And  
15 that critically needed positions are now eliminated  
16 due to staff vacancies. A clear strategy for  
17 improving timelessness on benefits access is to end  
18 the 90-day shelter stable that requires individuals  
19 to be in shelter for 90-days before they become  
20 eligible for City FHEPS. Eliminating this rule will  
21 help more individuals and families in need to access  
22 vital housing vouchers. We urge you to continue your  
23 support for eliminating this illogical and costly  
24 administrative rule.

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Also, there's an urgent need to hire more bilingual personal at HRA job centers to assist with households in desperate need of assistance. Homebase providers and clients have expressed concerns over the lack of Spanish language assistance at HRA job centers. CCC also supports the legislation being heard and I will provide more in my written testimony. I do want to highlight the positive effect of Intro. 0704 by Assembly, uhm, uhm, Council Member Abreu. This bill will require the human resource administration to provide landlords the option to accept rental assistance payments via electronic transfer into a bank account.

Based on my own experience as a former supervisor of a homeless prevention program, landlords often complain about receiving rental assistance payments late, both in shelter and in the community. There's constant confusion over check distribution when housing subsidies are approved. This process can be significantly improved by implementing a direct deposit system, like the one proposed by Council Member Abreu.

As I mentioned before, many landlords often came to Homebase complaining about payment and landlords

1

2 are also open to this direct payment, so we urge the  
3 CD to you know move ahead and pass this Intro and  
4 because far too many checks go missing and it puts  
5 pressure not only on tenants but also on case  
6 workers. Thank you for the chance to testify and for  
7 advocating for improving the public benefits  
8 processing system. Thank you.

9 COMMITTEE COUNSEL: Thank you to this entire  
10 panel for your testimony. We are now going to move  
11 to an in-person panel. The next panel will be the  
12 following individuals: Dr. Benjamin Zibbet, Towaki  
13 Komatsu, Camila Newton and Jason Fredrick.

14 Alright, you may begin when ready Dr. Benjamin .  
15 And you can just make sure your mic is on.

16 DR. BENJAMIN ZIBBET: Can you hear me better now.  
17 Oh yeah, thank you very much for this opportunity to  
18 speak. Uhm, so I am Benjamin Zibbet. I am a PhD and  
19 I live in Councilwoman Tiffany Cabàn's district,  
20 District 22. So, the first thing I'd like to say and  
21 it's actually through her good offices that I have  
22 the chance to speak to you. However, I would like to  
23 express my dismay over the fact that so few of the  
24 Council Members have stayed for our testimony and  
25 that's really a pity, including Councilwoman Cabàn.

1

2 I think it's important to hear the people speak, not  
3 just officials of various organizations.

4

5 So, I don't have to emphasize the fact that we're  
6 living in a time when hunger is endemic in our city.  
7 I am an older person. I'm 75. Every day I struggle  
8 to find enough food to make it through the week. I  
9 visit two food pantries every week, usually two days  
10 a week and a third every other week. I get enough  
11 canned food to make it through the week. I have a  
12 16-year-old at home as well, so I have to provide for  
13 him.

13

14 Because of the generosity of one of these food  
15 pantries, I had a Thanksgiving turkey, which was  
16 great that my son and I could enjoy. But the reality  
17 is I can't buy more than about \$25 worth of fresh  
18 food every day at the supermarket. I didn't come  
19 here to complain. People who are elderly or poor are  
20 struggling every single day. They're working very  
21 hard to make ends meet.

21

22 At the first food pantry that I go to, it's the  
23 Astoria Food Pantry on Steinway Street. I'd just  
24 like to mention, the manager of that pantry, her name  
25 is Katie, told me that she serves or she gives out

25

1  
2 400 bags of food every Monday and she usually runs  
3 out by 11 a.m..

4 She used to give out eggs to everyone. I  
5 remember getting eggs when they were \$1.00 a dozen.  
6 Now, they're \$4.30 at a minimum. Do I have any more  
7 time? Oh, thank you and no more eggs are given away.  
8 So, I applied for SNAP and SNAP is a federal program  
9 administered on three different levels, the  
10 Department of Agriculture, New York State and then  
11 HRA. That's a lot of different administrative  
12 levels. I put in more than three pages of  
13 documentation and data to support my application.  
14 Every one of these pages with a case number. I had  
15 help from a really great case worker at CID, though  
16 I'm not disabled. Her name is Elmira Salome and we  
17 worked on this application for weeks. This was in  
18 March of this year. On September 15<sup>th</sup>, I heard back  
19 from HRA that my application has been denied because  
20 my income was too high. It's basically twice what  
21 the limit of what is it \$1,452 a month. I'd like to  
22 know first of all, I thought about that and I said,  
23 how can anyone manage on \$1,452 a month in New York  
24 City now? My rent is \$1,572 a month. It would be

1  
2 impossible for a mother with two children to make it  
3 on this amount of money.

4 I'm not even going to mention, well, I guess I  
5 just did the skimming of \$730,000 of HRA funds, of  
6 SNAP funds here in the city. But I do want to say  
7 the following. This city is no longer the same as  
8 the city as New York was before the pandemic. We are  
9 fundamentally a different city now, very different.  
10 And the bureaucracy of the city has not kept up with  
11 the changes.

12 So, I have a few solutions. Take it or leave it.  
13 Uhm, we cannot count on congress to help us, so we  
14 have to help ourselves. I would like to suggest that  
15 the City Council and the city government set up an  
16 apparatus to distribute income, stimulus income the  
17 way the federal government did at the start of the  
18 pandemic on a regular basis. We need to levy higher  
19 income taxes on the rich. That's nothing new and for  
20 people whose income is below \$70,000 a year, we need  
21 to make sure that they have a guaranteed monthly  
22 income. We don't need HRA. I'm going to be frank.  
23 I don't want to put 14,000 people out of their jobs.  
24 God forbid but we don't need this third middle man to  
25 manage the money and the benefits that the elderly,

1  
2 the poor and other people who are in need get. It  
3 could come directly from the federal government  
4 through the IRS or in a supplemental program managed  
5 by the City Council and the city government. Okay,  
6 so, I just want to say one other thing. I mean, I'm  
7 in Astoria and I studied history for several years  
8 and I remember studying about the French revolution.  
9 I don't mean to sound like a you know, doom and gloom  
10 but I studied history and my take on this is that we  
11 are in a pre-1789 situation right here in this city  
12 and in the United States. People are calling for  
13 bread. The government is saying, let them eat cake.  
14 It's not going to work. We all know what happened to  
15 Marie Antoinette. So, we need to act positively to  
16 make sure that everybody has a guaranteed income  
17 before we face another 1789.

18 CHAIRPERSON AYALA: I appreciate that.

19 DR. BENJAMIN ZIBBET: Thank you.

20 CHAIRPERSON AYALA: Thank you. Make sure that  
21 your mic is on okay. Thank you.

22 CAMILA NEWTON: Uh, I would say good morning but  
23 it think we're at good afternoon. My name is Camila  
24 Newton and I'm in support of the bills that we're  
25 discussing today, all three of them. Before I begin,

1  
2 I just want to thank you for allowing me to speak on  
3 behalf of myself and thousands of other constituents  
4 who are facing similar obstacles but could not be  
5 here to share their testimony today.

6 I'm a 27-year-old mother of two. This is my son  
7 beside me and I have been dealing with housing  
8 instability for most of my life. My first night of  
9 homelessness was attributed to childhood abuse that I  
10 fled once I had my son. And my second now is largely  
11 due to the fact that my beloved city has failed me.  
12 After being encouraged by HRA to report my former  
13 slumlord to 311, I was retaliated against through an  
14 eviction proceeding. I contacted virtually every  
15 city agency and local government entity to help me  
16 defend myself against the blatant lawlessness of my  
17 ex-landlord.

18 I have attempted to utilize Homebase Homelessness  
19 Prevention Services, to no avail, leaving me and my  
20 now two very small special needs children without a  
21 home this winter. I am currently a straight A, full  
22 time Black Studies Major with a concentration in  
23 prelaw. As despite has inspired me to pursue this  
24 career path, particularly because of the lack of  
25 accountability plaguing the city agencies that should



1  
2 be assisting us the most. I entered the shelter  
3 system most recently at the end of September, having  
4 to put all my belongings in a storage that gladly  
5 accepts HRA payments.

6 My belongings were on the verge of being  
7 auctioned off because the agency that committed to  
8 supporting me through this hardship took an  
9 unreasonably long time to process the paperwork. I  
10 called the HRA Info Line between work and school and  
11 was made to wait well over two hours every time. It  
12 was interesting that she said 45 minutes. Two hours  
13 guaranteed every time. Many times, hanging up before  
14 I could even speak to someone.

15 Unfortunately, my background is in activism and  
16 I'm no stranger to advocating for myself and my  
17 community at large. Finally on the verge of losing  
18 everything, I was able to reach the HRA Administrator  
19 Ms. Fitzpatrick's office, just in time for her to be  
20 sure that my storage was paid in full as of this  
21 month.

22 Through my own volition and after having my  
23 voucher denied for four years, I've signed a lease  
24 for my pending apartment since early November. All  
25 my paperwork was completed by my dedicated and highly

1  
2 motivated housing specialist in record time. Park  
3 Chester Housing Management has also returned every  
4 requested document in less than 48 hours, despite the  
5 redundancy of the request. However, HRA has taken so  
6 long that they just this week requested a new lease  
7 dated for January 1<sup>st</sup> because it's far too much time  
8 has passed for them to honor my December 1<sup>st</sup> move in  
9 date. It, sorry, it has been over a month since all  
10 the required information was submitted. My son is  
11 entitled to door to door busing due to his diagnoses,  
12 yet we are still trudging for hours from Queens to  
13 the Bronx on a daily basis in the dead of the winter.  
14 Not one resource given to me by DHS has assisted me  
15 in my housing surge. All relevant paperwork has been  
16 turned over as quickly as humanly possible and yet,  
17 no matter how efficiently every other part of the  
18 system moves, HRA will find a way to take so long  
19 that people lose their apartments regardless.

20 No landlord wants to sign a lease and then not be  
21 paid for months at a time. And HRA moving at a  
22 snails pace has only further exacerbated the stigma  
23 to be faced in regards to being voucher holders and  
24 many times for the most ludicrous reasons. Thousands  
25 of people in this city either face homelessness or

1  
2 remain homeless because HRA doesn't operate  
3 efficiently enough for our vouchers to be comparable  
4 to cash.

5 Unless we want our city to end up with its own  
6 skid row, voucher discrimination needs to be  
7 appropriately addressed as the crime that it  
8 literally is. But first, HRA and DHS need to be held  
9 accountable for the tangible repercussions to their  
10 actions or lack there of that contribute for people  
11 already relying on them the most. Thank you.

12 CHAIRPERSON AYALA: Go ahead.

13 JASON FREDRICK: Hi, my name is Jason and things  
14 have been hard ever since my mom and I were forced to  
15 move. The shelter is the worse place I've ever been  
16 to because there are lots of roaches and mice. I  
17 miss my toys and my four pets. I have to walk really  
18 far. Get up really early and ride the Q44 bus for a  
19 long time to make it to school. My mom is working  
20 hard to make sure me and my baby sister are safe but  
21 it seems like the people that are supposed to be  
22 helping, aren't doing their jobs. I just turned nine  
23 last week on a Tuesday and I'm looking forward to  
24 having my own room real soon. I hope that these new  
25 laws can fix that. Thank you.

1

2

CHAIRPERSON AYALA: You turned nine last week?

3

Happy Birthday. You're so smart for nine. So

4

articulate, thank you so much for coming to testify

5

today. I know sometimes it gets a little bit scary

6

and I'll talk to both mom and you to share our

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stories and but I think it's important that other

8

people, because there are other people like you that

9

are in similar situations and don't know how to use

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their voice or don't know where to go to use their

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voice uhm, are going to probably be helped because

12

you're sharing your story today. And I'd like to

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offer my assistance if I can in helping you process

14

the necessary documentation as quickly as possible to

15

get you and your family into that housing as soon as

16

we can.

17

So, if you want to share that with us before we

18

leave. Thank you so much.

19

TOWAKI KOMATSU: Hi, I'm Towaki Komatsu. I've

20

testified to you repeatedly. Uhm, Lincoln Restler,

21

he praised HRA prior to boycotting our testimony

22

today. Uhm in contrast to what he said about HRA,

23

HRA is total garbage. Ann Marie Scalia, she's the

24

General Counsel of HRA. She was here while the

25

people who sat at this table lied straight to your

1  
2 face under oath. You're the Chairwoman of this  
3 Committee, with regards to instances of people lying  
4 under oath, what exactly are you going to do about  
5 that and when?

6 I've told you before that I've been trying to get  
7 access to you public contracts. Public contracts  
8 prior to public hearings that HRA conducts. There's  
9 another one on December 20<sup>th</sup>. They still won't let  
10 me at their headquarters to see that contract prior  
11 to the public hearing. In violation of my first and  
12 14<sup>th</sup> amendment rights. You're the Chairwoman of this  
13 Committee. I'm looking straight at you. I've asked  
14 for your assistance previously. I sent you emails.  
15 Never once got any assistance whatsoever.

16 I have litigation against Urban Pathways. It's a  
17 business partner. Well, it's an ally of Mayor Adams.  
18 A lawyer for Legal Aid Society basically told the  
19 judge during the hearing, sorry but this isn't the  
20 type of case that we take. Problem, people have a  
21 legal right to pro bono legal representation, Legal  
22 Aid make a determination saying sorry, but this isn't  
23 the type of case. It's only if you have like a lack  
24 of lawyers to take the case. I've apprised HRA of  
25 that, haven't gotten any assistance.

1

2           The people here today from HRA, they talked about  
3 jobs recruiting. They lied straight to your face. I  
4 think I told you previously I applied to HRA more  
5 than 20 times. That's how many interviews I got.  
6 Total number of jobs that I'm fully qualified for,  
7 all of them. So, there's a clear discrepancy. Them  
8 telling you, lying straight to your face, you know  
9 we're trying to fill these holes in our workforce. I  
10 talked to Mayor Adams in June of this year. He  
11 basically confirmed you know, if you have litigation  
12 against HRA, you can basically expect to be  
13 blacklisted, illegally blacklisted in retaliation.  
14 You can't do that. That's violation of applicable  
15 law.

16           I currently have active federal litigation  
17 against Ms. Scalia, HRA personnel. Cases Komatsu  
18 versus City of New York, Case Number 22 CV9080.  
19 Judge Laura Taylor Swing, she authorized me to pursue  
20 the litigation the last three weeks. After today's  
21 hearing, I'm going to be going straight after HRA and  
22 its personnel as well as well as the people that  
23 won't intervene on my behalf in regards to my  
24 complaints. Ms. Ayala, you're going to be busy.

25

1  
2 I also have early Christmas gifts for the Youth  
3 Supreme Court, two in fact. Here is a petition for  
4 [INAUDIBLE 2:44:39] being mailed today. Here's a  
5 petition for rehearing being mailed today.

6 Basically, Steven Banks illegally calls me to be  
7 Black, prevented from attending public town hall  
8 meetings in 2017 as early as April 2017. I have the  
9 emails confirming that. Basically, I had a  
10 conversation with them on what, April 11, 2017. I  
11 had an oral arguments hearing and litigation the  
12 following day. They stole my oral arguments hearing  
13 from me by doing ex parte communications with the  
14 judge. Can't do that. You're an attorney, you know  
15 that.

16 Last question is this. You know that I come here  
17 sometimes to advocate for other people. Somebody in  
18 the department directly beneath mine in my building,  
19 he had black mold. The landlord shut off the water  
20 for the whole building without prior notice to me, so  
21 I had to use the restroom. Guess what? No water  
22 service, what do you do? So, Urban Pathways, they  
23 keep getting more contracts, more cash, it's coming  
24 from your paychecks. So, why are they getting more  
25 uhm, money from your paychecks when they're not

1  
2 performing their legal duties and HRA is basically  
3 paying a blind eye about that. And sorry, one thing.  
4 The guy who was sitting in this chair before me, he  
5 talked about OTDA Fair Hearings. HRA won't comply  
6 with its legal duty to provide me discovering  
7 material prior to those fair hearings. OTDA is not  
8 providing me sufficient notice prior to those  
9 hearings to submit those requests to HRA to give me  
10 the discovery material. So, I understand that you  
11 have oversight of city agencies but do you have any I  
12 guess connections with the Assembly, Senate members  
13 to cause OTDA to have proper oversight to be  
14 administered to them? I mean the current  
15 Commissioner of OTDA, he's from HRA. What can you do  
16 about that?

17 CHAIRPERSON AYALA: Well, as I've shared with you  
18 before, I don't comment on individual cases that are  
19 being litigated. A lot of what unfortunately  
20 occurred to you predates to me and I know that  
21 there's pending action that you're pursuing, which  
22 you have every right to. But I cannot comment on you  
23 know pending legal -

24 TOWAKI KOMATSU: Sure, but the common denominator  
25 is just like she was talking about.



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CHAIRPERSON AYALA: I understand.

TOWAKI KOMATSU: It's a shared issue and there's no oversight by people like you.

CHAIRPERSON AYALA: I understand. I mean, there is oversight. I mean, this is why we're here. This is exactly why we're here.

TOWAKI KOMATSU: Where is everyone?

CHAIRPERSON AYALA: Well, I'm here. I'm here.

TOWAKI KOMATSU: You're really not.

CHAIRPERSON AYALA: Yeah, I appreciate that.

Thank you so much.

COMMITTEE COUNSEL: Thank you to everyone on this panel for your testimony. We're now going to move back to virtual testimony. In the following order, the next panel will be Adriana Mendoza followed by Sara Wilson followed by Ethel Brown. Over now to Adriana Mendoza.

SERGEANT AT ARMS: Starting time.

ADRIANA MENDOZA: Good afternoon. Thank you Chair Ayala and members of the General Welfare Committee for holding this hearing and for the opportunity to testify today.

I'm likely to go a little bit over in our testimony and I hope Chair Ayala will excuse us for a

1  
2 moment or two. My name is Adriana Mendoza, I am a  
3 Benefit Supervisor at the Safety Net Project at the  
4 Urban Justice Center, SNP. We're extremely disturbed  
5 to hear that only 44 percent of SNAP applications are  
6 processed on time and only 61 percent of cash  
7 assistance application are processed on time. This  
8 is completely unacceptable and in clear violation of  
9 federal and state law.

10 At SNP we assist over 1,000 households each year  
11 and we solve public benefit issues. As such, we  
12 haven't receive enough cases this year where  
13 households have submitted their application well over  
14 the 30-day mark and have yet to receive a  
15 determination or benefits. Other families have  
16 submitted their recertifications and still get their  
17 benefits cut off.

18 Some families we meet are waiting two, three,  
19 four, even six months to get their benefits. One of  
20 our clients, Ms. H. applied for cash assistance and  
21 SNAP on October 4<sup>th</sup>. Ms. H. lives in Brooklyn and is  
22 struggling to pay her rent each month. She had no  
23 income at all, so she should have received emergency  
24 cash and SNAP benefits.

1  
2           On the day that she applied for cash and five  
3 days later for SNAP. However, HRA did not issue any  
4 benefits until almost four weeks later on October  
5 28<sup>th</sup>. While she waited for benefits, she went to her  
6 center and was told that if she needed emergency  
7 benefits, she should apply again and press them. So,  
8 now Ms. H. reached out to us and we're able to  
9 advocate for her case to finally be activated as of  
10 this week December, over two months after she  
11 initially applied.

12           And these issues also extent to City FHEPS as  
13 well, which the city has delegated to Homebase  
14 without ensuring that Homebase is able to process  
15 applications for eligible families. People who need  
16 City FHEPS in order to avoid eviction, tell us that  
17 they spend months trying to reach Homebase and  
18 leaving messages, only to never hear back or to be  
19 told that there are no appointments available for  
20 many more months.

21           Others aren't able to reach City FHEPS for  
22 recerts. Mr. C. was approved for City FHEPS subsidy  
23 on October 2019. He's 58-years-old, currently  
24 disabled and lives in Brooklyn with his disabled  
25 adult nephew. He had open heart surgery in January

1  
2 2020 and was discharged from the hospital on January  
3 14, 2020.

4 That same day, he arrived home to an appointment  
5 notice for cash assistance recertification and he  
6 immediately went to his center to complete his  
7 recertification. Some center workers even asked why  
8 he was there on the day that he had been discharged  
9 from the hospital and yet, Mr. C. proceeded to  
10 complete his PA, his cash assistance recertification  
11 but was never informed by anyone at the center that  
12 he also had to recertify for City FHEPS.

13 He went back to the HRA center repeatedly to try  
14 and fix his City FHEPS but was told by workers again  
15 and again that they couldn't help or that they  
16 couldn't see the City FHEPS on his case. As a  
17 result, Mr. C's. City FHEPS subsidy was discontinued  
18 and he had -

19 SERGEANT AT ARMS: Time expired.

20 ADRIANA MENDOZA: Can I have more time?

21 CHAIRPERSON AYALA: Go ahead.

22 ADRIANA MENDOZA: Thank you. And he accumulated  
23 over two years of rental arrears and these stories  
24 unfortunately aren't uncommon but the norm. And so,  
25 we have a few recommendations. So, one, that HRA

1  
2 immediately redeploy staff from other areas to  
3 benefit processing units. Uhm, staffing personal  
4 program is about 1,112 while for investigations and  
5 fraud is 711, which is a hugely inflated number.

6 Two, that HRA implement emergency hiring  
7 procedures, including hiring public assistance  
8 recipients who are interested in positions at HRA.  
9 And three, that HRA stop all benefits and extend all  
10 certifications in six-month mailers. Thank you for  
11 your time and I look forward to answering questions  
12 you might have.

13 COMMITTEE COUNSEL: Thank you Adriana for your  
14 testimony. Now going to turn over to Sara Wilson.

15 SARA WILSON: Hi, my name is Sara Wilson. Good  
16 afternoon everyone. Very happy to be here. So, for  
17 identification purposes, I am formerly homeless,  
18 disabled, dual diagnosed, mental health and substance  
19 abuse and I just want to say that my stability and  
20 ability to function is directly impacted on my  
21 housing, my food, my sleep and any undue stress and  
22 despair that I'm going through, as well as other  
23 people with the same diagnosis. With that said, I  
24 agree with both HRA and City FHEPS need for  
25 revisions. Specifically, preventative services.

1  
2 Right now, Homebase is handling all of the  
3 preventative services for people in community.  
4 However, they are not able to meet that need. And  
5 the revision of HRA would be most, most, most crucial  
6 to implement onsite a housing person.

7 Right now, that's not being done. Also, I've  
8 heard community-based orgs. There are community-  
9 based orgs that do SNAP applications and supportive  
10 housing applications. Surely there's a way we can  
11 extend them to also be able to meet the need of the  
12 preventative. For example, there's someone I'm  
13 working with in community who in August had an  
14 immediate need. It took one month for a phone call.  
15 One month for an appointment and two months for a  
16 case workers. That's four months later and the only  
17 reason she got a case worker is because I reached out  
18 and intervened. She now still has not gotten her  
19 paperwork, which she put in in August to be eligible  
20 for a voucher. She's extended her opportunities and  
21 says, well what if I finally have to make three sons  
22 into shelter and my heart speaks to the young boy  
23 that spoke and I am so proud of him. As a mother, it  
24 just warms my heart. This same mother did not want  
25 to put her ten-year-old in shelter, so I get it. At

1  
2 that point, I then had to point out to her that if  
3 she did go in than she would have to wait three more  
4 months, which will be a seven-month period and I just  
5 want to speak from a mental health perspective, six  
6 months is the finding criteria between an adjustment  
7 disorder and PTSD, so when we're holding people this  
8 long, we're ensuring that they get PTSD.

9 In regards to hiring. I'll be able to complete  
10 my bachelor's in psychology next semester, well I'll  
11 be a graduate next semester and I looked up what I  
12 can do with in New York. For \$40,000 I can be a  
13 shelter director but for \$120,000 I can be a psych  
14 technician if I take an online accreditation for 200  
15 questions open book.

16 For me to choose a \$40,000 career versus \$120,000  
17 career, there would have to be something  
18 fundamentally wrong with me to pick the lesser one.  
19 So, my suggestion would be in your hiring process, to  
20 allow there to be one senior person onsite that is  
21 able to meet the credentials that comes with their  
22 education.

23 On top of that, uhm, sorry, the prison  
24 population, I have an ex that was sent home with a  
25 benefit card but it was not activated. If you know

1

2 you're being discharged and you know you're getting a  
3 benefit card, why not activate it instead of making  
4 them wait 45 days where a person could fall back into  
5 recidivism.

6

Also too, when we're reaching out to make sure  
7 the landlords get paid, we have to put an emphasis on  
8 the brokers. We have brokers that are acting as case  
9 managers, fighting for these clients and then at the  
10 end, not getting paid. When the key is exchanged,  
11 there should be some sort of an electronic action.

12

SERGEANT AT ARMS: Time is expired.

13

SARA WILSON: Okay, I'm going to stop in a  
14 second. Electronic action that gets the landlord and  
15 the broker paid because brokers are having to turn  
16 away clients. It should not have to be fundamentally  
17 that everyone takes a loss to work with homeless and  
18 unhoused persons. That's been the status quo and  
19 that needs to change from everything from staffing to  
20 these measures. And I'll shut up there. Thank you  
21 so much and God Bless.

22

COMMITTEE COUNSEL: Thank you Sara for your  
23 testimony. Now over to Ethel Brown for testimony.

24

25



1

2           ETHEL BROWN: Good afternoon. My name is Ethel  
3 Brown and I thank you Chair and Council Members for  
4 the opportunity to testify today.

5           All that I've heard it really breaks my heart to  
6 hear all of this. It's wrong. I am sounding like  
7 this because there was no heat and the boiler broke  
8 and we said it was the water, that there's no water  
9 there. So, that's how I got sick. Plus having high  
10 blood pressure, it's not a good thing.

11           I'm a mother, a grandmother, a City FHEPS voucher  
12 holder and a leader at Neighbors Together. If it  
13 wasn't for Neighbors Together or Safety Net, I don't  
14 know what would happen right now.

15           We found an apartment in May and we couldn't say  
16 or do anything regarding the apartment because there  
17 were also certain things that had to be done.  
18 Because those things had to be done, it held us up. I  
19 am here to also express my support for Intro. 703 and  
20 704 with Shaun Abreu and the other people who are  
21 connected to it.

22           I have firsthand experience with HRA not paying  
23 my rent on time. My family and I just moved to an  
24 apartment with City FHEPS voucher in late August of  
25 this year. After more than seven years, there's a

1  
2 woman that has been [INAUDIBLE 2:57:09] for over 29  
3 years. She was on NPR. Of searching for a place for  
4 our old voucher and months of delay and the moving  
5 process, this month, my landlord asked if the voucher  
6 money would come to him on time and we told him yes  
7 because that's what we expected. Now our yes became  
8 a no because HRA did not send the funds in time for  
9 our December rent payment.

10 Now, that is another thing. They did not even  
11 show up to the New York State Assembly. This is  
12 hurting our credibility with our landlord. It  
13 created a mistrust of us and the voucher program and  
14 for us it's just another experience of the voucher  
15 not working the way it should. Making promises that  
16 fail. My daughter reached out to HRA for assistance  
17 to try to figure out what happened with the rent and  
18 was told to call Homebase. Homebase told her that  
19 they couldn't help here and that she wouldn't be able  
20 to get an appointment until June. What audacity.  
21 So, we're left on our own as usual, trying to figure  
22 it out before our landlord gives us a 30-day notice.

23 Passing Intro. 704 would make a big difference on  
24 behalf of voucher holders like myself and to the  
25

1

2 landlords because they'll be getting more money on  
3 time.

4

5 If my family and I knew our checks from being  
6 deposited automatically and on time, it would make us  
7 feel more secure. More landlords would accept  
8 vouchers because it would be like getting your  
9 paycheck automatically.

9

SERGEANT AT ARMS: Time expired.

10

ETHEL BROWN: Because hello? It's right there.

11

You don't have to wait for it. Timely electronic

12

payments would improve landlords impression of

13

agencies because it would move the system more from

14

[INAUDIBLE 2:59:05] modern and up to date.

15

One important suggestion to improve Intro. 704,

16

would be that tenants vouchers be the way to approve

17

payment or not approve payment as a way to hold

18

landlords accountable for bad conditions. For

19

example, if there was no heat or hot water, the

20

tenant would be able to tell HRA to hold it until the

21

conditions are fixed and then once they're fixed, the

22

tenant could approve payment and the check would be

23

released into the landlords bank account.

24

I strongly urge the Council to pass these two

25

bills. To keep voucher holders housed and out of

1  
2 homelessness. It's very, very important not to be  
3 out on the streets or anywhere. We need a place to  
4 stay. The other thing is that the Metro Cards. A  
5 lot of people are eligible but they go by your gross  
6 income. That makes no sense. SNAP benefits need to  
7 be looked into because once you start working and you  
8 make a little bit more, it goes down and also, I  
9 thank you. By the way, today I just heard from the  
10 Real Deal Magazine that the ERAP is gone come  
11 January. So, people who are in need of it, won't be  
12 getting any help.

13 Thank you for your time and attention. I really  
14 appreciate you all. Thank you.

15 COMMITTEE COUNSEL: Thank you Ethel for your  
16 testimony and thank you every one on this panel for  
17 your testimony.

18 At this time, we're going to call on Milton Perez  
19 in person testimony.

20 MILTON PEREZ: We good, you hear me? Greetings.  
21 Thank you. Ethel is a friend of mine. She let me  
22 know about this, that it was going on today General  
23 Welfare meeting. My name is Milton Perez from the  
24 Bronx Puerto Rico. I'm a member of Vocal New York,  
25 member leader. Vocal New York's Homelessness Union,

1  
2 which is HU but also, Vocal AU All Union or support  
3 and I'm an ally of all the unions in Vocal New York.

4 I spent over five years in the shelter system. I  
5 want to say I stopped counting at five years. So,  
6 some of the issues that are being addressed today as  
7 far as these bills you know is something that I've  
8 dealt with throughout the years. The expeditor would  
9 be somebody, a professional, which usually the job is  
10 usually done by security guards at HRA. Which I'm  
11 thankful for them doing case work but it would be  
12 good to have an expeditor in these spaces to address  
13 the public while they're seeking help. That's one.

14 As far as HRA overall. A lot of people are very  
15 thankful for the help that is given but it's so  
16 difficult to access all these services and some of us  
17 you know, they might not need as much help as others.  
18 See how people are treated and you know a lot of  
19 times you know because of the difficulties, people  
20 you know kind of tune out and don't seek the help  
21 that they need. Where it could be a lady that's  
22 dealing with domestic violence and how she's treated  
23 in HRA you know, might you know push her away from  
24 seeking the help that she actually needs for herself  
25 and her children. Being in the shelter all these

1  
2 years and finally getting out last year, through  
3 getting lucky and getting a City FHEPS voucher, I'm  
4 very thankful but I've been trying to renew the City  
5 FHEPS voucher since May. I thought I did the right  
6 thing and just an example you know. You go to HRA to  
7 submit documents. You should get a letter saying  
8 that you were there. Get a separate letter saying  
9 that they received the documents and maybe a second  
10 letter letting you know what documents you submitted.  
11 I get no information from City FHEPS. It took them  
12 two months to respond to me. So, I got a letter in  
13 May saying that they never received the documents and  
14 they want to close my case or you know worse of that  
15 nature if I didn't respond by September.

16 I resubmitted everything. Got no more response,  
17 no immediate response till the end of August, near  
18 September saying that they reached out to me or  
19 something that I never received. When I looked at  
20 Access HRA, which is technically City FHEPS is not  
21 part of, for whatever reason even though City FHEPS  
22 is part of HRA. One more minute if I could.

23 When you submit stuff through Access HRA, it goes  
24 through the document section. When you receive  
25 something from uh, from uh, HRA it could go through a

1  
2 different section. I forget, one is submitted  
3 documents, uploads. So, the stuff that I submitted  
4 was in the area on the website, on the app that is  
5 coming from HRA. Oh notices. It was in the notices  
6 section. The paperwork that I submitted to HRA for  
7 City FHEPS was in the notices section and that's all  
8 I received. I never received any other paperwork.  
9 So, I called the numbers that were provided for me  
10 very difficult. It would take hours to get in  
11 contact and emailed. It was acknowledge that they  
12 received the paperwork but it's been two months and  
13 no word from City FHEPS, so it has been what? Four  
14 or five months just in the renewal process of City  
15 FHEPS. As far as renewing my lease, it took a week.

16 So, there's a discrepancy of what people want  
17 done and what is actually done. So, some of us who  
18 have some wherewithal of how to do things, know how  
19 to go to an HRA building and acknowledge that there  
20 are issues. For example, I know a friend of mine who  
21 went to HRA, told them their problem. The person  
22 acknowledge you know, it will be resolved. The case  
23 was still closed. So, we're very thankful for the  
24 help that is provided you know but HRA needs to do  
25 better in how they do things, so I support these

1  
2 three bills, the electronic payments, anything to  
3 bring things to you know the new century. Things  
4 would be much better than they are being done at the  
5 moment. Thank you so much City Council for your  
6 oversight. Every time when I saw oversight, I got to  
7 go to this meeting because it's necessary. It's  
8 necessary, so thank you for your help and the  
9 oversight that you're providing in these issues.  
10 Thank you.

11 CHAIRPERSON AYALA: Thank you Milton and I think  
12 we should be - we're hoping to have a hearing, an  
13 oversight hearing on the voucher program soon so, uhm  
14 be mindful of that on the calendar. I just want to  
15 thank, you know thank you for coming and sharing and  
16 again, you know, if you need any help in getting your  
17 application completed, we're happy to help with that.  
18 But for any New Yorker that's watching, I think that  
19 the message says you know I mean what we've heard  
20 today is pretty alarming. In regards to the number  
21 of applications that are still you know sitting  
22 around waiting to be processed. Obviously the city  
23 is facing you know several challenges and staffing is  
24 one of those but you should not feel like there is no  
25 recourse.



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If you are an individual that is applying for benefits and you haven't heard back or are continued to get denied, please I urge you to contact your City Council Member. We have a constituent services team at every office that is equipped with helping remedy a lot of those situations and that is what we do, so please make use of that resource. And thank you to all of the advocates again and the team for all of the work that went into these presentations and I think we've learned a lot and I think that we have a lot of work to continue to do.

COMMITTEE COUNSEL: So, at this point, we've heard from everyone who has signed up to testify and if we inadvertently missed anybody who would like to testify in person, you can visit the Sergeants at Arm table now and complete a witness slip. If we inadvertently missed anyone who signed up to testify and would like to testify virtually, please use the Zoom raise hand function right now in Zoom and I'll call on you in the order of hands raised.

I know that Ethel Brown and Sara Wilson both have their hands raised in Zoom. Both have testified already but deferring to the Chair, the Chair is

1  
2 alright with you all speaking at this point, so over  
3 to Ethel Brown.

4       ETHEL BROWN: I thank you so much. I really  
5 appreciate it. What happened is I also forgot to say  
6 that we have things in storage because we took out  
7 things from storage, brought it to the place but  
8 while we were there, certain things as I said before  
9 were supposed to be handled and wasn't complete  
10 because we asked in advance if everything was fried  
11 but it wasn't. So, the things that we also had, we  
12 had to put back in storage. Now, it's going to the  
13 situation of auctioning because we didn't get to pay  
14 the bill in time and plus it also caused - there's a  
15 situation where the person who is employed, their  
16 salary was decreased half and just had a child and  
17 this is bad because now, everything is backing up.  
18 You know, you're paying - you're taking from Peter to  
19 pay Paul. And it shouldn't be that way.

20       So, those are the things that I just wanted to  
21 say because we have things there that we don't want  
22 to lose. We don't even have coats or boots that we  
23 contact at different place and everything is, you  
24 have to sign up before in things like that. So, that  
25

1  
2 was it. That was it that I had to say and I thank  
3 you again.

4 COMMITTEE COUNSEL: Thank you Ethel. Now over to  
5 Sara Wilson.

6 SARA WILSON: Thank you so much. I will keep  
7 this so brief. The one thing I forgot to say was as  
8 staffing, if you guys could really consider a part  
9 time position for people like myself on disability or  
10 seniors that are only allowed to work a certain  
11 amount of minimal hours, I really think that would  
12 help engaging people to rejoin the workforce and also  
13 help with burnout and I think it would be pulling a  
14 resource of people that are currently ineligible.

15 And I'm done. Thank you so much and God Bless  
16 everybody.

17 CHAIRPERSON AYALA: Thank you.

18 COMMITTEE COUNSEL: And finally, Juan Diaz.

19 JUAN DIAZ: Yes, thank you. I just want to you  
20 know Council Member Ayala mentioned community  
21 colleges but also encourage HRA and city agencies  
22 look for you know seniors out of college. At Hunter  
23 College or Baruch City College. I'm a Hunter alumni,  
24 I can see a lot of advocates. Looking forward to  
25 work with the agency, so college campuses. You know

1  
2 work with the college advisors to have fairs and I'm  
3 pretty sure they will receive many applications from  
4 talented young advocates.

5 CHAIRPERSON AYALA: Thank you. Really good  
6 feedback.

7 COMMITTEE COUNSEL: At this point, seeing no one  
8 else with their hands raised on Zoom or anyone who is  
9 signed up in person, I just want to note that written  
10 testimony which will be reviewed in full by Committee  
11 Staff may be submitted to the record up to 72 hours  
12 after the close of this hearing by emailing it to  
13 [testimony@council.nyc.gov](mailto:testimony@council.nyc.gov). Deputy Speaker Ayala, we  
14 have concluded public testimony for this hearing and  
15 I will turn it back over to you.

16 CHAIRPERSON AYALA: With that, this hearing is  
17 adjourned. [GAVEL]

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C E R T I F I C A T E

World Wide Dictation certifies that the foregoing transcript is a true and accurate record of the proceedings. We further certify that there is no relation to any of the parties to this action by blood or marriage, and that there is interest in the outcome of this matter.



Date December 20, 2022