



Testimony of Kate MacKenzie, Executive Director, NYC Mayor's Office of Food Policy

**Before the New York City Council's Committees on Contracts and Economic Development
Oversight Hearing on Food Quality in NYC Shelters**

February 25, 2025

Good morning, Chair Won, Chair Farías, and members of the Committees on Contracts and Economic Development. My name is Kate MacKenzie, and I serve as Executive Director of the Mayor's Office of Food Policy (MOFP). Joining me today are my colleagues from the Department of Social Services (DSS), First Deputy Commissioner Jill Berry, Associate Commissioner, Special Population Support Services, Cindy Teta, Assistant Commissioner and Diversity Officer Raymond Medina, and from the Mayor's Office of Contract Services (MOCS), Deputy Director for Procurement Operations Mehak Kapoor. I welcome the opportunity to speak to you today about food quality in NYC shelters.

The mission of Mayor's Office of Food Policy (MOFP) is to advance the City's efforts to increase food security, promote access to and consumption of healthy foods, and support economic and environmental sustainability across the food system. As part of that, MOFP supports the Department of Homeless Services (DHS) and the Mayor's Office of Contract Services (MOCS) in their efforts to improve food quality, nutrition, and operational efficiency across the city's shelter system. We do this by providing strategic advisement and support in several ways, including contract language revisions, data collection, contract management and enforcement, menu adjustments, culinary training, food education, and other programmatic opportunities that enhance the effectiveness of agency food programs. These efforts aim to ensure that the food served in shelters and other institutional settings meets high standards for nutrition, quality, and affordability.

MOFP also brings subject matter expertise to MOCS to ensure that the contracting tools and resources it offers are in line with city requirements and priorities. For example, MOFP will soon include a new section on our website to provide helpful information specific to food vendors. We have also worked closely with MOCS to promote the utilization of best value bids for food, when possible. A best value bid allows city agencies to buy goods taking into account quality and equity. For the first time this year, the DOC included in its bid evaluation, not only cost, but other desirable attributes like taste, support to NYS food businesses, and organic products. MOFP also works with MOCS and food-buying agencies to incorporate Good Food Purchasing initiative data reporting requirements into solicitations and contracts.

Overview



The New York City Department of Homeless Services (DHS) serves more than 14 million meals and snacks annually throughout the shelter system. There are three ways that meals are provided in DHS shelters. First, in shelters operated by DHS (33), DHS has three direct contracts that have a total contract value of \$160,170,824.42 over a three-year period (7/1/2023-6/30/2026). This means that the vendors are responsible for delivering meals, typically frozen, to the shelter, and shelter staff are responsible for heating, serving the meals – breakfast, lunch and dinner.

Second, a provider may subcontract with a food vendor. In this case, a provider is required to obtain three bids. Approximately 347 providers run facilities use a food vendor. And, in the third case, a provider may prepare its own food (50 sites prepare meals on site or at another shelter in the provider network). The reasonable accommodation process is available to meet clients' religious and medical needs (e.g., kosher, halal, and a renal/dialysis diet).

Value Statement

DHS provides three meals each day, and snacks to clients. The meals are expected to be healthy, served at appropriate temperature, respect the medical dietary needs and/or religious requests of the individuals served, and reflect the diversity of cultures served throughout the shelter system. By following these guidelines, the agency strives to provide quality meals to the population that needs them, with as little waste as possible.

Quality Control and Feedback Systems

DHS uses a variety of systems to measure and control quality. All meals are required to adhere to the NYC Food Standards and meal service must adhere to sanitary codes. These standards are updated every three years based on current scientific evidence, the ability of the industry to meet those standards, and agency feedback. Menus sent to the DHS nutritionist are analyzed to determine compliance to these standards. And FY 25 was the first year that agencies were required to report client/consumer feedback centrally to DHS.

The DHS requires shelter directors, or their designees, to conduct monthly meal quality tests. These tests evaluate temperature, appearance, and accuracy for each meal period (breakfast, lunch, and dinner). Providers are required to submit menus with nutritional information to DHS for review when initiating meal services and whenever there is a change in the vendor or the menu. Usually, providers have a spring/summer menu and a winter/fall menu. If a menu is found noncompliant, DHS provides feedback and, as needed, technical assistance. Providers are also required to keep a sample of all meals for a prescribed period of time (two days in fridge or three days in freezer); these samples may be subject to microbial testing by DOHMH in case of food poisoning/infection. Together, this process of inspections and reviews by DOHMH and DHS provide continual monitoring and assessment of food quality at DHS shelters. Through all these systems, from client level feedback, to checks from DOHMH, to inspections that DHS staff conduct – these could all result in corrective action plans if warranted.



In addition to DHS' efforts to monitor and assess food quality, we maintain open lines of communication for clients to provide input on food quality. Clients may reach out to 311 or the DSS Ombudsman with feedback (the Office of the Ombudsman can be reached by phone at 800-994-6494, or via email at ombudsman@dss.nyc.gov). DHS logs complaints (using its IQ database system) and triages for direction to appropriate DHS staff and providers. Lastly, DHS conducts client satisfaction surveys. One avenue for that triage process is for DHS' program administrators to make the shelter provider aware of the complaint, and if warranted, work with them to create corrective action plans.

As noted above, all shelter providers are required to solicit and report on client feedback. In addition, DHS conducted a small, QR code-based anonymous food satisfaction survey, for direct input from shelter clients.

Vendor Performance

Vendors, whether they are direct meal providers, or the providers that sub-contract meal service, are required to report on a variety of factors to achieve optimal meal quality.

All shelter providers that prepare or serve meals are required to hold a food service establishment permit from the NYC Department of Health and Mental Hygiene (DOHMH). This ensures that DOHMH is aware and able to conduct an initial inspection to verify that the meal set-up is appropriate and that the food service staff have a food handler certificate demonstrating that they have received food service training. DOHMH annually inspects all sites to ensure compliance with New York City and New York State food safety regulations.

In addition to the annual DOHMH inspections, DHS conducts Routine Site Review Inspections (RSRI) twice a year to monitor the requirements and reporting outlined above. These inspections involve reviewing kitchens and seating areas for cleanliness, properly operating equipment, proper storage of food, permits for food handlers, proper temperatures for the storing and serving of meals, and recordkeeping. RSRI results are incorporated into the quarterly Shelter Repair Squad (SRS) scorecard on DHS' website. Any of these checks, as well as the client feedback could trigger a corrective action plan.

Finally, DHS adheres to Procurement Policy Board (PPB) rules regarding documentation and evaluation of vendor performance call for periodic, unannounced checks, interviews, and surveys of clients.

Opportunities for New Vendors

In line with the Administration's goals of building a robust ecosystem of vendors and serving as a strong partner in MWBE success, the DSS Marketplace Team is launching a capacity building workshop series in March. The series aims to help local restaurants and catering companies interested in adding a business development component to enable them to execute large-scale



food service. The series is designed to strengthen the business's ability to engage with NYC agencies, human service providers, and prime contract holders. The workshops will bring firms together with representatives from the Mayor's Office of Food Policy, DOHMH, DSS Program and Nutritional Staff, and the Department of Small Business Services for detailed guidance that will help these local organizations better understand the requirements and resources impacting firms operating in this space. It will include extensive Q&A with subject-matter experts. Later programming will leverage mentorship, bringing local restaurants and catering companies together with successful certified contractors and non-profit food providers currently performing on City contracts to support information-sharing and resourcing. The workshop series will culminate in a Matchmaking Event bringing vendors together with human service providers and agency representatives. We believe this effort will contribute to more local participation, diverse food, profitable contract experiences for participating firms, and competition for food contracts over the longer term.

The safety and well-being of DHS clients requires this complex food distribution systems to operate well. This drives the robust processes for oversight and obtaining feedback from clients that I've described. DHS has a quality control process so that the critical control points of food safety, including appropriate temperature, storage of food, safe environment, and hygiene are as strong as possible. DHS is engaging in a process at this time to strengthen its guidance, training, and oversight to ensure the highest food quality at our shelters, especially as the landscape has experienced such dramatic shifts over the last several years.

Introduction 905

Introduction 905 (Won) would require food service contractors with city agencies with contracts valued over \$100,000 or more to provide standardized feedback surveys to consumers of their service on a quarterly basis. While we support the intention of this bill, we would like to work with the Council to consider how it would advance our shared goals to increase transparency and food quality across agencies. As noted previously, agencies are now required to solicit feedback on meals and snacks served. Additionally, many factors influencing client feedback, including taste and presentation, are determined by food preparation, which vendors do not control. We look forward to discussing how best to achieve our shared goals.

Thank you for the opportunity to speak. We welcome your questions.

Testimony from Matt Jozwiak, CEO of Rethink Food
Re: Committee on Economic Development and Committee on Contracts Hearing on
Shelter Food Contracts
Tuesday, February 25, 2025

Dear Majority Leader Farias and Contracts Chair Julie Won,

My name is Matt Jozwiak, CEO of Rethink Food. Thank you for the opportunity to testify today.

Rethink is a nonprofit committed to creating a more equitable and sustainable food system where every New Yorker has access to dignified, nutritious, and culturally competent meals.

Intro 905, sponsored by Council Member Won, is an important step in enhancing the city's commitment to improving client experience and food quality at city sites by providing standardized quarterly surveys to shelter guests. Our team institutes this practice in our programs. We have robust mechanisms for feedback including meticulously collecting information on leftovers, soliciting qualitative feedback from guests daily, and meeting regularly with site leads to gather information about services and how we can improve.

We have not only been able to provide nearly 18 million meals to over 30 migrant shelters, but we are also excited to begin our partnership with institutional DHS programs, including Win NYC.

Commissioner Park's leadership has been instrumental in improving food systems at DHS shelters. With the number of DHS sites more than doubling recently, there's a crucial opportunity to improve food quality oversight.

Currently, only 2 people oversee DHS shelter food menus, compared to 44 people at DFTA. By providing additional resources for enhanced oversight and transforming the food we purchase and serve in City facilities, we can achieve the goals of the City's 10-Year Food Forward Plan. We urge the Council and Administration to collaborate on increasing the DHS budget to support these efforts.

Lastly, planning ahead for future disaster relief is crucial. The City must establish clear criteria and procurement systems to ensure nonprofits can respond swiftly and effectively in the next emergency.

Rethink values our partnership with the City and look forward to growing this partnership and our efforts to respond to the food insecurity crisis, both immediate and long term.



Testimony of

Coalition for the Homeless

and

The Legal Aid Society

before the Committees on Contracts and Economic Development
of the New York City Council

on

Oversight - Food Quality in New York City Shelters

submitted by

Alison Wilkey, Esq.
Director of Government Affairs and Strategic Campaigns
The Coalition for the Homeless

February 25, 2025

The Coalition for the Homeless (“Coalition”) and The Legal Aid Society (“Legal Aid”) welcome this opportunity to testify before the New York City Council’s Committees on Contracts and Economic Development. We are the court- and City-appointed independent monitor of the DHS shelter system and counsel in the historic *Callahan*, *Eldredge*, and *Boston* cases that created the right to shelter in New York City. Accordingly, we are uniquely situated to provide insight about the issues discussed below.

Food Quality in Shelters

One of the most frequent complaints made to the Coalition by shelter residents concerns the poor quality of food served in shelters. Residents consistently report receiving meals that do not meet their dietary needs, are frozen or overcooked, nutritionally inadequate, unappetizing, and that sometimes cause illness. Individuals with disabilities and health conditions who require special diets have difficulty getting their needs accommodated, even after being granted a reasonable accommodation under the Americans with Disabilities Act and obligations established under *Butler v. City of New York*.¹ Clients who need special diets due to their religious beliefs also frequently cannot access meals that comply with those diets.

New Yorkers residing in shelters deserve access to healthy, appealing food that is nourishing and meets dietary and religious requirements. When shelter meals go uneaten due to poor quality or inappropriate options, it not only wastes resources but impacts the health of residents who often have no other food option. Proper nutrition is fundamental to health and well-being, all critical factors in people being able to transition out of shelter.

Addressing these food quality issues through concrete policy changes would positively impact the daily lives of 124,000 individuals – including 43,000 children – currently living in shelters. These challenges are solvable through increased oversight and accountability and reforms to procurement and food policies.

Reports of Food Quality Issues from Monitors and Clients

Reports from the Coalition’s shelter monitoring team and current shelter residents demonstrate persistent problems with food quality, nutritional adequacy and information, and dietary accommodation. The consistency between monitor observations and resident experiences underscores the severity and widespread nature of these issues.

Food Service and Quality Control

Most shelters rely on external catering services that deliver food to be reheated on-site. Residents report that meals often sit unrefrigerated on tables for hours before and during mealtimes.

"I've experienced serious health issues due to how they handle the food here," reports shelter resident Rich G. "I've witnessed staff leaving frozen meals out in the hallways for hours, where they aren't kept cold enough, which could lead to foodborne illness. The preparation issues are concerning, and we really need healthier options. Some staff members just seem careless about proper food handling."

¹ *Butler v. City of New York* 15-CV-3783.

In some shelters, every meal is heated in microwaves in the black plastic containers in which it arrives, despite research showing that chemicals leach from microwaved plastics² even when they are labeled as being “food safe.”³ Yet, staff have reported receiving no standardized reheating instructions and sites do not always have equipment other than microwaves to heat or prepare food.

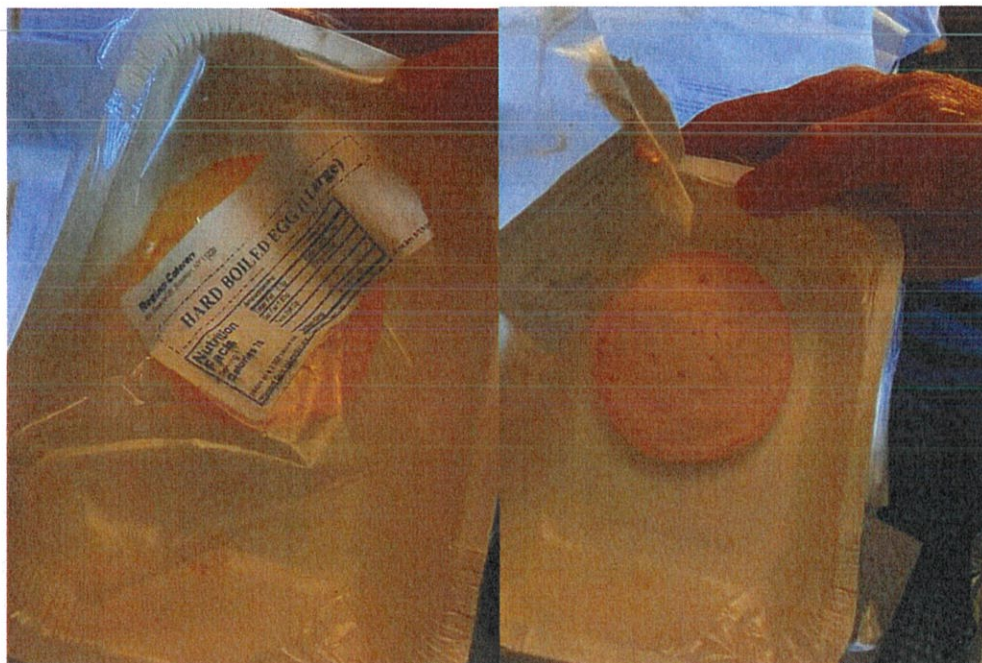
Accurate food labeling presents another significant problem, as meals often do not match posted menus or signs, leaving residents unable to identify what they are consuming. Meals served frequently differ from posted menus, though just as often there are no posted menus or menus are from weeks or months earlier. This presents further challenges to those who have dietary restrictions, as they cannot reliably know whether the listed contents are accurate. This is evident in the photo below, taken by a shelter resident, where the label claims that the contents are vegetarian paella with mixed vegetables, but the contents appear to be plain rice with a fried object and carrots on the side.



² Díaz-Galiano, Francisco José, et al. “Cooking Food in Microwavable Plastic Containers: In Situ Formation of a New Chemical Substance and Increased Migration of Polypropylene Polymers.” *Food Chemistry*, vol. 417, no. 135852, 2023, p. 135852, doi:10.1016/j.foodchem.2023.135852.

³ Hussain, Kazi Albab, et al. “Assessing the Release of Microplastics and Nanoplastics from Plastic Containers and Reusable Food Pouches: Implications for Human Health.” *Environmental Science & Technology*, vol. 57, no. 26, 2023, pp. 9782–9792, doi:10.1021/acs.est.3c01942.

Another example can be seen below from a picture sent by a shelter resident of part of their breakfast where the label claims that the contents are a hardboiled egg, while the photo shows a pancake-like object.



Both of these photos also illustrate the poor quality and unappetizing nature of the food.

Dietary Accommodations

To access a diet that accommodates a person's disability (including diets that are medically necessary and allergen-free), a person in shelter must file a "reasonable accommodation" request, a process in which NYC DHS requires documentation, usually from a medical professional.⁴ Even when clients successfully go through this process and get a formal approval for a special diet, they constantly struggle to receive meals consistent with that approval. Shelter staff frequently do not order the right kinds of meals from the vendor or the vendor struggles to provide food consistent with a client's dietary needs. Our staff often spend weeks and months trying to ensure clients' dietary needs are actually met once they have an approval from the Department of Homeless Services. Many clients resort to buying their own food to ensure they can safely eat it, but then they run out of funds and end up going hungry.

[REDACTED], I haven't been able to get the appropriate food to control my cholesterol," **reports resident Kassi**. "After two heart attacks, my doctor ordered me to follow a plant-based diet. I have an approved reasonable accommodation, but I still can't get the food I need. The only milk they serve to go with cereal in the morning isn't plant-based. The menu says they're going to serve oatmeal, which would be good for me, but we never get oatmeal. My health has gotten worse while living in shelter. The shelters never serve salad or fresh vegetables. My doctors are

⁴ New York City Department of Homeless Services. "DHS-PB-2019-023 Food and Nutrition Policies for Providing Safe and Nutritious Meals in the DHS Shelter System." Issued 13 Nov 2019.

concerned about my uncontrolled cholesterol, but I can't do anything about it because they won't give me plant-based meals even though they're supposed to."

When available, alternative meals often lack proper nutritional equivalency. For example, vegan options frequently consist of side dishes without protein substitutes, as shown in the photo below where the vegan dinner is only plain white rice and mixed vegetables.



Additionally, people who need special diets consistent with their religious beliefs must make the request when they arrive at the site and provide supportive documentation from a religious official.⁵ Despite these processes, many people who have been granted reasonable accommodations or religious diet requests report that they do not receive the appropriate meals.

Facility Conditions and Rules

Visits from Coalition's monitoring team often reveal concerning environmental conditions, including excessive kitchen temperatures affecting staff working conditions and evidence of rodents in dining areas. One resident reports that staff don't wear appropriate food handling

⁵ New York City Department of Homeless Services. "DHS-PB-2019-023 Food and Nutrition Policies for Providing Safe and Nutritious Meals in the DHS Shelter System." Issued 13 Nov 2019.

equipment when preparing foods, despite Department of Homeless Services (“DHS”) policy that requires hair restraints and gloves to be worn.⁶

“There's no one we can talk to about the poor food quality in the shelters,” reports a **shelter resident**, who prefers to remain anonymous. “The staff don't even wear proper equipment when handling food. There's absolutely no accountability or communication channels when we try to raise concerns about these issues.”

While some shelters allow limited food to be brought into shelters from the outside and provide vending machines, many prohibit outside food. Thus, even if residents can afford to purchase their own food, they are often not able to bring it into shelter, let alone have the ability to prepare their own food within the shelter. However, for many residents, purchasing their own food is not within reach given the low public benefit grant amounts.

Policy Issues Affecting Food Quality in NYC Shelters

Under current DHS regulations, shelter providers must select meals from pre-approved vendors and are required to select the lowest bidder unless they can provide sufficient justification for choosing a higher-cost option. Even if feedback consistently shows poor ratings across all approved vendors, shelter providers have little ability to contract with alternative food service providers that might better meet residents' needs. While DHS regulations require shelter providers to perform a “Client Food Service Satisfaction” survey twice a year, it appears that there are few options available to address issues identified in surveys because of DHS's contracting requirements.⁷

A deeper examination of DHS contract requirements is crucial to understanding the role these policies play in food quality. While providers can theoretically select a bidder that is not the lowest if they have sufficient justification, that selection must be approved by DHS. An analysis of how often DHS approves these requests would reveal whether providers are realistically able to use subcontractors that provide higher quality food, and food that satisfies various religious and other dietary accommodations. This examination of DHS policies should include whether shelter providers are allowed to allocate sufficient money in their budgets to offer high quality food, especially given high inflation in food prices in recent years.⁸

Both shelter providers and vendors operate under numerous regulatory constraints that affect food quality and service. A prime example is the New York City Food Standards, which govern meals and snacks served by all city contractors, requiring that any contractor serving three meals per day limit total caloric content of those meals to 1,800 to 2,200 calories. That amount is less than the recommended daily calories for some categories of people, such as those who are physically active and growing adolescents. These prescriptive standards, while well-intentioned,

⁶ New York City Department of Homeless Services. “DHS-PB-2019-023 Food and Nutrition Policies for Providing Safe and Nutritious Meals in the DHS Shelter System.” Issued 13 Nov 2019.

⁷ New York City Department of Homeless Services. “DHS-PB-2019-023 Food and Nutrition Policies for Providing Safe and Nutritious Meals in the DHS Shelter System.” Issued 13 Nov 2019.

⁸ “Food Inflation in the United States (1968-2020).” US Inflation Calculator, 2024, www.usinflationcalculator.com/inflation/food-inflation-in-the-united-states/.

limit the number of vendors that can meet those standards. The standards may also be the source of issues of caloric insufficiency and palatability raised by shelter residents.

Intro. 905-2024

We support the intention of Intro. 905-2024 as an important first step toward understanding and addressing the needs of shelter residents regarding food quality and service. The proposed quarterly feedback surveys could provide valuable insights into the experiences of those receiving meals through City-funded food service contracts.

While the legislation requires vendors to provide survey results to contracting agencies, shelter providers would not have access to these results. This disconnect between data collection and the entities making contracting decisions limits the practical utility of the surveys for improving food service.

To meaningfully improve food quality in shelters, we must examine and address the structural policies that currently limit both shelter providers' choice of vendors and vendors' ability to provide high-quality, culturally appropriate meals, beyond what feedback surveys alone can accomplish.

Recommendations to Improve Food Quality in DHS Shelters

To address the systemic issues affecting food quality in shelters, we recommend the following measures:

Accountability and Oversight

DHS must provide more oversight and accountability to ensure that providers are fulfilling food-related reasonable accommodations for special diets and requests for religious diets as soon as the accommodations are approved. DHS must also ensure providers inform residents of their rights to receive meals when they are not able to be on site during meal service, and ensure proper storage and food handling. There must also be clear responsibility and accountability for receiving and responding to quality concerns raised by residents in real time.

Vendor and Contract Reform

The DHS subcontractor approval process requires significant revision to better serve shelter residents' needs. The process should consider factors beyond lowest bid when evaluating food service vendors, while creating a streamlined approval pathway for selecting higher-quality vendors. DHS should establish transparent criteria for justifying the selection of non-lowest bidders, supported by regular analysis of how frequently providers request and receive approval to select non-lowest bidders. Additionally, DHS should work to develop a more diverse pool of pre-approved vendors capable of meeting various dietary and cultural needs.

Policy Review

The New York City Food Standards need reassessment to better serve people living in shelter. These standards should ensure caloric requirements align with the needs of diverse shelter residents while allowing appropriate flexibility to maintain nutritional quality. This review must consider the practical implications of standards on vendor availability and food palatability. The

standards must also be reviewed to ensure that special diets provided to people with reasonable accommodation requests are nutritionally adequate and that nutritional information is consistently provided such that residents know what they are eating and whether it complies with their dietary needs.

We look forward to working more with the Council to address the pervasive and persistent food quality issues in shelters.

About The Legal Aid Society and Coalition for the Homeless

The Legal Aid Society: Legal Aid, the nation's oldest and largest not-for-profit legal services organization, is more than a law firm for clients who cannot afford to pay for counsel. It is an indispensable component of the legal, social, and economic fabric of New York City – passionately advocating for low-income individuals and families across a variety of civil, criminal, and juvenile rights matters, while also fighting for legal reform.

Legal Aid has performed this role in City, State, and federal courts since 1876. It does so by capitalizing on the diverse expertise, experience, and capabilities of more than 2,000 attorneys, social workers, paralegals, and support and administrative staff. Through a network of borough, neighborhood, and courthouse offices in 26 locations in New York City, Legal Aid provides comprehensive legal services in all five boroughs of New York City for clients who cannot afford to pay for private counsel.

Legal Aid's legal program operates three major practices — Civil, Criminal, and Juvenile Rights — and receives volunteer help from law firms, corporate law departments and expert consultants that is coordinated by Legal Aid's Pro Bono program. With its annual caseload of nearly 200,000 legal matters, Legal Aid takes on more cases for more clients than any other legal services organization in the United States. And it brings a depth and breadth of perspective that is unmatched in the legal profession.

Legal Aid's unique value is an ability to go beyond any one case to create more equitable outcomes for individuals and broader, more powerful systemic change for society as a whole. In addition to the annual caseload of nearly 200,000 individual cases and legal matters, Legal Aid's law reform representation for clients benefits more than 1.5 million low-income families and individuals in New York City and the landmark rulings in many of these cases have a State-wide and national impact.

Legal Aid is uniquely positioned to speak on issues of law and policy as they relate to homeless New Yorkers. Legal Aid is counsel to the Coalition and for homeless women and men in the *Callahan* and *Eldredge* cases. Legal Aid is also counsel in the *McCain/Boston* litigation in which a final judgment requires the provision of lawful shelter to homeless families. Legal Aid, in collaboration with Patterson Belknap Webb & Tyler, LLC, filed *C.W. v. City of New York*, a federal class action lawsuit on behalf of runaway and homeless youth in New York City. Legal Aid, along with institutional plaintiffs Coalition and Center for Independence of the Disabled - NY ("CIDNY"), settled *Butler v. City of New York* on behalf of all disabled New Yorkers

experiencing homelessness. Also, during the pandemic, Legal Aid along with Coalition continued to support homeless New Yorkers through litigation, including *E.G. v. City of New York*, Federal class action litigation initiated to ensure Wi-Fi access for students in DHS and HRA shelters, as well as *Fisher v. City of New York*, a lawsuit filed in New York State Supreme Court to ensure homeless single adults gain access to private hotel rooms instead of congregate shelters during the pandemic.

Coalition for the Homeless: Coalition, founded in 1981, is a not-for-profit advocacy and direct services organization that assists more than 3,500 homeless and at-risk New Yorkers each day. The Coalition advocates for proven, cost-effective solutions to address the crisis of modern homelessness, which is now in its fifth decade. The Coalition also protects the rights of homeless people through litigation involving the right to emergency shelter, the right to vote, the right to reasonable accommodations for those with disabilities, and life-saving housing and services for homeless people living with mental illnesses and HIV/AIDS.

The Coalition operates 11 direct-services programs that offer vital services to homeless, at-risk, and low-income New Yorkers. These programs also demonstrate effective, long-term, scalable solutions and include: permanent housing for formerly homeless families and individuals living with HIV/AIDS; job-training for homeless and low-income women; and permanent housing for formerly homeless families and individuals. Our summer sleep-away camp and after-school program help hundreds of homeless children each year. The Coalition's mobile soup kitchen distributed nearly 400,000 hot, nutritious meals to homeless and hungry people on the streets of the city this past year – up from our usual 320,000. Finally, our Crisis Services Department assists more than 1,000 homeless and at-risk households each month with eviction prevention, individual advocacy, referrals for shelter and emergency food programs, and assistance with public benefits as well as basic necessities such as diapers, formula, work uniforms, and money for medications and groceries. In response to the pandemic, we are operating a special Crisis Hotline (1-888-358-2384) for homeless individuals who need immediate help finding shelter or meeting other critical needs.

The Coalition was founded in concert with landmark right-to-shelter litigation filed on behalf of homeless men and women (*Callahan v. Carey* and *Eldredge v. Koch*) and remains a plaintiff in these now consolidated cases. In 1981, the City and State entered into a consent decree in *Callahan* through which they agreed: “The City defendants shall provide shelter and board to each homeless man who applies for it provided that (a) the man meets the need standard to qualify for the home relief program established in New York State; or (b) the man by reason of physical, mental or social dysfunction is in need of temporary shelter.” The *Eldredge* case extended this legal requirement to homeless single women. The *Callahan* consent decree and the *Eldredge* case also guarantee basic standards for shelters for homeless men and women. Pursuant to the decree, the Coalition serves as court-appointed independent monitor of municipal shelters for homeless single adults, and the City has also authorized the Coalition to monitor the municipal shelter system serving homeless families. In 2017, the Coalition, fellow institutional plaintiff Center for Independence of the Disabled – New York, and homeless New Yorkers with disabilities were represented by Legal Aid and pro-bono counsel White & Case in the settlement of *Butler v. City of New York*, which is designed to ensure that the right to shelter includes accessible accommodations for those with disabilities, consistent with Federal, State, and local laws. During the pandemic, the Coalition worked with Legal Aid to support

homeless New Yorkers, including through the *E.G. v. City of New York* Federal class action litigation initiated to ensure Wi-Fi access for students in DHS and HRA shelters, as well as *Fisher v. City of New York*, a lawsuit filed in New York State Supreme Court to ensure homeless single adults gain access to private hotel rooms instead of congregate shelters during the pandemic.

My name is Barbara Hughes, and I am the Executive Director of City Beet Kitchens at Project Renewal, a New York City homeless services nonprofit agency. Thank you to Chair Farias, Chair Won, and the City Council for convening this hearing.

For over 55 years, Project Renewal has provided shelter, housing, health care, and employment services to New Yorkers experiencing homelessness. We are grateful to the City Council for supporting our programs.

Our social enterprise catering company City Beet Kitchens is unique because it employs many graduates of Project Renewal's Culinary Arts Training Program. This workforce development program provides New Yorkers facing barriers to employment—including veterans—with a world-class culinary education and a pathway to a fulfilling career.

City Beet Kitchens prepares high-quality food for providers across the city—to the tune of nearly 2,500 daily meals for 18 nonprofit sites, and 2,800 daily meals for Project Renewal's seven shelters. We also cater private and corporate events. Profits from the business are reinvested in our culinary training program to provide even more employment opportunities.

Poor food quality in shelters leads to food waste. Think about it: If you had an unappetizing meal placed in front of you, would you force yourself to eat it, or would you try going to a nearby soup kitchen or pantry for something better? When poor quality food is wasted, the City is paying twice over—first for the wasted meal and then for the outside resources that shelter residents turn to.

At City Beet Kitchens, we take pride in crafting quality dishes and diverse menus for shelter residents. We care about the food we create, and about our staff. We pay our team members above minimum wage, and food prices continue to rise—which means we do charge a higher price than most for-profit catering businesses. But using the lowest-price catering options means that the quality of food in shelters will continue to be an issue.

Additionally, in order to improve food quality in shelters, nonprofit providers must be paid fairly and in a timely manner. Unfortunately, the city has been chronically late to pay nonprofit providers for our work, and rising costs make it even more challenging to sustain our work. In recent years, food prices have risen by 20%, paper products by 25%, gas by 54%, and van repairs by 43%—yet the food budget for shelter meals has remained the same.

The City Council should consider prioritizing social enterprise caterers like us over for-profit food contracts. The return on investment with caterers like us is strong. We provide high-quality meals for New Yorkers in need, while supporting workforce development to create opportunities for those who face barriers to employment.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify today.

**Kommissary Testimonial Letter to the New York City Council Committee on Contracts
and Economic Development**

Hon. Julie Won, Chair, Committee on Contracts

Hon. Amanda Farías, Chair, Committee on Economic Development

Int 0905-2024: A Local Law requiring standardized feedback surveys from food service
contractors

February 25, 2025

Thank you, Chair Won and Chair Farías, and committee members, for the opportunity to submit testimony in support of Intro 0905-2024. My name is Edward Song, and I am the Chief Executive Officer at Kommissary, a M/WBE food service provider committed to delivering nutritious and culturally relevant meals to food-insecure communities across New York City.

Through our contracts with NYC Health + Hospitals, Department of Youth and Community Development, and non-profits, Kommissary serves thousands of New Yorkers, ensuring that individuals in need receive high-quality, well-prepared meals that support their well-being.

Please accept this written testimony supporting proposed Local Law 0905, which would require standardized feedback surveys from food service contractors with contracts over \$100,000. This Local Law is a critical step towards enhancing the quality and effectiveness of city-funded meal programs. As a food vendor dedicated to serving vulnerable populations, we recognize the value of direct consumer feedback in improving meal quality, addressing dietary preferences, and ensuring overall satisfaction.

At Kommissary, we deeply value the importance of utilizing data to improve our food operations. We use a multi-tiered feedback system that integrates real-time meal feedback from program staff, direct customer outreach surveys, and even structured driver reports on delivery quality. Our culinary team conducts daily taste evaluations to ensure consistency, while partner agencies provide additional survey data. All feedback is centralized and automatically organized, enabling real-time tracking, trend analysis, and data-driven decision-making to refine recipes and enhance meal quality to help us meet and go beyond our commitments to the City and those we serve. Our mission to provide nutritious meals is achieved by systematically gathering input on nutrition, taste, and presentation, ensuring that we are accountable for meeting the highest standards in food service and providing healthier, more satisfying meals for those in need.

With the passage of this Local Law, increased accountability and transparency will result from regular feedback surveys across all agencies, creating a consistent framework that ensures food service providers uphold their commitments while also giving agencies and the City Council clear, data-driven insights into service performance.

Food service is not a one-size-fits-all model, particularly when serving diverse communities. Feedback surveys will allow vendors like Kommissary to tailor meals to cultural and dietary preferences better, reducing food waste and increasing meal acceptance rates. We also believe that informed decision-making for future contracts will be supported by such aggregate survey results, equipping the City with valuable data to refine future service contract solicitations and

ensuring that public funds are used efficiently to support vendors prioritizing quality and responsiveness.

As a dedicated City contractor, Kommissary welcomes the opportunity to work with the New York City Council and those we serve on ways we can continue to refine and enhance our food programs, including implementing a standardized feedback system to elevate food service standards across New York City.

We appreciate the Council's commitment to improving food service contracts and ensuring that all New Yorkers receive meals that meet their needs with dignity and care.

Sincerely,

Edward ("Eddie") Song
CEO
Kommissary

Written Testimony of Whitsons Culinary Group®

Hearing by the NYC City Council Committees on Contracts and Economic Development, February 25, 2025

Chairpersons, Council Members, and Esteemed Committee Members:

Thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony on the critical issue of food quality in publicly-funded facilities in New York City (“NYC”). As a proud NYC and National Minority Supplier Development Council (“NMSDC”)-certified, minority-owned food service organization with deep roots in the greater NYC area, Whitsons Culinary Group® is committed to delivering high-quality, nutritious meals that meet the diverse needs of our city’s communities.

For over 45 years, Whitsons has been a trusted partner in food production, emergency dining, and crisis response, serving the people of New York with integrity and an unwavering dedication to excellence. Our reputation for quality, reliability, and community focus has been consistently recognized by City officials, and we remain committed to meeting the highest industry standards while supporting the City’s evolving food service needs.



School Nutrition

Prepared Meals

Residential Dining

Healthcare Dining

Emergency Dining

How Whitsons Prioritizes Quality, Safety, and Nutrition:

State-of-the-Art Production Facilities

Our facilities are Safe Quality Food (“SQF”)-certified, United States Department of Agriculture (USDA”)-inspected, and Food and Drug Administration (“FDA”)-certified, ensuring the highest levels of food safety and quality control. Our Brooklyn facility successfully passed the SQF audit in February 2025 with an outstanding score of 98%, and our Islandia, Long Island facility received a score of 99% in 2024.

Advanced Food Safety & Quality Control

Whitsons upholds strict supplier approval, lot traceability, and rigorous quality controls, including regular microbiological testing and detailed nutritional labeling. We have a dedicated Food Safety & Quality Assurance team that can quickly respond to supplier recalls and trace products throughout our supply chain. Every meal is prepared with high-quality ingredients, ensuring both safety and consistency.

Commitment to Regulatory Compliance & Training

We adhere to the most stringent Hazard Analysis and Critical Control Point (“HACCP”) and Hazard Analysis and Risk-based Preventive Controls (“HARPC”)-certified food safety protocols, meeting federal Homeland Security regulations and maintaining an industry-leading recall system to ensure public safety.

Authentic, Halal-Certified Meal Production

Recognizing the diverse dietary needs of NYC residents, Whitsons operates a Halal-certified culinary center in Edison, NJ, accredited by the American Halal Foundation (“AHF”). We are committed to authentic preparation and strict compliance with halal food standards, ensuring that all meals meet religious and cultural requirements.

Expert Support Team of Nutritionists & Culinary Professionals

Whitsons’ team includes experienced registered dietitians, nutritionists, and expert



chefs who design innovative, culturally appropriate meal solutions tailored to the unique needs of the populations we serve.

Unmatched Transportation & Logistics Capacity

Our fleet of 250+ temperature-controlled, electronically monitored delivery vehicles ensures efficient, safe, and timely meal distribution across NYC. Strategic partnerships with trusted third-party logistics providers further enhance our ability to scale services as needed.

Commitment to Customer Feedback & Continuous Improvement

Customer feedback is a critical feature of Whitsons customer-centric approach. To expand opportunities for feedback and streamline issue reporting and resolution, Whitsons has a customer feedback form where any submissions are assigned a case number to track resolution. Our Customer Success Team follows up to ensure satisfaction and provides a summary of the outcome, ensuring transparency, accountability, and continuous service improvement. In addition, our onsite team members regularly engage directly with customers to discuss meal offerings, gather real-time input, and understand how they are enjoying their meals. These direct conversations help us refine our menus, address concerns proactively, and continuously enhance the dining experience for all customers.

Commitment to NYC Diversity Goals

As a NYC and NMSDC-certified minority-owned certified company, we hold diversity as a core value integral to our business operations. We actively seek diverse suppliers who share our commitment to promoting diversity. In compliance with City requirements, we are committed to subcontracting 30% of our contracts to Minority and Women-owned Business Enterprises (“MWBEs”) in NYC and actively recruiting MWBEs to participate.

A Proven Partner for NYC’s Future

Whitsons has a long history of supporting New Yorkers in times of need, from September 11 relief efforts to Hurricane Sandy and COVID-19 meal distribution. Our ability to mobilize large-scale meal services within 24 hours underscores our reliability and responsiveness.

As the City seeks to strengthen food quality oversight and ensure equitable access to nutritious meals, Whitsons stands ready to partner with NYC leadership and City agencies, community stakeholders, and regulatory bodies to enhance standards, improve service, and continue providing high-quality meals to those who need them most.

To provide greater transparency and a deeper understanding of our operations, we warmly invite members of the City Council to tour our Brooklyn, Islandia, and/or Edison facilities. Such visits will offer a firsthand look at our state-of-the-art food safety measures, meal production process, and logistics capabilities, reinforcing our commitment to delivering the highest-quality, culturally appropriate, and compliant meals to NYC communities.

We appreciate the opportunity to contribute to this discussion and welcome any questions from the Committee chairs and members.

Respectfully submitted,
Whitsons Culinary Group

Rap4Bronx Testimony

Re: Committee on Economic Development and Committee on Contracts Hearing on Shelter Food Contracts

Tuesday, February 25, 2025

Dear Majority Leader Amanda Farias and Contracts Committee Chair Julie Won,

Thank you for the opportunity to testify in support of Intro 0905-2024. My name is Shana McCormick, and I represent RAP4Bronx—a community-driven organization dedicated to enhancing food access and nutritional outcomes in New York City. Our work spans partnerships with faith-based groups, senior centers, temporary residences, NYCHA developments, and other community-based organizations. We have proudly assisted in establishing pantries, subsidizing food access, and meeting residents where they are by providing prepared meals, both rescued and farm-fresh produce, and essential pantry staples. As we all know, food insecurity is not a one size fits all situation - nor should it be treated as such.

I would like to extend a special thank you to Majority Leader Farias for her steadfast support in allocating discretionary funds to help with food access in her district—the very community we serve the most. Her commitment is a powerful example of leadership that makes a tangible difference on the ground and we hope to see continued support for food access efforts.

Our on-the-ground experience has shown that when food quality issues arise at some sites, residents often turn to local pantries and community-based organizations for better, more nutritious options. This situation not only duplicates efforts but also escalates costs and compromises health outcomes. Many working New Yorkers already face the challenge of stretching their budgets to cover rent, transportation, childcare, and other expenses. This often forces them to compromise on food quality—resorting to fast food or lower-quality options that lack real nutrition. In contrast, locally prepared, culturally relevant, ready-to-eat meals provide a dignified alternative. Such meals are critical for individuals without access to a full kitchen or those juggling multiple jobs with limited time and energy to prepare nutritious meals.

For the past five years, as a partner of Rethink Food, we've seen their efforts flourish into an ecosystem that not only prioritizes community well-being but also bolsters local businesses. Through this partnership, we've helped deliver close to 1 million meals from neighborhood restaurants—ensuring that local businesses thrive, local hires like our longstanding driver, Dwayne receive a fair wage and benefits, and consumers have access to quality, nutritious meals.

Intro 0905-2024 mandates that food service contractors with city agencies holding contracts of \$100,000 or more administer standardized feedback surveys on a quarterly basis. This requirement will ensure that the voices of our community members are heard and that insights gained lead to improvements in food quality, portion sizes, and overall nutrition standards. It is a

critical step toward reducing duplicate efforts, lowering costs, and ensuring every New Yorker has access to the healthy, nourishing food they deserve and need to succeed.

Thank you for your consideration and for your commitment to a healthier, more equitable New York City. We look forward to continuing our work with Rethink Food and our many community partners to build a food system that truly serves the needs of our residents.

We believe this is just the beginning and hope the City continues to invest in this model for the benefit of all.

Testimony to the NYC Council on Halal Food in Shelters:

Good morning, my name is Rana Abdelhamid, and I am here on behalf of Malikah. Our organization didn't initially set out to focus on asylum work, but when we began working with asylum seekers through the IDCNY, we quickly learned how urgent the issue of food was. Many of these individuals shared with us how hungry they were, how the food they were receiving was not only insufficient, but also made them sick. We heard heartbreaking stories about the poor quality of food they were given, and how it violated their basic rights and needs.

One story that particularly stays with me is of a Sudanese woman who was so malnourished that she couldn't breastfeed her child. She had been receiving food that was not only subpar, but also not halal. For her, that wasn't just an inconvenience, it was a direct conflict with her faith. Halal food is a religious obligation for Muslims. It's not a matter of preference or choice, but a requirement based on their beliefs.

Halal food follows strict guidelines set by Islamic law. It means food that is permissible for Muslims to eat, and this includes not just the preparation methods, but also the avoidance of forbidden ingredients such as pork or alcohol. For Muslims, consuming halal food isn't just about health, it's an essential aspect of their spiritual practice. It's a commitment to living according to their faith, and it forms an integral part of their daily life. So when asylum seekers come to this country seeking safety and support, they should not have to sacrifice their religious practices just to survive.

Thanks to the support of Councilmember Won's office, we've been able to distribute over 8,000 halal hot meals to asylum seekers. Every week, we visit shelters in Long Island City and provide meals, but what we hear from people over and over again is the same: the food they are given is of poor quality. At times, we have heard anecdotally that some have been misled into thinking they were receiving halal food, only to find out later that it contained pork or other non-halal ingredients. This isn't just about food. It's about faith, dignity, and respect. For these individuals, eating something that isn't halal isn't just a dietary mistake. It's a violation of their core beliefs and an infringement on their right to practice their religion.

What's even more difficult to grasp is the mismanagement of food contracts and the millions of dollars allocated to feed people in need. Whenever I see in the news that millions of taxpayer dollars are being spent on food contracts, I feel devastated. How is it that in a city like New York, one of the wealthiest cities in the world, we are spending millions, but our neighbors are still going hungry and being denied the food they need? It breaks my heart to see people literally starving while the system that's supposed to support them is failing them. These contracts, instead of providing adequate, culturally competent food, are putting people at risk. The money is being spent, but it's not reaching those who need it most. Instead, it's being mismanaged, leaving vulnerable communities with food that isn't nourishing, isn't culturally appropriate, and isn't what they deserve.

Halal food isn't just a preference, it's a religious obligation. For Muslims, eating halal is about living in alignment with their faith. To be denied halal food is to be denied their ability to practice their religion freely. We should not be putting anyone in that position, especially not those who have already been through so much trauma and hardship.

I urge the City Council to take immediate action to address the mismanagement of these contracts and ensure that the food provided to asylum seekers and all New Yorkers meets their basic dietary needs and respects their cultural and religious practices. Our neighbors should not have to choose between their faith and their survival.

We must do better. Thank you for your time and consideration.

**THE COUNCIL
THE CITY OF NEW YORK**

Appearance Card

[]

I intend to appear and speak on Int. No. _____ Res. No. _____

in favor in opposition

Date: 2/25

(PLEASE PRINT)

Name: JEANETTE LUGO

Address: [REDACTED]

I represent: _____

Address: _____

**THE COUNCIL
THE CITY OF NEW YORK**

Appearance Card

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in favor in opposition

Date: _____

(PLEASE PRINT)

Name: LATOYA MEADERS

Address: _____

I represent: COLLECTIVE FART

Address: _____

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THE CITY OF NEW YORK**

Appearance Card

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I intend to appear and speak on Int. No. _____ Res. No. _____

in favor in opposition

Date: _____

(PLEASE PRINT)

Name: JEANETTE LUGO

Address: _____

I represent: AGAPE FOOD RESLUE

Address: _____



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**THE COUNCIL
THE CITY OF NEW YORK**

Appearance Card

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in favor in opposition

Date: _____

(PLEASE PRINT)

Name: MATT JORWIAK

Address: _____

I represent: RETHINK FOOD

Address: _____

**THE COUNCIL
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I intend to appear and speak on Int. No. _____ Res. No. _____

in favor in opposition

Date: _____

(PLEASE PRINT)

Name: Raymond Medina

Address: Assistant Commissioner - Diversity officer

I represent: DSS

Address: _____

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in favor in opposition

Date: _____

(PLEASE PRINT)

Name: Cindy Tata

Address: Associate Commissioner Special Population Services

I represent: DSS

Address: _____

**THE COUNCIL
THE CITY OF NEW YORK**

Appearance Card

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in favor in opposition

Date: _____

(PLEASE PRINT)

Name: Mehak Kapoor

Address: Deputy Director for Placement Operations

I represent: MOCS

Address: _____

**THE COUNCIL
THE CITY OF NEW YORK**

Appearance Card

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in favor in opposition

Date: _____

(PLEASE PRINT)

Name: Jill Berry

Address: First Deputy Commissioner

I represent: DSS

Address: _____

**THE COUNCIL
THE CITY OF NEW YORK**

Appearance Card

I intend to appear and speak on Int. No. _____ Res. No. _____

in favor in opposition

Date: _____

(PLEASE PRINT)

Name: Kate Mackenzie

Address: Executive Director

I represent: MoFP

Address: _____

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**THE COUNCIL
THE CITY OF NEW YORK**

Appearance Card

I intend to appear and speak on Int. No. _____ Res. No. _____

in favor in opposition

Date: 2

(PLEASE PRINT)

Name: Barbara Hughes

Address: [Redacted] NY 10012

I represent: Project Renewal

Address: 200 Varick St, NY 10014

**THE COUNCIL
THE CITY OF NEW YORK**

Appearance Card

I intend to appear and speak on Int. No. 905 Res. No. _____

in favor in opposition

Date: 2/25/25

(PLEASE PRINT)

Name: Alison Wilkey

Address: CAA

I represent: Coalition for the Homeless

Address: 129 Fulton St, 10038

**THE COUNCIL
THE CITY OF NEW YORK**

Appearance Card

I intend to appear and speak on Int. No. _____ Res. No. _____

in favor in opposition

Date: 2/25/25

(PLEASE PRINT)

Name: Jane Jackson

Address: [Redacted] BX, N.Y.

I represent: _____

Address: _____

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**THE COUNCIL
THE CITY OF NEW YORK**

Appearance Card



I intend to appear and speak on Int. No. _____ Res. No. _____
 in favor in opposition

Date: 2/25/2025

(PLEASE PRINT)

Name: C. W. Lee Brewer

Address: _____

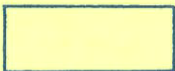
I represent: the Interfaith Center of NY

Address: 475 Riverside Dr #540

Address: _____

**THE COUNCIL
THE CITY OF NEW YORK**

Appearance Card



I intend to appear and speak on Int. No. _____ Res. No. _____
 in favor in opposition

Date: _____

(PLEASE PRINT)

Name: SHANA MC CORMICK

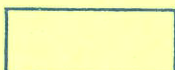
Address: _____

I represent: RAP 4 BRONX

Address: _____

**THE COUNCIL
THE CITY OF NEW YORK**

Appearance Card



I intend to appear and speak on Int. No. _____ Res. No. _____
 in favor in opposition

Date: 2/25/2025

(PLEASE PRINT)

Name: Sharon Brown

Address: _____

I represent: ROSE OF Sharon Enterprises

Address: _____

BRONX NY 11238
Please complete this card and return to the Sergeant-at-Arms

**THE COUNCIL
THE CITY OF NEW YORK**

Appearance Card

I intend to appear and speak on Int. No. _____ Res. No. _____

in favor in opposition

Date: _____

(PLEASE PRINT)

Name: ADANA BAH

Address: Box 14

I represent: African

Address: _____

**THE COUNCIL
THE CITY OF NEW YORK**

Appearance Card

I intend to appear and speak on Int. No. _____ Res. No. _____

in favor in opposition

Date: 2/25/25

(PLEASE PRINT)

Name: Abdullah P. Ratis

Address: [Redacted] NY, 12077

I represent: Hotel Waddy

Address: 241 Route 9W #1004, Glenmont, NY 12077

**THE COUNCIL
THE CITY OF NEW YORK**

Appearance Card

I intend to appear and speak on Int. No. _____ Res. No. _____

in favor in opposition

Date: 2/25/25

(PLEASE PRINT)

Name: Christopher Leon Johnson

Address: [Redacted]

I represent: Self

Address: _____

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