

CITY COUNCIL  
CITY OF NEW YORK

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TRANSCRIPT OF THE MINUTES

Of the

COMMITTEE ON GENERAL WELFARE

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August 13, 2019  
Start: 12:44 p.m.  
Recess: 1:05 p.m.

HELD AT: Committee Room - City Hall

B E F O R E: Stephen T. Levin  
Chairperson

COUNCIL MEMBERS: Barry Grodenchik  
Antonio Reynoso  
Ritchie J. Torres  
Brad Lander  
Laurie A. Cumbo  
Mark Treyger

A P P E A R A N C E S (CONTINUED)

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2                   CHAIRPERSON LEVIN: Good afternoon,  
3 everybody. I am Council Member Steve Levin, chair of  
4 the Council's Committee on General Welfare. Today we  
5 are voting on 11 bills and one resolution that all  
6 aim to ensure that HRA clients are treated with  
7 respect and that HRA employees have the resources  
8 that they need to do their jobs effectively and  
9 efficiently. Most of us are familiar with the story  
10 of Jazmine Headley starting a December day attempting  
11 to reinstate her childcare subsidy and ending the day  
12 with her child ripped from her arms and her placed in  
13 handcuffs. Regrettably, as Ms. Headley herself has  
14 said in news articles, unfortunate experiences at HRA  
15 centers are not unique to her case. The Urban  
16 Justice Center Safety Net Project published a report  
17 in February highlighting the challenges New Yorkers  
18 face while trying to obtain public assistance SNAP  
19 benefits. Most of the HRA clients surveyed felt like  
20 they had been spoken to inappropriately and may  
21 reported having their paperwork lost by HRA, and the  
22 large majority said that their calls were not  
23 answered. They also found average wait times of  
24 over three hours at job centers, and 2 hours and 45  
25 minutes at SNAP centers. The survey results showed

1  
2 clear improvements compared to a similar study  
3 conducted in 2014. In the five years of Commissioner  
4 Banks's leadership, HRA has undergone significant  
5 modernization and streamlining efforts by increasing  
6 self-service options, online applications and  
7 recertification, mobile document uploads, and client-  
8 initiated scheduling for interviews on demand. We  
9 appreciate everything that has been done to make the  
10 system work better, but clearly more needs to be  
11 done. The abuse Jazmine Headley experienced was  
12 abhorrent. Jazmine should have never had her child  
13 taken from her. She should have never been sent to  
14 Riker's Island. In February, in response to what  
15 happen to Jazmine, this committee heard 13 pieces of  
16 legislation, including Intro 1359, a bill which I am  
17 sponsoring, to require DSS to issue a public report  
18 on instances in which public assistance for a  
19 recipient was terminated and the recipient reapplied  
20 for such public assistance. Transparency is the key  
21 to identifying gaps and tracking progress at DSS.  
22 What occurred to Jazmine did not take place in a  
23 vacuum. The incident did, however, bring to light  
24 serious gaps in our city's Social Services system  
25 that we can change. This package of bills seeks to

1  
2 achieve full-scale improvement at HRA centers. I  
3 also want to thank Jazmine herself for coming to  
4 testify at that time hearing in February. We greatly  
5 appreciate her taking the time and thoughtfulness to  
6 present to this committee. At this time I would like  
7 to acknowledge my colleagues who are here today.  
8 We're joined by Council Member Barry Grodenchik of  
9 Queens, Council Member Antonio Reynoso of Brooklyn  
10 and Queens, Council Member Ritchie Torres of the  
11 Bronx, Council Member Brad Lander of Brooklyn, and  
12 I'd like to thank the staff of the General Welfare  
13 Committee, Amita Kilowan, senior counsel, Krista  
14 Ponce, senior policy analyst, Julia Hermis, finance  
15 analyst, and Agatha Marvopolous, counsel, for their  
16 work on this package. I'd also like to thank my  
17 chief of staff, Jonathan Bouchet, and legislative  
18 director, Elizabeth Adams. And I'd like to  
19 acknowledge all of the sponsors of legislation as  
20 part of this package - Council Member Adrienne Adams,  
21 Council Member Alicka Ampry-Samuels, Council Member  
22 Laurie Cumbo, Council Member Vanessa Gibson, Council  
23 Member Helen Rosenthal, Public Advocate Jumaane  
24 Williams, and Council Member Chaim Deutsch, and I do  
25 have statements from both Council Member Gibson and

1  
2 Council Member Adams that I will read into the  
3 record, but I will first turn it over to my  
4 colleague, Council Member Brad Lander. Do you have a  
5 statement to make on the legislation?

6 COUNCIL MEMBER LANCMAN: Thank you, Mr.  
7 Chair. I just really, I want to appreciate your  
8 leadership. I mean, as you said, the fact that  
9 Jazmine herself like found the courage and leadership  
10 to say we've got to make systemic change here, after  
11 we all saw what happened there. It was very powerful  
12 and I just, I really appreciate that you have stuck  
13 with this. There's a lot to do here and it would  
14 have been easy for this to be kind of a day of  
15 headlines, and then, you know, we've all pounded our  
16 chest but we don't make real long-term change and  
17 this is a really thoughtful package of legislation to  
18 try not only to respect and honor Jazmine's  
19 experience, but just to use it to do better. I think  
20 a lot of times what happens with these bureaucratic  
21 systems is we just stop looking at them and even if  
22 we could figure out new ways so that people wouldn't  
23 have to spend their time coming into appointments  
24 that they don't need, we just stop paying attention  
25 and I really appreciate that you have stuck with us

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2 and I'm honored to be part of today's package of  
3 legislation. Thank you.

4                   CHAIRPERSON LEVIN: Council Member  
5 Lander. Do any other of my colleagues have anything  
6 they want to add to this? OK. I will read the  
7 statements from Council Members Vanessa Gibson and  
8 Adrienne Adams. This is from Council Member Vanessa  
9 Gibson. Dear Chair Levin, I want to thank you and my  
10 fellow General Welfare Committee members for your  
11 consideration of this important bill on today's  
12 voting agenda. Intro 1350-A will require HRA to  
13 develop and implement a plan based on DSS HRA audit  
14 findings on job centers and SNAP centers. We have  
15 often heard of various complaints regarding HRA SNAP  
16 center wait times, employee professionalism, and  
17 overall clientele satisfaction. Included in these  
18 stories are alarming instances of clients having to  
19 take days off of work just to rectify an issue at an  
20 HRA job center or merely obtain verification  
21 documents at SNAP centers. Intro 1350-A will report  
22 on the current wait times at each job center,  
23 including how these wait times are calculated,  
24 changes implemented to improve efficiency at each  
25 site, changes implemented to improve staff to visitor

1 ratios, changes to improve access to technology and  
2 better use of departments' phone lines, and much  
3 more. Additionally, DSS HRA would be required to  
4 issue three subsequent progress reports over the next  
5 six years on such changes, and their overall impact  
6 at job centers and SNAP centers. I thank you all for  
7 your attention and consideration of this bill. I  
8 thank you for your consideration once again and hope  
9 you vote in the affirmative. Thank you, Vanessa  
10 Gibson, Council Member, 16th District, Bronx County,  
11 Deputy Leader Chair of the Subcommittee on Capital  
12 Budget. The following statement is from Council  
13 Member Adrienne Adams, 28th District, Queens,  
14 statement on Introduction 1333. Good afternoon. I'd  
15 like to start by thanking Chair Levin for his  
16 willingness to deliver these comments on Introduction  
17 1333 on my behalf. As you know, over the past year  
18 we have received many accounts of poor treatment of  
19 people visiting HRA centers in need of assistance.  
20 Many of us have seen the video of police officers  
21 yanking a 1-year-old from his mother's grasp in a  
22 Brooklyn HRA center. It was during an arrest that  
23 was completely unnecessary. After the unfortunate  
24 escalation in the case of Jazmine Headley and so many  
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1 others, we must take steps to ensure that this does  
2 not happen again. The daily protocol inside HRA  
3 offices is in desperate need of reform. Vulnerable  
4 New Yorkers that go to HRA for help should not have  
5 to second-guess how they will be treated. I am  
6 proud to join my colleagues in a package of  
7 legislation to improve treatment of clients and  
8 quality of service at HRA centers. It is time that  
9 we address the flaws in our Social Services system.  
10 My bill, Intro 1333, would require the Department of  
11 Social Services/HRA, Human Resources Administration,  
12 to report on arrests, summonses, removals, escorts,  
13 and the use of force incidents occurring in DSS, HRA  
14 job centers, and SNAP centers. I encourage my  
15 colleagues to support Intro 1333, as it is a  
16 necessary step to improve accountability and  
17 transparency. We must ensure that this agency  
18 improves their policies and protocols to prevent  
19 future trauma from families in need. And as the  
20 chair of this committee, I'd like to specifically  
21 acknowledge Council Member Adam's, Council Member and  
22 our Majority Leader Laurie Cumbo, Council Member  
23 Vanessa Gibson, Council Member Inez Barron for  
24 speaking so forcefully and so compellingly on these  
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1  
2 matters over the last several months. This was a  
3 very emotional issue for many of us and I think a  
4 lot, a lot of council members, and here's our  
5 Majority Leader right now, felt a real responsibility  
6 to do what we can on behalf of clients of DSS and  
7 HRA, and I think that, ah, this responsibility of  
8 this council to act we are achieving in some small  
9 measure today. There's still going to be more work  
10 that needs to be done. We need to make sure that we  
11 are valuing the contribution of all New Yorkers and  
12 making sure that city agencies are treating their  
13 clients, New Yorkers, with the dignity and respect  
14 that they warrant and deserve. I'm going to ask our  
15 Majority Leader, Laurie Cumbo, to deliver some  
16 remarks as well.

17 MAJORITY LEADER CUMBO: I want to thank  
18 Chair Levin for your leadership and Speaker Corey  
19 Johnson for all that you have done to uplift this  
20 package of legislation that is so critical. Before I  
21 get started, I want to thank Jazmine Headley for her  
22 bravery and love for family and sharing your story  
23 with the world. This has certainly been an eye-  
24 opening experience for what so many individuals, low-  
25 income individuals, individuals that have been

1 economically marginalized, have to face day-to-day in  
2 the City of New York. It is a good day when we at  
3 the City Council can address long-standing  
4 institutional systematic challenges. We believe that  
5 all people seeking services should be entitled to  
6 professional, compassionate, and efficient care. No  
7 one ever should be treated in a matter that is  
8 verbally, physically abusive or cruel. We also  
9 believe that the municipal workforce in this city  
10 must be provided the same level of respect and must  
11 be paid for high-quality professional development,  
12 training, and should receive appropriate salaries  
13 that match their experiences. Among all women in New  
14 York City single mothers with children are the most  
15 economically insecure. Across the five boroughs  
16 there are close to 300,000 households headed by women  
17 who are responsible for the care of more than 1  
18 million children. Close to 40% of single mother-  
19 headed households, compared to just 13% of two-parent  
20 households with children. We are amazing. We are  
21 incredible. And we do have the magic. We are black  
22 women. We will not allow anyone to treat us less  
23 than. Navigating everyday life is hard enough and as  
24 primary caregivers it's even harder when the color of  
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1  
2 our skin can mean the difference between life and  
3 death. In the case of Jazmine Headley officers  
4 violently ripped her 18-month-old son from her arms  
5 and the world viewed the interaction. Clear that  
6 officers behavior was unwarranted and downright  
7 wrong. It is essential that we stand together and  
8 firmly reject the criminalization of poverty.  
9 Annually nearly 3 million New Yorkers rely on Human  
10 Resource Administration for economic support and  
11 social services through benefit programs. Both  
12 client and worker must have opportunities to interact  
13 with an agency in a safe and positive manner.  
14 Several legislative reforms will be voted out of this  
15 committee today and I'm proud to usher in Intro  
16 1347, which is an innovative approach to provide  
17 clients an opportunity to alter appointments over the  
18 phone. Also, we will pass a resolution calling on  
19 the state legislature to provide a grace period  
20 before terminating public assistance or supplemental  
21 nutrition assistance program benefits due to a change  
22 in income and/or employment. As a mother co-  
23 parenting and raising a son, and my son today just  
24 graduated to the big class, I can only imagine how  
25 traumatic it would be if I had to come to work today

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2 and found out that my benefits or the ability to send  
3 my child to school had been disrupted or interrupted  
4 as a result of some sort of clerical or  
5 administrative error. Our families cannot be torn  
6 apart. We cannot lose income, we cannot lose our  
7 jobs because we have to fight for issues around  
8 administrative or clerical upsets or mistakes that  
9 have been made, and I hope that my colleagues on the  
10 state and assembly levels will also recognize the  
11 power of this particular resolution and we will be  
12 able to pass it in Albany. I would like to thank our  
13 Committee on General Welfare, Steve Levin, and all  
14 the council members, and Laura Popa and Jeff Baker  
15 that worked together to address this unique situation  
16 that we hope will never happen in the city of New  
17 York anywhere in the world. This was a deplorable  
18 incident and was really, has cast a dark shadow on  
19 the City of New York, but this package of legislation  
20 will begin to turn us in the right direction. Thank  
21 you so much.

22 CHAIRPERSON LEVIN: Thank you, Majority  
23 Leader Cumbo, and thank you for your unwavering  
24 leadership over the last seven months on this  
25 legislation. I also want to acknowledge the chair of

1  
2 the Women's Issues Committee, Helen Rosenthal, and  
3 Council Member Alicka Ampry-Samuel, as well for their  
4 incredible leadership. And just one last thing,  
5 Council Member Cumbo. You have a small child. I  
6 have small children. Council Member Reynoso has a  
7 small child. And the idea, as you said, that  
8 somebody can go to an HRA center for reasons that  
9 were not her fault, or really should ought to have  
10 been her responsibility to rectify, but had to take a  
11 day off of work, the fact that she was potentially  
12 going to lose her childcare because she had found a  
13 job, and then to have her child ripped out of her  
14 arms, I don't think that is something that any of us  
15 could even imagine, and if we try to imagine it, I  
16 imagine that any of us would do anything in our power  
17 to hold onto our children. So, you know, we need to  
18 keep the human story and the human experience front  
19 and center as we move forward, as we run a city that  
20 ought to be more compassionate and ought to be more  
21 centered around meeting people where they are and  
22 delivering the services in a compassionate way. So  
23 with that I will ask William Martin, clerk of the  
24 committee, to call the roll. Thank you all very  
25 much.

2 COMMITTEE CLERK MARTIN: William Martin,  
3 committee clerk, roll call vote, Committee on General  
4 Welfare. All items are coupled. Chair Levin.

5 CHAIRPERSON LEVIN: Aye on all.

6 COMMITTEE CLERK MARTIN: Grodenchik.

7 COUNCIL MEMBER GRODENCHIK: Aye.

8 COMMITTEE CLERK MARTIN: Lander.

9 COUNCIL MEMBER LANDER: Aye on all.

10 COMMITTEE CLERK MARTIN: Reynoso.

11 COUNCIL MEMBER REYNOSO: Permission to  
12 explain my vote? I just want to say this could have  
13 just been a moment that could have passed. With the  
14 leadership of many in the Women's Caucus and Council  
15 Member Steve Levin and the work that you've done, we  
16 didn't let it be that. We've come to closure and  
17 actually pushed meaningful legislation to change the  
18 experience of the most vulnerable and neediest in our  
19 city. So I want to thank you for that, and thank you  
20 to the Women's Caucus for holding this as a priority  
21 and finally getting something done. So thank you and  
22 I vote aye on all.

23 COMMITTEE CLERK MARTIN: Torres.

24 COUNCIL MEMBER TORRES: Aye.  
25

2 COMMITTEE CLERK MARTIN: A vote of 5 in  
3 the affirmative, zero in the negative, and no  
4 abstentions. All items have been adopted by the  
5 committee.

6 CHAIRPERSON LEVIN: Council Member  
7 Lander.

8 COUNCIL MEMBER LANDER: Thank you, Mr.  
9 Chair. I just, I want to briefly draw the connection  
10 to the public charge issue which is out there right  
11 now, which I think is important for us to see the  
12 connections here, like so much of what we're doing,  
13 thanks to Jazmine, thanks to your leadership, thanks  
14 to the Majority Leader's, just recognizing the  
15 fundamental humanity of people who receive public  
16 assistance, who just like us want childcare for their  
17 kids and enough food to feed their families, and like  
18 part of what we're doing here is saying we're not  
19 going to accept some like line between people who  
20 receive public assistance and everybody else, and  
21 obviously what the president is doing with the public  
22 charge rule is just trying to draw on the, some sense  
23 of stigma around public assistance to also demonize  
24 our immigrant families who are also, you know,  
25 hundreds of thousands in New York City who want just



1  
2 the same things, um, you know, a safe place with  
3 their family, that Jazmine couldn't find at that  
4 center. But, boy, the idea that folks will have to  
5 choose between making themselves subject to  
6 deportation and detention and immigration enforcement  
7 and the childcare that Jazmine was seeking or the  
8 food stamps or public benefits that made it possible  
9 to live in the cities, this is galling, and it's the  
10 same spite and racism and I just want to again say  
11 thank you for the package, but also make sure we're  
12 connecting it to, ah, to that atrocity that's taking  
13 place right at the same time, so.

14 CHAIRPERSON LEVIN: Thank you very much,  
15 Council Member Lander. OK. So, being that we are  
16 not expecting any other members we will adjourn this  
17 committee here at 1:05. [gavel] Reopening the vote  
18 on the package of legislation here in General Welfare  
19 Committee on August 13.

20 COMMITTEE CLERK MARTIN: William Martin,  
21 committee clerk, roll call vote, Committee on General  
22 Welfare. Council Member Treyger.

23 COUNCIL MEMBER TREYGER: I vote aye.

24 COMMITTEE CLERK MARTIN: Final vote, all  
25 items on today's agenda have been adopted by a vote

2 of 6 in the affirmative, zero in the negative, and no  
3 abstentions.

4 CHAIRPERSON LEVIN: The hearing is  
5 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 August 15, 2019