



**Department for
the Aging**

TESTIMONY

Presented by

Jocelyn Groden

Associate Commissioner for the Bureau of Social Services & Active Aging

on

Introduction 0896-2023

before the

**New York City Council
Committee on Aging**

on

**Tuesday, November 28, 2023
10:00 am**

Introduction

Good morning, Chair Hudson and members of the Committee on Aging. I am Jocelyn Groden, Associate Commissioner for the Bureau of Social Services and Active Aging, Office of Elder Justice and Mental Health at the New York City Department for the Aging (NYC Aging). Thank you for the opportunity to testify today regarding these introductions. For the purposes of this brief testimony, I will be keeping my remarks solely to Introduction 896 which pertains to NYC Aging.

Bill Introductions

While NYC Aging does not construct housing for older adults, nor place older adults in affordable housing units, we do work closely with our partners at the New York City Department for Housing Preservation and Development (HPD) and the New York City Human Resource Administration (HRA) to address housing needs of older adults. In particular, our recent work with the Cabinet for Older New Yorkers—of which HPD and HRA are members—has deepened these relationships and assisted us in addressing older adult needs. This partnership is crucial to ability to develop the broad range of options necessary to satisfy this diverse group. For example, we are currently collaborating with HPD on an upcoming Universal Design recommendation pursuant to Local Law 30. These are just some examples of our commitment to older adults and accessibility in affordable housing.

Regarding Introduction 896, while we agree with this spirit of transparency in the legislation and feel it is positive to understand where older adults and in what type of housing, NYC Aging would need to rely heavily on HPD in order to produce such a report. HPD has the expertise and knowledge of housing types, units, and the age of residents regarding the physical structures constructed throughout the city. As a social service agency, NYC Aging may not readily access this information, though we are committed to addressing older adult needs in housing. Additionally, it is our understanding that the reporting requirements for this piece of legislation may be partially contained in publicly available sources which HPD can give greater insight into as they relate to the housing needs of New Yorkers.

Conclusion

We look forward to continuing a discussion about this bill with Council in the future. Thank you for your time today and this discussion. I am able to address any additional questions you may have about this bill specifically. Thank you again for this opportunity to discuss this with you today.

Good morning, Chair Hudson and members of the Committee on Aging,

My name is Pierre Dejean, and I am the Assistant Commissioner of the Property Exemptions Administration Division at the Department of Finance. I am joined by Kieran Mahoney, Outreach Director, and Robin Lee, the Taxpayer Advocate.

The Senior Citizens and Disability Rent Freeze Programs (SCRIE and DRIE, respectively) provide crucial housing affordability assistance to vulnerable New Yorkers. In fiscal year 2023, over 51,000 seniors and over 10,400 disabled New Yorkers received assistance. To be eligible for the rent freeze program, an applicant's combined household income must be less than \$50,000, the applicant must be at least sixty-two years old for SCRIE or must have a qualifying disability for DRIE, and the applicant's rent must be one third or more of their household income.

Once the application is approved, the household's rent is frozen at the base year amount, and thereafter the City credits the landlord for an amount equivalent to rent increases through a property tax exemption. The tenant continues to pay their base rent and must renew their status with the Department of Finance, every year or two years, depending on the tenant's lease and the type of housing. The Department of Housing Preservation and Development administers SCRIE for tenants in subsidized housing, including Mitchell Lama, Redevelopment Company developments, certain federally assisted housing, and Housing Development Fund Companies.

We share the Council's desire to streamline the Rent Freeze application process, and I want to highlight a few areas where we've made great strides to accomplish this.

In the 2023 state legislative session, we successfully advocated for a state law that changed the income definition for these programs, and the senior and disabled homeowner exemptions, to align with federal adjusted gross income (AGI). This change means that applicants can provide their personal income tax return to verify their income, instead of a binder full of documentation to meet the previous definition of income. Additionally, we expect that the change will broaden the base of eligible New Yorkers by thousands.

Additionally, we have enhanced the lookup function of our Tenant Access Portal (TAP) to allow renewal applicants to track their application online and file a renewal application, as initial applicants already could.

Finally, I want to highlight our outreach teams' efforts to reach potential applicants for these programs. In this calendar year, DOF's outreach unit, along with the Office of the Taxpayer Advocate, have conducted sixty-eight events, including events with elected officials, community boards and community-based organizations. Additionally, we work closely with the Mayor's Office of Public Engagement to ensure eligible New Yorkers are aware of these beneficial programs. In the past, we have worked with HPD on SCRIE/DRIE enrollment in Mitchell Lama complexes. In June, we joined State Senator Kavanaugh and Councilmember Marte at Knickerbocker Village for a massive SCRIE/DRIE enrollment event. Supported by HPD and

Volunteers of Legal Service, we were able to provide direct on-site assistance to SCRIE/DRIE eligible Mitchell Lama residents. Furthermore, earlier this year we provided SCRIE/DRIE training to Department for the Aging staff, as well as their service providers.

In addition to my team, the Department of Finance's External Affairs Division, and the Office of the Taxpayer Advocate, which includes the SCRIE and DRIE ombudspersons, are dedicated to ensuring every New Yorker who would benefit from this program is able to take advantage of it.

Regarding Introduction 985, while we support the spirit of this bill, and encourage more New Yorkers to enroll in these programs, we have concerns regarding the provisions of this bill as written.

We have concerns regarding our ability to pre-determine eligibility based on the Mitchell Lama income verification, and that we will not be able to pre-populate a form with verified, accurate information that will improve the process for these applicants. Our agency is reviewing the income definitions used on these forms to assess how they align to the state laws that govern the SCRIE program.

Our goal, like yours, is to ensure that the application process is as easy as possible and that anyone who is eligible is able to take advantage of this benefit. We look forward to working with the Council and HPD to reach these potential recipients and design outreach efforts in collaboration with community groups and Council offices.

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



**TESTIMONY OF VOLUNTEERS OF LEGAL SERVICE
New York City Council Committee on Aging
November 28, 2023**

Good morning. My name is Stephanie Taylor and I am a project director at Volunteers of Legal Service (VOLS). VOLS was established in 1984 and our purpose is to leverage private attorneys to provide free legal services to low-income New Yorkers to help fill the justice gap. I oversee both our Benefits Law Project and our Incarcerated Mothers Law Project.

For over three decades, VOLS has assisted NYC older adults with high-quality free legal services through our dedicated staff and our network of pro bono attorneys. In just the past year, we worked on over 2000 cases for older adults living in New York City. We provide legal assistance on a wide range of civil legal issues including end of life and incapacity planning, landlord tenant matters, access to benefits, consumer matters, and other civil legal needs. We work closely with dozens of community-based organizations working with older adults, many of the City's Older Adult Centers (OACs) and naturally occurring retirement communities (NORCs).

As part of our Benefits Law Project, we help older adults with their Senior Citizen Rent Increase Exemption (SCRIE) applications, and we conduct legal workshops to educate the public about these life-saving benefits. Most older adults live on fixed incomes and the ability to freeze their shelter costs can often mean the difference between being able to age in place in the community with dignity or being at risk of experiencing homelessness. Over the past few months, we've conducted several SCRIE legal clinics, including at Mitchell-Lama buildings. At some of these events, we've worked alongside New York City's Department of Finance and Department of Housing Preservation and Development (HPD). Through all of this work, we've spoken with many older adults about the SCRIE application and recertification process. As such, we are well-positioned to weigh in on Introduction 0985-2023 as it pertains to this vulnerable population.

We have found that many older adults are confused by the SCRIE application and recertification process. They have questions on eligibility, requisite documentation, their pending applications and, of course, application denials. Many of these older adults report to us that their applications haven't been processed in 1-2 years. These individuals don't know whether their application or documentation was incomplete or whether there is any way to cure their deficient application.

Many low-income older adults living in Mitchell-Lama housing are unaware that they are eligible for SCRIE and do not know where or how to apply for benefits. We have teamed up with social services staff who work tirelessly to help as many older adults as possible apply for SCRIE benefits, but inevitably there are many who are left behind. Providing eligible residents with pre-filled applications could ensure that more older adults will be able to access SCRIE benefits.

VOLS recognizes New York City's efforts to better assist older adults with their SCRIE applications, but there is much that can be done to increase access to SCRIE benefits and make the application process easier. The provisions contained in Introduction 0985-2023 would have a positive impact on ensuring that more older adults are aware of the program and will help with the ease of filling out the application. Providing pre-populating SCRIE applications to eligible residents would certainly help many older adults ultimately obtain these critical benefits. We would be happy to work with Councilmembers' offices to screen people and to help them with their applications.

Our City's older adults lifetime experiences and achievements are woven into the fabric of our city; we should strive to provide them with all the support they need to remain in their communities, stay socially connected and remain active and healthy as they age. Thank you for allowing us to submit this testimony and for supporting the needs of New York City's older adults.

Stephanie Taylor, Esq.

VOLS Project Director, Benefits Law Project & Incarcerated Mothers Law Project



TESTIMONY OF CITYMEALS ON WHEELS

**Before the New York City Council Aging Committee
Honorable Crystal Hudson, Chair**

November 28, 2023

**Submitted by:
Citymeals on Wheels**

**Prepared by:
Vik Bensen**

Citymeals works in partnership with the City and the network of home-delivered meal providers to fill a significant gap in its home-delivered meals program by funding the delivery of meals on weekends, holidays, and emergencies to homebound older adults alongside additional supplemental feeding and connective services. In addition, we are the only organization providing home-delivered emergency meals to older New Yorkers citywide. Citymeals supports the two proposed bills and the resolution being discussed today as they will help older New Yorkers safely and vibrantly age in place.

Int. No. 896

Citymeals supports Int. No. 896 which would require NYC Aging to publish an annual report on "how many seniors live in apartment buildings in each Council district and how many of those apartments are retrofitted for people with disabilities, including mobility issues." This proposed report would be beneficial for both local government and aging service organizations to track accessible infrastructure as New York City's older adult population continues



to grow. NYC Aging reports that by 2025 all baby boomers will be over 60 and by 2040, and New York’s 60+ population will be 1.86 million, up from 1.7 million today.¹ The AARP 2021 Home and Community Preferences Survey notes that 85% of 65+ older adults want to stay in their “current residence for as long as possible,” and 86% want to remain in “their community for as long as possible.”²To do so, most homebound older adults rely on in-home accessibility modifications as well as a network of community-based services like our home-delivered meals program.

We know that 57% of our meal recipients live alone, and all need some assistance walking: 66% use a cane, 39% use a walker, and 16% use a wheelchair. Often inaccessibility issues are a contributing factor in food insecurity and the need for expensive institutional care. For many, simple retrofits like grab bars, ramps, elevators, and more can be enough to allow them to remain in their homes safely. An annual report that tracks the accessibility retrofitting of apartments with older adults across districts and zip codes will be an important tool to manage the infrastructure needed to keep pace with New York City’s aging demographics.

Int. No. 0985

We strongly support the proposal to pre-populate data on Senior Citizen Rent Increase Exemption (SCRIE) applications for older adult residents of Mitchell-Lama housing. Across the city, the rent freeze programs (SCRIE and DRIE) are heavily underutilized with the Department of Finance reporting

¹ DFTA 2023 Annual Report. Accessed at: <https://www.nyc.gov/assets/dfta/downloads/pdf/news-reports/2023-Annual-Plan-Summar-9-20-2023v3.pdf> 11.20.23

²AARP 2021 Home and Community Preferences Survey. Accessed at: [2021 AARP Home and Community Preferences Survey](#) 11.20.23



that only 55% of eligible households are enrolled in the program.³ In aging services, we know that complicated applications for benefits can be a barrier to enrollment in aid programs. Knowing about existing programs, understanding eligibility, getting proper paperwork in order, and completing an application correctly can be quite difficult for older adults navigating the benefits landscape. This contributes to another problem: many older adults do not apply for SCRIE until they are at the brink of affordability. For the program to be truly successful, an older adult should apply before their rent becomes unaffordable so that they can remain in their homes without undue rent burden.

We know through New York City and State's implementation of the Elderly Simplified Application Project for the SNAP program that streamlining applications works to increase older adult participation in benefit programs. By pre-filling Mitchell-Lama residents' applications for SCRIE with information they have already provided to City agencies, we expect that residents will better utilize this benefit. Simplifying the process would also be of huge benefit to thousands of older adults across the City who do not live in Mitchell Lama housing. Therefore, we recommend expanding this bill to include residents of all housing units where the required level of information about their income and household is available.

Finally, we strongly support Res. No. 0757 calling for the Federal Communication Commission Management Agency to add alerts for missing persons with dementia to the Wireless Emergency Alerts system, which would help keep this vulnerable population safe.

³ NYC Department of Finance, 2022 SCRIE-DRIE Report. Accessed at: [2022-scrie_drie_report.pdf \(nyc.gov\)](#) 11.20.23



We thank the City Council for your time and continued partnership in ensuring that older New Yorkers have the tools to age in place.



Making New York a better place to age

**New York City Council
Committee on Aging
Chair, Council Member Hudson
November 28th 2023**

Thank you Chair Hudson and members of the Committee on Aging for hosting this important hearing and for the legislation that is being heard today.

My name is [Kim Lerner](#) and I am the director of LiveOn NY's Benefits Outreach Program, which provides assistance to older adults throughout the city in applying for the benefits they are qualified for from the city, the state, and the federal government.

LiveOn NY's members include more than 110 community-based nonprofits that provide core services which allow all New Yorkers to thrive in our communities as we age, such as older adult centers, home-delivered meals, affordable senior housing, NORCs, and home care. LiveOn NY is also home to the Reframing Aging NYC Initiative, part of the national Reframing Aging Initiative aimed to counteract ageism and improve the way policymakers, stakeholders, and the public think about aging and older people. With our members, we work to make New York a better place to age.

Background

SCRIE is one of the most effective programs in keeping older adults in their homes and their communities, but it is a benefit that only an estimated 55% of eligible New Yorkers are utilizing. Within that 55% many New Yorkers only apply for SCRIE when they are faced with eviction or their rent burden has become too high and impacts their medical or nutritional needs, often many years after they become eligible.

Early enrollment in SCRIE is key to ensuring older New Yorkers stay in their homes in the long term. SCRIE benefits are calculated by the date applicants apply, not based on when they became eligible. This means that if an applicant is applying because of dire financial straits, SCRIE will not change their financial circumstances, it will only freeze them in that state. They must apply as close to their eligibility as possible to ensure long term housing stability.

Many New Yorkers do not apply for SCRIE benefits because they do not know about them or they do not know they are eligible. Existing outreach programs are not meeting all eligible tenants and should be bolstered to prevent a further increase in the population 60+ unhoused New Yorkers.



Making New York a better place to age

Many New Yorkers refuse to apply for SCRIE because they are resistant to receiving benefits that they are eligible for. Materials related to SCRIE and the SCRIE application should be examined and reworked to overcome hesitancy from individuals who refuse aid.

Based on these factors, we would offer the following recommendations:

Recommendations

Pass into 985 and expand these efforts to all eligible New Yorkers that we have the ability to reach. This bill would increase awareness and remove barriers in Mitchell-Lama housing in one action, and should be explored in all dwellings where we have this level of resident information.

Create a universal benefits screening tool that informs applicants of all benefits they qualify for when applying for any individual benefit. Benefits applications should be streamlined so applicants only provide information once and become eligible for all applicable benefits.

Work with the state to pass S569/A2974 a SCRIE rollback that would make the benefit retroactive to the date the applicant became eligible for the benefit and cap it at 30% of their income. The city should pass a resolution in support of this policy and work with HPD and DOF to understand what would need to be done to implement it as efficiently as possible upon passage of the bills.

Require that Landlords provide information about SCRIE and DRIE when offering a lease renewal. Requiring landlords of rent regulated buildings to notify eligible tenants of SCRIE applications and eligibility would be a powerful way to ensure existing tenants are aware of their rights and qualifications for benefits.

Furthermore, LiveOn NY strongly supports the passage of all bills heard in today's hearing, and is grateful for the leadership of Chair Hudson on aging issues in our city. We are grateful for the work of Council Members Dinowitz and Schulman for their work to improve the lives of older New Yorkers, and for everyone who serves on the Aging Committee.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify.

Testimony provided by [Kim Lerner](#), Director of Benefits and Outreach at LiveOn NY. For additional questions please reach out to Klerner@liveon-ny.org

LiveOn NY's members provide the core, community-based services that allow older adults to thrive in their communities. With a base of more than 100 community-based organizations serving at least 300,000 older New Yorkers annually. Our members provide services ranging from senior centers, congregate and home-delivered meals, affordable senior housing with services, elder abuse prevention services, caregiver supports, case management, transportation, and NORCs. LiveOn NY advocates for increased funding for these vital services to improve both the solvency of the system and the overall capacity of community-based service providers.

LiveOn NY

Making New York a better place to age

LiveOn NY also administers a citywide outreach program and staffs a hotline that educates, screens and helps with benefit enrollment including SNAP, SCRIE and others, and also administers the Rights and Information for Senior Empowerment (RISE) program to bring critical information directly to seniors on important topics to help them age well in their communities.

Health Insurance Coverage of Medical Cannabis

Greetings Councilmembers, my name is Sabine Ovide. I work as a community health nurse, and I am all too familiar with the burden of chronic disease management. According to the New York State Health Department, chronic illnesses are a primary contributor to mortality, disability, and escalating healthcare expenses. More precisely, they are responsible for about 70% of all fatalities in New York State. In March of 2023, The A04713 bill titled, “An act to amend the public health law and the social services law, in relation to health coverage for medical marihuana” was introduced.

The overarching aim is to designate cannabis as a prescribed medication, thereby making it eligible for coverage under health insurance providers' pharmaceutical plans. In addition, the bill aims to allow the commissioner to certify medical cannabis dispensaries as Medicaid providers.

In a 2022 NIH study involving nearly 200 cancer patients, 93 of them received certification to access medical cannabis. Among these patients, 48% reported pain relief, 45% reduced their opioid usage, and 85% experienced an enhancement in at least one symptom. The occurrence of adverse effects remained low at under 4%.

Medical cannabis in addition to providing pain relief, has the potential to mitigate the incidence of opioid-related overdoses and fatalities. At present, the New York State Medical Cannabis Program does not provide any discounts on medical cannabis for low-income New Yorkers.

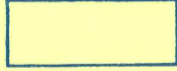
“I have my marijuana card, but it’s so expensive at the dispensary” This is a quote from one of my older patients that suffers from chronic pain and did qualify for a medical cannabis card. The obstacle to accessing medical cannabis lies in the cost of the product imposed by the sole legal dispensary in NYC. This establishes an alarming precedent, as it not only hinders pain relief for the patients but also compels them to seek alternative, dangerous sources.

I am asking you, the council members, to vote, YES for affordable chronic disease management. Vote YES for the A04713 bill titled, “An act to amend the public health law and the social services law, in relation to health coverage for medical marihuana”

Thank you all for your time.

**THE COUNCIL
THE CITY OF NEW YORK**

Appearance Card



I intend to appear and speak on Int. No. 985 Res. No. _____
 in favor in opposition

Date: _____

(PLEASE PRINT)

Name: Mieron Mahoney
Address: Center Street Pearl River, NY 10965
I represent: Dept. of Finance
Address: Centre street

**THE COUNCIL
THE CITY OF NEW YORK**

Appearance Card



I intend to appear and speak on Int. No. 985 Res. No. _____
 in favor in opposition

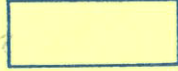
Date: 11/28/23

(PLEASE PRINT)

Name: Robin Leo
Address: 375 Pearl St, 26th Fl
I represent: Dept of Finance
Address: 375 Pearl St 26th Fl

**THE COUNCIL
THE CITY OF NEW YORK**

Appearance Card



I intend to appear and speak on Int. No. 11/28/23 Res. No. _____
 in favor in opposition

Date: 11/28/23

(PLEASE PRINT)

Name: Jocelyn Gordon, Assistant Commissioner
Address: 2 Lafayette
I represent: NYC Aginc
Address: same as above

**THE COUNCIL
THE CITY OF NEW YORK**

Appearance Card

I intend to appear and speak on Int. No. 985 Res. No. _____
 in favor in opposition

Date: 11/28/2023

(PLEASE PRINT)

Name: Pierre Dejean

Address: DOF 59 Maiden Lane, NY NY

I represent: NYC Dept of Finance.

Address: 59 Maiden Lane.

**THE COUNCIL
THE CITY OF NEW YORK**

Appearance Card

I intend to appear and speak on Int. No. 985 Res. No. _____
 in favor in opposition

Date: 11/28/23

(PLEASE PRINT)

Name: Kim Lerner

Address: NY NY 10022

I represent: Live On NY

Address: 49 W. 45th Street, 7th Fl, NY, NY 10036

**THE COUNCIL
THE CITY OF NEW YORK**

Appearance Card

I intend to appear and speak on Int. No. 0985 Res. No. _____
 in favor in opposition

Date: 11/28/2023

(PLEASE PRINT)

Name: Stephanie Taylor

Address: _____

I represent: Volunteers of Legal Service (VOLS)

Address: (same)

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