



Testimony

of

**Ricky Wong**  
**Assistant Commissioner, Government Affairs**  
**New York City Department of Health and Mental Hygiene**

before the

**New York City Council Committee on Consumer and Worker Protection**

on

**Int. 0995-2023**

September 6, 2023  
New York, NY

Good morning, Chair Velázquez and members of the committee. I am Ricky Wong, Assistant Commissioner for the Bureau of Government Affairs at the New York City Department of Health and Mental Hygiene (the Health Department). On behalf of Commissioner Vasana, thank you for the opportunity to testify today on Introduction 995, which would require the Health Department to create a public awareness campaign on the dangers of purchasing cannabis or cannabis products from unlicensed cannabis retailers. I'm grateful for the opportunity to speak about this legislation. First, I wanted to provide some background on the agency's thinking on this issue since New York State legalized consumption and possession of up to three ounces of cannabis for adults ages 21 and over in 2021.

The Health Department is tasked with protecting the health and safety of all New Yorkers, which includes the provision of evidence-based information and resources regarding recreational drug use. The Health Department implemented a multi-pronged strategy to educate providers and the public—including minors and young adults—on the health considerations of cannabis use and legalization. We established an agency workgroup in order to organize cannabis work and published four public education fact sheets and a general information postcard covering the following topics: Safer use, Health Effects, Legal Use, and Know Your Rights. These materials are available in multiple languages online and in print and have been distributed to community organizations and at community events. We are currently in the early stages of developing a public education pamphlet specifically targeted towards youth.

Communicating potential health impacts of substance use is an important part of our mission. Like any substance, cannabis can have associated health risks and benefits. Health risks linked to cannabis include higher risk of motor vehicle crashes, earlier onset of psychotic disorders for those already at risk; more frequent breathing and coughing symptoms, especially when smoking or vaping cannabis; vaping-related lung injuries; and cannabis use during pregnancy can have harmful effects on a baby's development.

Restrictive drug policies have limited research on how cannabis affects health, but existing research shows that cannabis can be helpful for some conditions, including chronic pain in adults; chemotherapy-induced nausea and specific Multiple Sclerosis symptoms. The Health Department is still learning more about the long-term effects of cannabis and will continue to educate the public as we learn.

Now I want to speak about unlicensed cannabis retailers, and synthetic cannabinoids.

Sale of adult recreational cannabis is currently legal only through the New York State Office of Cannabis Management licensed Conditional Adult Use Retail Dispensaries. The Health Department is aware of the increasing presence of unlicensed cannabis retailers as the State continues to implement retail licensing. Products sold in unlicensed retailers have not undergone state-regulated quality and safety controls.

The Health Department is aware of the risks of using unregulated products and we agree with the Council that more education is needed. The Health Department uses population-level data and surveys to identify health trends across the city. To date, we have not seen an increase in adverse health outcomes associated with using products purchased at unlicensed cannabis retailer nor an increase in emergency department visits associated with cannabis use. Even though we are not seeing negative effects in our data, we still want New Yorkers who chose to consume cannabis to be sure that it is safe for use, and not a synthetic cannabinoid product. I want to take some time to explain what a synthetic cannabinoid product is.

Synthetic cannabinoids are not cannabis and have different use patterns and health effects than cannabis. They consist of leaves sprayed with chemicals that are either smoked or ingested. Synthetic cannabinoids contain a dangerous mix of chemicals sprayed on to plant material, making its effects unpredictable. Health effects can include erratic behavior, severe anxiety, paranoia, confusion, hallucinations, nausea, vomiting, rapid heart rate, and seizures. In New York State, it is illegal to possess, sell, offer to sell, or manufacture synthetic cannabinoids. Currently, our data shows that emergency department-related visits involving synthetic cannabinoids make up a very small proportion of drug-related emergency department visits overall and decreased slightly between 2021 and 2022.

We encourage members of the public who wish to purchase cannabis to purchase it from OCM licensed facilities to ensure it has gone through the proper regulatory process and is deemed safe for use.

I will now turn to the proposed Introduction 995. The Health Department supports the intent of this legislation to raise awareness, particularly among youth, of the health risks associated with cannabis, including cannabis purchased at unlicensed retailers, and synthetic cannabinoids. We look forward to working with Council to meet the need for youth-focused communications about cannabis-related health risks while ensuring that these efforts complement existing education efforts already underway by the Health Department and OCM.

The Health Department remains committed to providing evidence-based, accessible information regarding cannabis and synthetic cannabinoid use; and we are happy to discuss with Council how we can best support the intention of this legislation.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify here today. I would be happy to answer any questions.

**OFFICE OF TECHNOLOGY AND INNOVATION TESTIMONY BEFORE THE NEW  
YORK CITY COUNCIL COMMITTEE ON CONSUMER AND WORKER  
PROTECTION**

**Int 1010-2023: A Local Law to amend the administrative code of the city of New York, in  
relation to adding a 311 complaint category for unlicensed cannabis retailers.**

**September 6, 2023**

Good morning, Chair Velazquez and members of the City Council Committee on Consumer and Worker Protection. My name is Joe Morrisroe and I am Deputy Commissioner of New York City 311, under the Office of Technology and Innovation (OTI). I am here to discuss Introduction 1010-2023, proposed legislation aimed at creating a 311 service request for unlicensed cannabis dealers.

As you all know, 311 delivers fast and easy access to government services and information to all New Yorkers. 311 is available 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, 365 days a year through multiple channels, including the call center, online portal, text, mobile application, and social media. Originally launched as a call center, New York City 311 has evolved into the most comprehensive municipal government customer service platforms in the nation. 311 received 35 million customer contacts in 2022, and on an annual basis New York City 311 receives more calls than all other U.S. City 311 call centers combined.

I am also pleased to share with the Council a recent report by an independent third party on the public's satisfaction with 311. 311 call center representatives received a customer satisfaction rating of 94, positioning 311 in the top 10% among private sector companies. This level of public satisfaction with 311 is a testament to the dedication and commitment of the 311 team to serve their fellow New Yorkers every day.

As 311's Deputy Commissioner, I oversee all aspects of 311, from the operation of the most familiar component – the call center – to the creation and implementation of multiple customer-facing channels, performance results and quality control measures, interaction with City agencies, and data collection. 311 reports directly to OTI, which provides support for the 311 organization and works collaboratively with 311 on the continual evolution and enhancements to service delivery and customer experience.

It is important to note that 311 serves as the *platform* to provide information and services to the public. With few exceptions, public interactions with 311 result in one of the following outcomes:

- Information Request (when is my trash pick-up day?)
- Referral to an external entity (NY State, FCC)
- Service Request (submitting a ticket)

We rely on our collaborative relationships with each City agency to build out the service request forms and information pages (also known as “knowledge articles”) that properly reflect each agency or office’s mission and services.

With respect to service requests specifically, 311 does not create them in a vacuum – there must be an agency that will accept the request, investigate, and if applicable, enforce. When an agency decides that adding a new service request is necessary, they contact 311 and OTI to create, test and deploy a complaint form.

Introduction 1010-2023, sponsored by Council Member Brewer, seeks to create a 311 service request for “unlicensed cannabis retailer.” While we acknowledge and appreciate the Council’s efforts to combat the issue of unlicensed cannabis shops that have proliferated across the City, the City does not oversee the licensing of cannabis retailers. The State Office of Cannabis Management (OCM) oversees such licenses. 311 does provide information on how to submit a complaint to the OCM Enforcement Unit about cannabis sales and products in a knowledge article on the 311 website, and if someone called 311 to report an issue, the customer is referred to the OCM Enforcement Unit.

As noted, it is an agency that comes to 311 to create a new service request, not the converse. Absent a designated City agency to respond and resolve a service request, it is not best practice to create tickets for issues that are beyond the purview of the City.

I thank you for this opportunity, and will now take Council Members’ questions.

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Committee on Consumer and Worker Protection  
Wednesday, September 6, 2023



Good morning, Chairperson Velázquez and members of the Committee on Consumer and Worker Protection. My name is Tom Harris, and I am the President of the Times Square Alliance, the business improvement district that exists to make Times Square clean, safe, and desirable for all.

Before I begin, I want to state for the record that the Alliance is not opposed to the legalization of cannabis, and we have had conversations both with OCM and with an entrepreneur looking to open legal dispensaries in Times Square. However, the state's delays and disorganization with regards to the legal sale and distribution of cannabis resulted in the unchecked growth in illegal cannabis shops in our district, and throughout the city. This has been greatly detrimental to our neighborhood, and to the very people legalization seeks to benefit. Unless we address the illegal operators, the legal operators will not survive, the state will forfeit much needed tax revenue, and our neighborhoods will continue to be overrun with illegal activity.



This year, 30% of retail openings in Times Square have been illegal cannabis stores. In five months, our district went from two illegal cannabis stores to 12. The stores, which are largely cash businesses, make Times Square less safe. One has been robbed; there have been two homicides within 100 feet of another; a person was shot in front of a third.

In addition to the violence, crime, and disorder surrounding these stores, many regularly market and sell their unregulated products to underage children. The products sold are untested and unregulated. Lab tests on some of the products purchased contained Fentanyl, salmonella, and rat poison. Finding effective solutions is critical to maintaining public health and safety.

I want to thank the City Council for advancing this legislation. Anything that will help address the proliferation of illegal cannabis stores in our city is appreciated. While the bills being introduced today are helpful, much more is needed. We feel strongly that the city should lobby Albany to grant the Office of Cannabis Management the power to shut businesses found selling cannabis without a license, as the State Liquor Authority does. You can't open a liquor store and sell without a license – you should not be able to open a cannabis store either. In the absence of action by our state government, we ask that the Council consider the following:

Bill 1001-2023 passed last month was a first step. **It holds landlords accountable.** However, we must go further. Reports show a 2021 bill in California charging landlords \$30,000 per day for illegal cannabis businesses has failed to slow the proliferation after two years. We need to make sure landlords do not think the benefits of these leases outweigh the costs.

We also need to **hold the illegal operators accountable.** The Nuisance Abatement Law was used successfully in the 1990s to eliminate criminal activity in establishments. In 2017, the City Council changed the Nuisance Abatement Law such that it is now harder to issue a closure order when illegal activity is observed taking place within premises. I am urging the Council to revisit their action in 2017 to allow judges to immediately issue a closure order when two incidents of illegal sales to minors occur at the same location. This narrowly tailored approach will help make our children and communities safer.

The bills being introduced today are a first step in educating the public on the dangers of illegal cannabis purchases and empowering the public to report if they witness illegal activity. **But we need more resources dedicated to solving this problem.** The Sheriff has been doing an excellent job but he needs

more support. The Sheriff is reporting 207 inspections year to date. Based on those numbers, it will take over three years to inspect the 1600 illegal weed locations now operating in our city.

To make our city safer, lawmakers and the administration must make the reforms necessary to deal with this crisis.

Thank you for your time and consideration.



Tom Harris  
President  
Times Square Alliance

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<sup>i</sup> Wright, Wendy. "N.Y. law enforcement officials issue warning for illegally-purchased marijuana laced with fentanyl," *Spectrum News New York*, May 24, 2023, <https://spectrumlocalnews.com/nys/central-ny/news/2023/05/24/n-y-law-enforcement-officials-issue-warning-for-illegally-purchased-marijuana-laced-with-fentanyl>.

Southall, Ashley. "What's in New York's Illicit Cannabis: Germs, Toxins and Metals," *NY Times*, Dec. 1, 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/12/01/nyregion/cannabis-bacteria-pesticides-illegal-dispensary.html>.

State Health Officials. "Warning issued for synthetic marijuana laced with rat poison," *Spectrum News New York*, April 10, 2018, <https://ny1.com/nyc/all-boroughs/news/2018/04/10/warning-issued-for-synthetic-marijuana-laced-with-rat-poison>.

My name is Floyd Jarvis. I am the founder of Ganja War Veterans for Equity and the Director of the Borough of Manhattan Community College Cannabis Workforce & Business Development Training Program, a no cost grant funded program focused on creating the cannabis workforce in New York City, with a focus on persons and communities that were directly impacted during the war on drugs.

This will be my second time testifying before this council, I testified earlier this year on the rise of illicit smoke shops. I will make this as plain as possible, when true legacy market operators had control of the New York City cannabis market, 11-year-old children were not able to purchase weed across the street from their school.

In Ansley Hamid's *The Ganja Complex: Rastafari and Marijuana*, he details how after the passage of the Hart -Cellar Immigration Act of 1965, Afro- Caribbean youth (particularly Rastafarian) came to the United States and principally New York City and helped to fortify the cannabis market. They did this while being marginalized, while being targeted, while being harassed and accosted by NYPD precincts like the 77<sup>th</sup> precinct in Crown Heights who would notoriously cut the sacramental dreadlocks of a Rastaman when he was caught with weed and hang it up in the precinct, of the even more appalling 75<sup>th</sup> precinct in East Flatbush foolishly and disrespectfully nicknamed "Fort JAH" who would give out medallions and painted on the medallions would be with Rottweilers biting at the feet of a locked and bearded Black men; these medallions were given to officers when they arrested a RAS; in spite of all of this these young men were able to become successful paterfamilias through the sale of illicit ganja. They opened up Ital stores, schools and reinvested their so-called ill-gotten gains right back into their communities.

The late 1990's was followed by the early 2000's and the now disgraced Giuliani administration that brought about TNT Tuesday's and Thursdays tactical narcotics unit. Many herb gates were targeted, raided and eradicated. In place of these beloved herb gates-pillars in their communities popped up corner stores and corner store owners that had no real investment in the communities they served. In 2014 these stores were found selling K2 to our communities. We are here again in 2023 after a hard-fought battle for the passage of the MRTA which I was a part of as a member of the Start Smart Coalition. We fought for fair and equitable cannabis and pathways for legacy market operators like the aforementioned Rastafarian paterfamilias. Not for new corner store owners to circumnavigate loopholes in the most progressive cannabis law in the nation, and hide behind the guise of the Yemeni Merchants Association to funnel sprayed weed and carcinogens to our progeny.

Many people are afraid to call out this group and its commandeering of the illicit cannabis market but I am not, not when you're sending children to the hospital weekly.

My name is Ashley Jeffries and I am the Housing Specialist for HELP USA – Homebase SA 2, a non-profit which provides homeless prevention services and housing financial emergency assistance to New Yorkers in the West and North Bronx of New York City.

Thank you, Deputy Speaker Ayala and Chair Hanif and members of the Council, for allowing me to submit written testimony.

Thank you for holding this hearing today and for your leadership uplifting and protecting services for unhoused New Yorkers. The impact of your heroic efforts to strengthen the homeless services safety net will be diluted by the Mayor's 2.5% "Provider Flexible Funding" Budget Cut to all DHS and HRA contracted non-profit programs, including shelters, street outreach, safe havens, drop-in centers, and Homebase eviction prevention programs. Please join us in the fight to protect our programs, and hold strong against the Mayor's proposed budget cut to homeless services! We need the Mayor to understand that the City budget shouldn't be balanced on the backs of poorest New Yorkers!

The Mayor's 2.5% DSS Budget Cut will hurt services, as DHS is already telling non-profit providers to plan to eliminate vacancies and non-core services such as on-site mental health services and clinical services, and collapse several job roles into one position to be able to meet this cost-savings for the City.

My office covers a vast zip code list of neighborhoods which continue to need assistance post-pandemic in regard to rental arrears payments, street homeless prevention or families that might have to resort to entering a homeless shelter. There is limited occupancy in said shelters, and as we know, scattered sites have been eliminated for the most part. Processing housing applications for the rental assistance programs FHEPS and CityFHEPS is the bulk and of what my team and I do and the volume of applications in the last quarter has been dramatically high. We need the proper number of staff and appropriate salaries to maintain and hire. A salary cut for the current staff, absorbing work amongst staff and implementing a hiring freeze could impact the NYC social services homeless prevention industry tremendously and it could lead to a major exodus of staff in ways never seen before.

We applaud the Council's unwavering commitment to protecting all New Yorkers experiencing the trauma of homelessness and are extremely grateful for the landmark legislation you passed which will revolutionize access to rental assistance. Please stand strong against the Mayor's 2.5% cut. We stand ready and want to join you on the work ahead rehousing our neighbors.

Thank you.

My Name is **Jessica Cabral** and I am the **Outreach Housing Specialist** for **HELPUSA**, a non-profit which provides **rental assistance** to New Yorkers in the **Bronx** of New York City. Thank you, Deputy Speaker Ayala and Chair Hanif and members of the Council, for allowing me to submit written testimony.

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The Mayor's 2.5% DSS Budget Cut *will hurt services*, as DHS is already telling non-profit providers to plan to eliminate vacancies and non-core services such as on-site mental health services and clinical services, and collapse several job roles into one position to be able to meet this cost-savings for the City.

I work at an office site located at 815 Burke Avenue in the Bronx. This site currently has openings for Housing Specialists and Case Managers. If my organization must eliminate those positions, our caseloads will double. We are passionate and committed to helping our clients but no one can handle that many cases.

In this office we service clients within the community who are facing eviction. We also provide a number of services including, but not limited to, Paid Medical Training, CDL Driver's License, OSHA Training. All these trainings are paid for by the agency to assist families better progress their lives. We service families who face difficulties in obtaining employment due to lack of training and being unable to pay for trainings/licensing.

We applaud the Council's unwavering commitment to protecting all New Yorkers experiencing the trauma of homelessness and are extremely grateful for the landmark legislation you passed which will revolutionize access to rental assistance. Please stand strong against the Mayor's 2.5% cut. We stand ready and want to join you on the work ahead rehousing our neighbors.

I am Kabir Gill, a rising senior at the Bronx High School of Science. Three years ago, my parents bought me a dog named Cloud. Cloud brought us a lot of joy and responsibilities that I willingly signed up for, including long evening walks where he would chase everything from the city rats to dogs three times his size and sniff around every corner of the block and claim it as his own.

These evening walks became a highlight of my day- something I looked forward to after a long day at school. However, one night last fall was different. I came home from school and saw that neither my dog nor my mom was home. This was strange- my mom should have been home making dinner, and it wasn't time for Cloud's walk. I looked around for a bit and then called my mom, who told me what happened. My dog was in emergency care, and the vet diagnosed him with cannabis poisoning, which he probably consumed during his walk earlier in the day. I rushed to the ER. When I finally saw my dog, he was extremely lethargic, and his veins were pumped full of fluid the vet had administered. The vet told us our dog could have died, and we were lucky to be within walking distance of a veterinary ER. Others are often not that lucky. The vet also told us that cannabis poisoning in pets has become a leading cause of ER visits in the city since 2019. This happens when dogs consume improperly disposed and often unlicensed cannabis products from the street. My research revealed that, unlike other toxic products, dogs are attracted to the smell of cannabis, and if there is something disposed of unsafely- they will seek it through that sense. This pattern of pets consuming cannabis from the city streets and becoming sick has become increasingly common and has been featured on local news channels such as CNBC. Vets and experts alike suspect that the disposal of unregistered cannabis products is at the heart of this problem.

Before I was affected by this issue, I had no idea how widespread it was. However, after I looked into it further and shared my experience, I found that many friends had been in a similar situation. I became very anxious when walking my dog, worried he'd eat some cannabis product off the roadside. I asked myself, "Why didn't I know about this before?" and "Are people going to continue to watch their pets go through this awful situation?". I had no idea this was a problem, so I'm willing to bet so many citizens and lawmakers aren't aware of it.

I offer and propose three potential solutions for our policy makers to consider. 1. Since people are uninformed about the dangers of cannabis to pets, informational posters can be put up at disposal areas. 2. Safe and strategically placed "disposal trash" should be placed around the city as an option for the safe disposal of cannabis products. 3. Additional restrictions should be placed on the use of unlicensed cannabis products.

Licensed cannabis use helps certain humans when used and disposed of appropriately. However, an animal suffering from the irresponsibility of us humans is wrong and, in this case, easily avoidable. I thank Councilwoman Julie Menin for supporting my cause and humbly ask that policy makers do more to address this problem. I thank you all for your time and attention.

I have experienced the issues the unlicensed distribution of cannabis has caused our city. Undoubtedly, these products pose dangers to the consumer, but their disposal brings about even more. One night, I was coming home late from school and saw that neither my dog nor my mom was home. I found the absence of my family members strange since it was not time for my dog to walk, and my mom should have been home. I looked around for a bit and then called my mom, who told me what happened. My dog was in emergency care, and the vet suspected that he had eaten some cannabis product from the roadside. When I finally saw my dog, he was extremely lethargic, and his arteries were pumped full of fluid the vet had administered. The vet told us our dog could have died and we were lucky to live so close to a veterinary center. Others are often not that lucky. The vet also told us that the issue of dogs eating cannabis from the roadside and becoming sick has become increasingly common, and she suspects that the disposal of unregistered cannabis products is at the heart of the problem. Before I was affected by this issue, I had no idea it existed. However, after I looked into it further, I found that multiple friends had been in the same situation. I did not know this was an issue animals were prone to, and I am willing to believe that many people using these cannabis products are also unaware. Due to the lack of disposal options for cannabis products, individuals likely see no better option than getting rid of them in places where pets walk around. However, this can become an immense hazard to pets and potentially small children. An animal suffering from the irresponsibility of us humans is wrong and, in this case, easily avoidable. It is important not to purchase these products in the first place, but even getting rid of them creates a problem in the city's environment.

Kabir Gill

**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: 9/6/23

(PLEASE PRINT)

Name: Esther Relieure

Address: 115-29-201st Street Saint Albans

I represent: The Relieure Foundation

Address: Same

**THE COUNCIL  
THE CITY OF NEW YORK**

Illicit  
Smoke  
Shops

Appearance Card

I intend to appear and speak on Int. No. \_\_\_\_\_ Res. No. \_\_\_\_\_

in favor  in opposition

Date: 9/6/23

(PLEASE PRINT)

Name: Floyd Jarvis

Address: Brown St 9 Street

I represent: Grand War Veterans for Equity

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: 9/6/2023

(PLEASE PRINT)

Name: Rowl River

Address: \_\_\_\_\_

I represent: \_\_\_\_\_

Address: \_\_\_\_\_

**THE COUNCIL  
THE CITY OF NEW YORK**

Appearance Card

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I intend to appear and speak on Int. No. 0995/23 Res. No. \_\_\_\_\_

in favor  in opposition

Date: 9/7/23

(PLEASE PRINT)

Name: Tom Harris

Address: 1560 Broadway Suite 1001

I represent: Time Square Alliance

Address: 1560 Broadway Suite 1001

**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: 9/6/23

(PLEASE PRINT)

Name: Christopher Leon Johnson

Address: Buff 910 Ave

I represent: SELF

Address: \_\_\_\_\_

**THE COUNCIL  
THE CITY OF NEW YORK**

Appearance Card

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I intend to appear and speak on Int. No. 995 Res. No. \_\_\_\_\_

in favor  in opposition

Date: Sept 6

(PLEASE PRINT)

Name: Meredith Berkman

Address: West 73

I represent: Parents Ajad Vapiy Eszok

Address: 105 W. 86 Street

**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: Deputy Commissioner Joe Morrisroe

Address: for OTI

I represent: \_\_\_\_\_

Address: \_\_\_\_\_

*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: Assistant Commissioner Ricky Wong

Address: for DCHMH

I represent: \_\_\_\_\_

Address: \_\_\_\_\_

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