

COMMITTEE ON GENERAL WELFARE

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CITY COUNCIL
CITY OF NEW YORK

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TRANSCRIPT OF THE MINUTES

OF THE

COMMITTEE ON GENERAL WELFARE

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Wednesday, June 18, 2025

Start: 1:17 p.m.

Recess: 5:01 p.m.

HELD AT: Committee Room - City Hall

B E F O R E: Hon. Deputy Speaker, Diana I.
Ayala, Chair

COUNCIL MEMBERS:

Alexa Avilés

Chris Banks

Tiffany Cabán

Chi A. Ossé

Lincoln Restler

Kevin C. Riley

Althea V. Stevens

Sandra Ung

COMMITTEE ON GENERAL WELFARE
A P P E A R A N C E S

Scott French,
Administrator of the Human Resources
Administration (HRA) within the Department of
Social Services (DSS)

Noam Cohen,
VOCAL-NY

Diana Ramos,
Safety Net Activists

Calvin Michael,
Safety Net Activists

Karla Aguilar,
Advocating for Self

Laura Russell,
Citywide Director of the Family Domestic Violence
Unit at The Legal Aid Society

Rachel Braunstein,
The Director of Policy at Her Justice

Deborah Berkman,
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Assistance Group ("NYLAG")

Raji Edayathumangalam, MSc, PhD, LCSW,
Senior Policy Social Worker
New York County Defender Services

Alison Wilkey, Esq.,
Director of Government Affairs and Strategic
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Jonathan Chung,
National Alliance on Mental Illness of NYC (NAMI)

COMMITTEE ON GENERAL WELFARE
A P P E A R A N C E S (CONTINUED)

Luisa Lopez,
Executive Director of the Latino Social Work
Coalition and Co-Chair of the Licensing Committee
of Social Justice

Shyvonne Noboa,
Associate Executive Director for Older Adult
Services at Sunnyside Community
Services (SCS)

Ellen Mischinski,
Social Workers for Justice

Maria Lizardo,
Executive Director at NMIC; Social Workers for
Justice

Gabriela Amara Lis,
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Jacqueline Mondros,
Interim Director of Social Workers for Justice

Tara Escudero Alameda,
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Maria Miranda,
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Dr. Grace Downs-Liguori
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Alyson Rosenthal,
Chief Program Officer and Registered Dietitian at
the West Side Campaign Against Hunger (WSCAH)

COMMITTEE ON GENERAL WELFARE
A P P E A R A N C E S (CONTINUED)

Khivah Fequierz,
Advocating for - Self

Alison O'Connor Jordan, LCSW-SIFI, CCHP,
Retired from HRA and The New York City Health
Department; Supporting Resolution 362-A and the
Social Work Workforce Act

Xai Yang,
Social Worker; Social Workers for Justice

Christopher Leon Johnson,
Member of the Public

Dr. Shakira A. Kennedy,
Licensed Social Worker (LMSW) and Executive
Director of the National Association of Social
Workers-New York

Jocelin Narciso,
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Nancy Gallina, LCSW, PhD,
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Matthew DeCarlo, PhD, MSW,
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Victoria Rizzo, Ph.D., LCSW-R
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Luis Pena Chalas,
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COMMITTEE ON GENERAL WELFARE
A P P E A R A N C E S (CONTINUED)

Kersey Neau, MSW
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Alexey Dmitriyev,
Social Workers for Justice

SERGEANT PAYTUVI: This is a microphone check for the Committee on General Welfare—recorded on June 18, 2025, in the Committee Room, by Nazly Paytuvi.

SERGEANT AT ARMS: Good afternoon, good afternoon, welcome to the New York City Council Hearing for the Committee on General Welfare. At this time, please silence all electronic devices and do not approach the dais. I repeat, please, do not approach the dais.

If you are testifying today or if you have any questions or concerns, please see the Sergeant at Arms at the back of the room. Thank you for your cooperation.

Chair Ayala, we are ready to begin.

CHAIRPERSON AYALA: Thank you. [GAVEL]

Thank you. Good afternoon, everyone, and welcome to today's hearing. My name is Diana Ayala, and I am the Deputy Speaker of the New York City Council and Chair of the General Welfare Committee. Today, we are holding a hearing on a number of pieces of legislation introduced by my colleagues.

We will hear the following bills:

Introduction number 791, sponsored by Council Member Lincoln Restler, requires the Department of Social Services to post on its website data concerning vacant supportive housing units.

Introduction number 1175, sponsored by Council Member Julie Menin, requires the Office of Civil Justice to establish a permanent program to provide domestic violence survivors with full legal representation throughout divorce proceedings.

Introduction, a sponsored by Council Member Jennifer Gutierrez, would require DSS to produce a one-time report on air conditioning in homeless shelters.

Introduction Number 1232, sponsored by Council Member Chris Banks, requires DSS to provide notifications for emergency rental assistance program grant approvals.

We will also hear two resolutions:

Proposed Resolution Number 362-A of 2024, sponsored by Council Member Erik Bottcher, calls on the New York State Legislature to pass, and the Governor to sign, the Social Worker Workforce Act.

Resolution Number 839, sponsored by Council Member Avilés, New York State Legislature to

pass, and the Governor to sign, A.03578/S.00403 to establish a SNAP and cash assistance fraud victims compensation fund.

I look forward to hearing from the Administration and advocates today and gathering feedback on this legislation.

At this time, I'd like to acknowledge my colleagues who are here today: Council Members Avilés, Restler, and Ung.

I would also like to thank my committee staff, who worked hard to prepare this hearing: Penina Rosenberg, Senior Legislative Policy Analyst; Julia K. Haramis, Finance Unit Head; Elisabeth Childers-Garcia, Financial Analyst; and Phariha Rahman, Financial Analyst. And finally, I would also like to thank my Deputy Chief of Staff, Stephanie Herrera.

I would now like to turn it over to my colleagues to provide remarks about their legislation, and we will start with Council Member Restler.

COUNCIL MEMBER RESTLER: Thank you, as always, Chair Ayala. I am grateful for your...

CHAIRPERSON AYALA: (INAUDIBLE) microphone
on.

COUNCIL MEMBER RESTLER: I thought it was,
but I will speak a little louder. You know me, I'm
always quiet. (LAUGHS)

I would like to start by thanking Chair
Ayala for her strong leadership of this committee and
the moral clarity she brings to this work in
centering on the most vulnerable New Yorkers. We are
very fortunate to have you at the helm.

In District 33, I have been really proud
to help shepherd in large new-scale supportive
housing developments. We opened the largest
supportive sing development in all of Brooklyn at 90
Sam Street. We significantly expanded and renovated
the longtime supportive housing development at 50
Nevin Street, around the corner from my office. We
are in the process of designating what has been DEP
land for a big new supportive housing development. We
prioritize the building and construction of
supportive housing at every turn because it is an
evidence-based solution to solving chronic
homelessness, helping provide long-term, effective
support to people who have suffered from homelessness

and severe mental illness. Yet, we've seen alarming trends from the Adams Administration when it comes to actually occupying all of our supportive housing units.

As of September, some months ago, there were over 4,000 vacant supportive housing units reported, hundreds of which had been sitting empty for a year or more, despite more than 7,000 eligible individuals waiting for those units. We all know how onerous the process is to be screened and approved for supportive housing. We have 7,000 people waiting and thousands of empty apartments. Something is not working.

The City is unfortunately creating fewer and fewer new supportive housing units despite the high demand. Only 786 units were completed in FY24, down 38% from the year before. And in the first four months of this current fiscal year, we are, unfortunately, down again.

The Mayor's Office made a pronouncement a couple of months ago about shifting scatter sites of supportive housing to new congregate, but with no real timetable for when this is going to be completed, after the Mayor had announced a couple of

years ago that he was going to get all of the 15 by 15 that work done two years early in 2028. So it's just, you know, as you per usual, nothing makes sense from the other side of City Hall.

In 2024, only 18% of individuals experiencing street homelessness were approved for supportive housing--who are approved for support housing were actually successful moved into new supportive housing units.

Supportive housing has been shown time and again to work, but it cannot solve the problem if we don't have a real, up-to-date picture of its scope.

Over the last 30+ years, since New York, New York I, and David Dinkins and Mario Cuomo began crafting our supportive housing system. We've had desperate city, state, and federal funding streams that are complicated to track, and it's really unclear to anyone who cares what the actual vacancies in supportive housing are. How can we maximize occupancy, and how can we effectively hold the City agencies involved accountable? And I just don't think that's happening today. So for us to fully activate and occupy our supportive housing

units, to get every, single person who is suffering from chronic homelessness and severe mental illness into the housing with onsite services, that they desperately need and deserve, filling all 40,000+ of the supportive housing units in New York City, we need a clear accounting of the data. We need a real-time dashboard that DSS is responsible for monitoring and sharing, so that all of us who care, stakeholders, including the providers, those seeking housing, the City Council, and others, can hold the City accountable for ensuring that every single unit is filled.

The dashboard model we propose in Intro 791 is modeled after something that has worked really well in San Francisco and would help us diagnose exactly where the issues lie regarding chronic vacancies. According to the report from September, 2,000 of the 4,000 vacant units were just offline. Right? So, 2,000 units of housing or 2,000 shelter beds that we could be moving people into for permanent housing, meaning, taking 2,000 people off the street and moving them into safe havens or other shelters that would more effectively meet their needs, but instead, they're just sitting there

vacant. We are not making progress, and we are not holding ourselves accountable in the ways that we should because the data is opaque.

UNKNOWN: (INAUDIBLE)

COUNCIL MEMBER RESTLER: So I am really grateful to Speaker Ayala, as always, for everything she does and for--Deputy Speaker, oh, you're right, Deputy Speaker Ayala, I didn't mean to promote you—it's been a long day—Deputy Speaker Ayala for providing the opportunity for this hearing today. And I look forward to the conversation with Administrator French as always.

CHAIRPERSON AYALA: Council Member Avilés?

COUNCIL MEMBER AVILÉS: Thank you, Deputy Speaker (LAUGHS) and Chair Ayala.

COUNCIL MEMBER RESTLER: (INAUDIBLE)

COUNCIL MEMBER AVILÉS: (LAUGHS) No, it's all good. I think it just points to her leadership, right? Just points to your leadership.

COUNCIL MEMBER RESTLER: We'll allow it.

COUNCIL MEMBER AVILÉS: Thank you. So thank you for all your work on this committee and for putting Reso 839 on the Agenda today. This resolution is in support of state legislation that would

1 establish a SNAP and Cash Assistance Fraud Victim
2 Compensation Fund, an issue that we have dealt with
3 quite regularly in our office in District 38. It is
4 of critical importance that we pass this legislation
5 here in New York State, so that during these times
6 when families are being hit hard by rising prices on
7 food, rent, childcare, and more, no one goes hungry
8 because they are a victim of crime.

10 New York accounts for nearly 20% of all
11 SNAP reimbursement claims filed nationwide, with
12 approximately 85,000 claims being filed between
13 August 2023 and December 2024. However, we know that
14 the number of New Yorkers who have experienced SNAP
15 fraud is likely higher due to the fear of reporting,
16 meaning tens of thousands of families would go hungry
17 without this compensation fund. And because we know
18 help isn't coming from the federal government, with
19 our current administration, we must set up and ensure
20 that our neighbors have access to the things that
21 they need for something that is so basic. So,
22 obviously, we know that the state legislature just
23 adjourned for the session, and they will not be
24 passing this bill in this session, which is deeply,
25 deeply unfortunate that they could not find the time

to make sure that families who are victims of crime can be made whole by establishing this. This is not a controversial piece of legislation, and in fact, it should be a very easy thing we should be doing. So, obviously, I'm well aware of the timing of this whole thing, but as the arc of justice is long, we'll continue to fight to make sure that our city does right by families in need.

So I urged the Committee Members to sign onto the resolution, if you haven't already, and for all of us to ensure that we urge our state colleagues to pass bills A.03578/S.00403. Thank you, Chair.

CHAIRPERSON AYALA: Council Member Banks?

COUNCIL MEMBER BANKS: Thank you, Madam Chair, uh, Deputy Speaker, and thank you to my colleagues as well.

I'm pleased to speak on my bill today, Intro 1232, which requires Human Resources Administration to provide automated texts and email notifications upon the approval of an application for an emergency assistance grant program related to rental assistance. These notifications would be sent to both the tenant who applied for assistance and the building owner or the management agent designated by

the owner to collect rent payments, provided that their contact information is included on the application. Notifications would include key details, the approved grant amount, an estimated issuance date, and the method of delivery for the payment.

I've been in office for over one year, and since day one, we've had constituents who have made complaints about this particular issue. So my constituent liaisons have seen close to 85 to 90% of the cases we handle involve HR related issues. And what inspired this bill was a case where the constituent was evicted from her apartment, and though her One-Shot Deal had been approved and paid for, the problem was that neither the tenant nor the management company received any updates from HRA. And as we've seen in many of those RAD/PACT developments, aggressive evictions have become a common tactic, often with little to no cooperation with the tenants. Ultimately, my staff followed up on the issue and discovered that the check had been sent by regular mail and had arrived late. The entire timeline from the tenants' application to the eviction and the eventual return to their apartment unfolds over just about three or four weeks. And the

core issue was the lack of timely notification to both the landlord and the tenant. When my office called to inquire, the only information we received was that the application was being processed. This is simply unacceptable in the 21st century. Our constituents deserve better communication, especially when it concerns something as critical as keeping a roof over their heads. This bill is a common-sense step towards transparency, accountability, and basic efficiency, and most importantly, ensuring that no one loses their home due to preventable breakdowns and communication issues.

I would like to thank my colleagues who signed on to this bill: Council Members Narcisse, Louis, Brannan, Ayala, and Cabán. I thank my staff, the Legislative Department, and all those who made this possible in helping this legislation hopefully come to life. I look forward to a dialogue with the Commissioner, well, with the Deputy Commissioner on this particular Intro. Thank you.

CHAIRPERSON AYALA: Thank you, Council Member Banks.

I will now turn it over to our Policy Analyst to swear in the members of the Administration.

PENINA ROSENBERG: Administrator French, could you please raise your right hand?

Do you affirm to tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth, before this committee, and to respond honestly to council member questions?

ADMINISTRATOR FRENCH: I do.

PENINA ROSENBERG: Thank you.

ADMINISTRATOR FRENCH: Good afternoon. My name is Scott French, and I serve as the Administrator of the Human Resources Administration (HRA) within the Department of Social Services (DSS). I would like to thank Deputy Speaker Ayala, the members of the Committee on General Welfare, and the bill sponsors for holding today's hearing.

I will speak to each of the introductions being heard today in turn. Highlighting important considerations and concerns, we believe the sponsors, members of the Committee on General Welfare, the broader Council, and stakeholders should keep in mind in assessing and amending these introductions.

Introduction 1175, sponsored by Council Member Menin, would establish a program to provide domestic violence survivors with legal representation throughout a divorce proceeding. The Office of Civil Justice (OCJ) would be required to submit an annual report on the program to the Mayor and the Speaker of the Council.

Delivering services to survivors of domestic violence is incredibly important. Our City's network of Family Justice Centers, domestic violence shelters, and non-residential community services are critical components in providing lifesaving support.

If anyone listening needs help, they can contact 311 or New York City's Domestic Violence and Sexual Assault Hotline at 1-800-621-4673 (HOPE).

As required by Local Law 5 of 2022, HRA convened a work group with the Mayor's Office to End Domestic and Gender-Based Violence (ENDGBV) and the Administration for Children's Services (ACS), consulting with stakeholders, including legal services providers and domestic violence survivors. The work group provided important analytic grounding as the City began to think through the challenges posed by establishing a program to provide these

1 legal services within the context of a 24-month pilot
2 proposed in Local Law 5. There are significant
3 challenges in determining the scope of service
4 provision required in this area. Readily available
5 data along a number of dimensions, important
6 provisions of this kind of legal assistance are
7 limited, including data on the number of contested
8 matrimonial cases in the New York City Supreme Court
9 where one, or neither, party is represented by
10 counsel, or the number of cases related to domestic
11 violence. That kind of data is important because it
12 would inform contract design, crafting the
13 appropriate contours of the contracts for legal
14 service delivery, such that City dollars would be
15 focused on the individuals and types of cases that
16 are most underserved.

18 Program design would also be informed by
19 understanding, given a limited budget, whether it
20 would be more important to focus on brief legal
21 assistance or full representation, and if both, in
22 what proportion for each.

23 An additional challenge the work group
24 highlighted is the timeline of divorce proceedings.
25 The most contentious divorce proceedings can take

more than two years, impacted by factors like child custody, the complexity of property disputes, and the court's workload. Where providing full representation, the City would have to craft a program sensitive to the fact that it is irresponsible for a provider to drop a client in the middle of a contested divorce.

Conversations with OMB are ongoing with regard to funding Local Law 5 of 2022; Local Law 5 serves as an important bridge to a potential broader legal services program for domestic violence survivors. While conscious of the boundaries of our capability to establish such a program in short order, the data limitations to program design, and the fiscal implications of such a program, DSS remains aware of the impact a matrimonial legal services program could make in the lives of survivors of domestic violence. Alongside our ENDGBV and ACS partners, DSS stands ready to continue the conversation with the Council.

Introduction 791, sponsored by Council Member Restler, would require DSS to post on its website each month data concerning vacant supportive housing units, including the total number and

percentage of all supportive housing units in the city that are vacant, as well as the number of vacant units at different stages in the placement process. DSS would also be required to provide data beginning twelve months prior to the enactment of the law.

Transparency is an important goal, and we are open to partnering with the sponsor and the Council to deliver timely, accurate data on vacant supportive housing units. There are significant aspects of the legislation we would want to discuss in further detail to achieve that goal. For instance, harmonizing this proposed report with existing reporting and methodologies for reporting on supportive housing vacancies would mean DSS would be able to deliver this report in a cost-effective manner. Aligning definitions across existing reports would enable the creation of a proposed report without the need to fundamentally restructure the logics, programming, and databases used to produce it. Note that misalignment would result in a report that is onerous to produce, costly, and undeliverable in a timely fashion. Furthermore, looking at vacancy data in two different reports with different approaches could lead to confusion.

In this area, HRA would want to leverage the ongoing work of HRA's Office of Supportive /Affordable Housing and Services (OSAHS). The OSAHS team is committed to ensuring that supportive housing vacancies are monitored and filled quickly. OSAHS has developed sophisticated reports to review all vacancies in CAPS monthly. The occupancy rate for the OSAHS-referred units is 96.4%, and we feel these tools have been instrumental in the increase in occupancy rate. The reports OSAHS creates are used to constantly monitor the system, identify issues, and implement interventions where needed.

Introduction 1208, sponsored by Council Member Gutiérrez, would require the Department of Homeless Services (DHS), in coordination with DSS, the Department of Housing Preservation and Development (HPD), and the Department of Youth and Community Development (DYCD), to issue a one-time report to the Mayor and the Speaker of the Council on the availability of air conditioning in homeless shelters. The report would detail which shelters have air conditioning, identify shelters with air conditioning only in some areas, versus throughout the facility, specify the types of air conditioning

systems used, highlight shelters that need air conditioning repair, and provide information on shelters that have installed air conditioning in the past 12 months or plan to do so within the next 12 months.

DHS recognizes the critical role that high-quality shelter facilities play in meeting client needs. DHS has expressed its commitment to phasing out operations in sites that no longer meet agency standards and transitioning to sites that better accommodate clients, continuously seeking to raise the bar in shelter quality and client care. As part of this ongoing commitment, DHS has issued an addendum to the current nonprofit social service provider open RFP that all new shelter sites include air conditioning. Currently, the majority of DHS sites have site-wide air conditioning or a cooling room, and this RFP addendum continues to build on our long-standing focus on enhancing shelter quality. DHS recognizes the importance of transparency in this area and welcomes further dialogue with the sponsor and Council regarding Introduction 1208, specifically the granular level of detail required by the report, and privacy challenges associated with the report.

1 Introduction 1208 calls for the production of data on
2 air conditioning at sites at a level of granularity
3 that would pose serious challenges for DHS to
4 produce. Given the size of the system and the
5 diversity of air conditioning setups, DHS does not
6 maintain a centralized tracking system of air
7 conditioning repairs, as such maintenance is managed
8 directly by individual shelter providers. However,
9 DHS is kept informed of any major air conditioning or
10 heating issues that impact shelter operations and
11 clients. Additionally, DHS has concerns regarding
12 client privacy, confidentiality, and security related
13 to the reporting requirements in Introduction 1208.

15 Two key factors underlay DSS's focus on
16 privacy in direct or indirect shelter address
17 disclosure. First, clients deserve to retain their
18 dignity while in shelter. Second, there are serious
19 security considerations DSS must take into
20 consideration on an ongoing basis with respect to
21 shelters serving survivors of domestic violence and
22 the potential for disclosure of their addresses.

23 Introduction 1232, sponsored by Council
24 Member Banks, would require HRA to provide an
25 automated text message or email notification upon the

1 approval of an application for the Emergency
2 Assistance Grant Program pertaining to rental
3 assistance. Such approval notification would be
4 delivered to the tenant applying for assistance and
5 the building owner or managing agent designated by
6 the building owner to collect rental payments from
7 the applicant, to the extent that such information is
8 provided in the application. Notifications would
9 include information on the monetary amount of the
10 award via the emergency assistance grant, an
11 estimated issuance date for the assistance, and the
12 mode of delivery for the corresponding check.

14 Access HRA is a critical tool in
15 informing clients about the status of their case.
16 Clients may opt to go paperless and receive
17 notification via Access HRA; otherwise, they will
18 receive mail or mail and Access HRA notification
19 updates as to the status of their cases. We have
20 various concerns with Introduction 1232, including
21 privacy, the use of text messages and email, and
22 notice requirements. Given the outstanding privacy
23 concerns, HRA does not support the Council moving
24 forward with Introduction 1232 as drafted, but would
25 like to continue conversations with the sponsor.

Thank you to the sponsors and the Committee on General Welfare for considering these introductions. HRA, DSS, and DHS remain ready to continue even more detailed discussions on the concerns and considerations I have outlined here today. I welcome your questions.

CHAIRPERSON AYALA: Thank you. I am going to do something a little bit out of the ordinary. I'm going to allow Members who have submitted bills to be heard today an opportunity to ask questions first, and I will start with Council Member Restler.

COUNCIL MEMBER RESTLER: Thank you so much, Chair Ayala. It's my wife's birthday, and she will appreciate it.

Thank you for your testimony, Administrator French. I appreciate your suggestion to explore ways to align other reporting requirements, and I would welcome that conversation.

We were--I don't use this word lightly, but disturbed by the data that Legal Services of New York FOIL-ed for late last year around supportive passing vacancies. And I just want to try to-- the data that you've referred to in your testimony is radically different, so I just want to see if we can

get to some common understanding of where things are today.

How many vacant, supportive housing units are there in New York City as of today?

ADMINISTRATOR FRENCH: As of June 3, 2025, there... (CROSS-TALK)

COUNCIL MEMBER RESTLER: Good enough.

ADMINISTRATOR FRENCH: There are 5,092 vacant supportive housing units. Of these, 56% are state-contracted units to the Office of Mental Health, 41% are city units, and 3% are federal units.

COUNCIL MEMBER RESTLER: Did you say 67 and 41 or 57--57?

ADMINISTRATOR FRENCH: I said 56 and 41.

COUNCIL MEMBER RESTLER: So 56?

ADMINISTRATOR FRENCH: Mm-hmm, and of the 5,092 units, 44% or 2,226 have been put off-line by the support housing providers and are not available for referral for a variety of reasons, much of it connected to units that need significant repairs. Of that, 1,200 of these offline units are under contract by the state, and 34% of the units, 1,729, are actively in the referral process. And 438 of those are re-rental units currently linked to an

individual, so they would be shown as vacant because someone does not occupy them, but that's...

COUNCIL MEMBER RESTLER: Tell me that number again that it's linked to an individual?

ADMINISTRATOR FRENCH: It's 438 re-rentals that are linked, and then an additional 518 rent-ups, which would be new facilities, are also linked to units.

COUNCIL MEMBER RESTLER: So you're saying that 950 are linked to people...

ADMINISTRATOR FRENCH: Yes.

COUNCIL MEMBER RESTLER: out of the 5,092?

ADMINISTRATOR FRENCH: Yes. Yes, I would say yes. I was saying that out of the 1,729 that are available for referral at the moment...

COUNCIL MEMBER RESTLER: Right.

ADMINISTRATOR FRENCH: And in the process, 22% are online, and the housing provider has not yet requested a referral, and of these, 64% state contracted units. For units that have not received a referral, OSHAS tracks this information monthly. We then provide a list of sites, facilities, and units that have not received a referral to the specific referral and contracting entities, allowing them to

follow up with those providers. I understand what's going on.

COUNCIL MEMBER RESTLER: I know this is not your job today, but you're a smart guy who's been doing this work for a while. Could you just give me your ballpark, best estimate on the number of chronically street homeless New Yorkers?

ADMINISTRATOR FRENCH: I'm going to get back to you on that, because I don't want to guess, and I know there is a number that DSS, DHS... (CROSS-TALK)

COUNCIL MEMBER RESTLER: Do you believe...

ADMINISTRATOR FRENCH: has...

COUNCIL MEMBER RESTLER: we talked about in the 6,000-ish range, 5,000 to 6,000 range? Those are ballparks that are often discussed. Is that fair?

ADMINISTRATOR FRENCH: I'm... I... (CROSS-TALK)

COUNCIL MEMBER RESTLER: You're not going to comment for certain... (CROSS-TALK)

ADMINISTRATOR FRENCH: I'm not going to comment on that...

COUNCIL MEMBER RESTLER: I just mean to say that we have 5,000 vacant supportive housing

units today, 900 of which are linked up to individuals, but well over 4,000 vacant supportive housing units today that could, with the Housing First approach, potentially house the healthy majority of street homeless New Yorkers that are living on our subways and our streets today if we did the work to fix up those units.

ADMINISTRATOR FRENCH: Street homeless individuals are not the only individuals who need and can utilize supportive housing... (CROSS-TALK)

COUNCIL MEMBER RESTLER: (INAUDIBLE)

ADMINISTRATOR FRENCH: So, I would say that the universe of individuals, you know, who can benefit from support housing is broader than that. I would also say that the number of vacant units is not static; what comprises that number is different over time, right? We do focus on units we have seen being vacant for extended periods of time by bringing those trends to the referral entities or the contracting agencies to have them follow up to understand what specifically is going on. I think that within a system like this, there is always going to be some type of vacancy rate at any point in time. That's how a system works and moves, allowing people to move in

and move out. But I will say from a tracking data, right, I think the City has made incredible strides over the last several years through the CAPS system, and how we have been able to (TIMER) utilize that system to run reports, which we would very much like to sit down and show you a little bit more in depth, so you can see what is the information we have to align on the report that also meets what you are looking for in regards to transparency.

COUNCIL MEMBER RESTLER: Okay. And just for my edification, the total support housing universe is 40-odd thousand?

ADMINISTRATOR FRENCH: In CAPS, it is 38,329. There are some supportive housing units within, you know, the CAPS system.

COUNCIL MEMBER RESTLER: So, I would certainly agree with you, there's some vacancy rate that's healthy in a system. We're talking about a 13.39% vacancy rate, roughly. That is not a healthy vacancy rate in a world where chronic homelessness is the top priority. I think of many policymakers around the city, and we know the solution to homelessness is housing, and to have 5,000 empty units sitting there is, I think, embarrassing. I think we have an

1 opportunity. I mean, we have the same problems in
2 NYCHA as the council members at this table know very
3 well—Chair Banks, former Chair Avilés, and Chair
4 Ayala, who has more NYCHA in her district than just
5 about any other in the city. We have the same problem
6 in NYCHA, where we've seen the number of vacant units
7 explode tenfold since Eric Adams came into office.
8 We also have a situation involving 5,000 vacant
9 support housing units. If we just did the work to
10 actually put the resources into fixing up those
11 units, we could make a tremendous difference in
12 reducing our shelter, population, and street
13 homelessness. I recognize that those are not the only
14 people who benefit from supportive housing. Still, it
15 is one of the number one issues that every mayoral
16 candidate talks about, that the Mayor himself talks
17 about, that we all hear from our constituents, is the
18 concern about chronic street homelessness, people
19 living in the subways, people who desperately need
20 help, who we want to identify compassionate,
21 effective solutions. This is the solution, and yet we
22 have 5,000 vacant units of housing. So...

24 ADMINISTRATOR FRENCH: Every vacant unit
25 is not equal, and I think it's important that we

1 understand that and understand that within the
2 system, but also within the units, right? Because
3 there is also individual choice, right? We don't
4 place someone in a unit; they get to decide that they
5 want to live somewhere based upon the location of the
6 building, how it's connected into their life, but
7 also the unit itself. There are some challenges in
8 older units, specifically SRO (Single Room Occupancy)
9 units, which can be particularly challenging due to
10 shared bathrooms, bedrooms, and kitchens. Individuals
11 might want to consider waiting for some of the newer
12 units that become available.
13

14 COUNCIL MEMBER RESTLER: I don't mean to
15 be flippant...

16 ADMINISTRATOR FRENCH: There's also a
17 level two. I just want to finish, please. There are
18 state-funded units at the same level as two clinical
19 care units, which provide a higher level of care but
20 require a significantly larger share of an
21 individual's income. Additionally, these units do not
22 offer the same tenant protections as those provided
23 in support of housing. So, within the 5,000. I think
24 there is some subset of those that are very
25 challenging to fill. I don't disagree with you that

at every point we should be looking to see how we can improve to fill vacancies, and that's what we do. But I just also don't think every unit in the 5,000 is equal.

COUNCIL MEMBER RESTLER: I totally hear you. You are absolutely right. You laid it out clearly, breaking down the 5,000 into different buckets, and you well-articulated some of the barriers that we face and filling those units. But I would love to see City Hall prioritize activating and filling every one of those units, getting the resources in, making the necessary repairs, and providing additional subsidies if needed, to work for both tenants and operators, let's make that happen. All of that is cheaper than paying for shelter. All of that is better for our community than people living on the streets and for the people themselves, most of all. None of it is acceptable. While everything you said made sense, those are totally bureaucratic answers when people just want to see real solutions to these problems. And I get that, you know, we all live in the real world of having to navigate bureaucracy to solve problems. I wish that folks on the other side of this building invested the

time, energy, and resources to actually solve problems through our bureaucracy and make things better.

My last question, if I may, what is the process for dealing with cherry picking by providers or discrimination by providers that violate applicable laws? Have you seen any trends in this area? How many times have DSS staff had to intervene in rejections by providers for applicants to supportive housing because the City was concerned the provider was (INAUDIBLE) or violating applicable laws? Or is this not a concern that you're focused on?

ADMINISTRATOR FRENCH: I mean, we always track referrals and try to identify, you know, if it seems as if providers are not accepting clients. The referral process, when the individual requests a referral, we refer three individuals to that unit who meet the appropriate eligibility requirements for that. And the provider is expected to choose one of those three. I can't speak specifically to some of the things you're talking about, but we definitely track it. And if we see trends... (CROSS-TALK)

COUNCIL MEMBER RESTLER: Do you follow up on those sites?

ADMINISTRATOR FRENCH: Yes, if we see trends in that way, we will follow up specifically with the provider and whoever the contract oversight agency is... (CROSS-TALK)

COUNCIL MEMBER RESTLER: I appreciate that. We will send a (UNINTELLIGIBLE) monitor.

ADMINISTRATOR FRENCH: Okay.

COUNCIL MEMBER RESTLER: Thank you, Chair.

CHAIRPERSON AYALA: Council Member Banks?

COUNCIL MEMBER BANKS: Thank you. And thank you for the opening statement, Deputy Commissioner.

When it comes to Intro 1232, and I know there have been concerns around the state law and PPI, I understand that there have been concerns that were raised by a staff member at DSS about the possible violation of state law related to handling the PPI in my particular bill. I wanted to know if there is a specific law that is cited? And can you clarify which state law or regulation the agency believes may be implicated by this bill?

ADMINISTRATOR FRENCH: Sure, thank you, Council Member.

Social Services Law 136 is the primary state law that governs individuals' privacy and the confidentiality of their private information. So that is the primary concern that we have.

COUNCIL MEMBER BANKS: Okay.

ADMINISTRATOR FRENCH: I am happy to also set up a meeting with the lawyers on my side, who know more about it, to talk a little bit more in detail. But that's the primary... (CROSS-TALK)

COUNCIL MEMBER BANKS: (INAUDIBLE)

ADMINISTRATOR FRENCH: The primary concern around protection and sharing of information beyond... (CROSS-TALK)

COUNCIL MEMBER BANKS: And that's on your end, sharing that information with a landlord?

ADMINISTRATOR FRENCH: Yeah.

COUNCIL MEMBER BANKS: (INAUDIBLE)
information that is knowledgeable already known by the landlord.

ADMINISTRATOR FRENCH: Uhm...

COUNCIL MEMBER BANKS: When they're talking about an address or the name of the tenant, I mean, I doubt you just... (CROSS-TALK)

ADMINISTRATOR FRENCH: Yes.

COUNCIL MEMBER BANKS: make them write checks out to the wind, but you are making the check out to a particular individual or entity, am I correct? (CROSS-TALK)

ADMINISTRATOR FRENCH: Yes, if someone is on a subsidy, absolutely, if they're not receiving a subsidy and... (CROSS-TALK)

COUNCIL MEMBER BANKS: Right...

ADMINISTRATOR FRENCH: and they have applied for a One-Shot Deal...

COUNCIL MEMBER BANKS: Okay.

ADMINISTRATOR FRENCH: the landlord wouldn't have that. We can speak to landlords about a specific subsidy they are receiving, and they might have questions for us about a check that they didn't receive or that type of case, and in that instance, we can speak with guardrails... (CROSS-TALK)

COUNCIL MEMBER BANKS: Well, this is a situation where... (CROSS-TALK)

ADMINISTRATOR FRENCH: to the landlord regarding the subsidy they received, not in particular about the individual connected to a subsidy... (CROSS-TALK)

1 COMMITTEE ON GENERAL WELFARE 40

2 COUNCIL MEMBER BANKS: But, to keep things
3 in context, this is about transmitting payment to a
4 particular entity or a landlord for arrears, right?

5 ADMINISTRATOR FRENCH: In regard to this
6 bill... (CROSS-TALK)

7 COUNCIL MEMBER BANKS: Yes, yes... (CROSS-
8 TALK)

9 ADMINISTRATOR FRENCH: Yes.

10 COUNCIL MEMBER BANKS: Correct.

11 ADMINISTRATOR FRENCH: But the
12 relationship, the landlord or the property manager,
13 would be a third party in this relationship. So the
14 relationship is really between the agency and the
15 individual requesting and applying for the... (CROSS-
16 TALK)

17 COUNCIL MEMBER BANKS: Well...

18 ADMINISTRATOR FRENCH: for the benefit. So
19 the communication is made directly between them...
20 (CROSS-TALK)

21 COUNCIL MEMBER BANKS: Right.

22 ADMINISTRATOR FRENCH: regarding what they
23 have provided, and then what our determination would
24 be based on... (CROSS-TALK)

25

1 COMMITTEE ON GENERAL WELFARE 41

2 COUNCIL MEMBER BANKS: What are the
3 documents needed to apply for a One-Shot Deal?

4 ADMINISTRATOR FRENCH: I can get back to
5 you with the details, but it would be... (CROSS-TALK)

6 COUNCIL MEMBER BANKS: Would you...

7 ADMINISTRATOR FRENCH: We would need...
8 (CROSS-TALK)

9 COUNCIL MEMBER BANKS: a lease... (CROSS-
10 TALK)

11 ADMINISTRATOR FRENCH: a determination of,
12 like... (CROSS-TALK)

13 COUNCIL MEMBER BANKS: Would a lease be a
14 document that would be (INAUDIBLE)... (CROSS-TALK)

15 ADMINISTRATOR FRENCH: (INAUDIBLE)
16 arrears, along with some other information. An
17 individual would need to... (CROSS-TALK)

18 COUNCIL MEMBER BANKS: Would-- would a...
19 (CROSS-TALK)

20 ADMINISTRATOR FRENCH: do an interview...
21 (CROSS-TALK)

22 COUNCIL MEMBER BANKS: Would a lease be a
23 document that would be required to be presented...
24 (CROSS-TALK)

25 ADMINISTRATOR FRENCH: Uh... (CROSS-TALK)

COUNCIL MEMBER BANKS: to show that there is some type of contract or... (CROSS-TALK)

ADMINISTRATOR FRENCH: (INAUDIBLE)...
(CROSS-TALK)

COUNCIL MEMBER BANKS: agreement between the two... (CROSS-TALK)

ADMINISTRATOR FRENCH: Yes... (CROSS-TALK)

COUNCIL MEMBER BANKS: Okay.

ADMINISTRATOR FRENCH: We would need some proof that the person is responsible for the rent of that particular... (CROSS-TALK)

COUNCIL MEMBER BANKS: And on that lease, it would list the landlord's information and the tenant's information as well?

ADMINISTRATOR FRENCH: Correct.

COUNCIL MEMBER BANKS: Okay. For the record, when it comes to landlord access to PII (Personally Identifiable Information), regarding the issue of PII, what specific types of personal information does the agency believe would be at risk if a landlord were to receive status updates for One-Shot Deal applications or similar services? And given that the landlords already possess this information, such as a tenant's Social Security number, full name,

and other identifiers, what additional risk does the agency foresee?

ADMINISTRATOR FRENCH: One of the key components of the Social Services Law and the confidentiality is actually the person being in receipt of public benefits and identified as such. And that is the sort of overarching protection that Social Services Law provides to individuals. So, and... (CROSS-TALK)

COUNCIL MEMBER BANKS: But relegated to the identifiers that I mentioned—Social Security number, full names, the address, what would put that tenant at risk?

ADMINISTRATOR FRENCH: Well, first the methods of... (CROSS-TALK)

COUNCIL MEMBER BANKS: If the landlord is already privy to that information... (CROSS-TALK)

ADMINISTRATOR FRENCH: part the information and concerns with that are the methods of communication—over text message and email, which are not end-to-end encrypted. So there is concern regarding... (CROSS-TALK)

COUNCIL MEMBER BANKS: (INAUDIBLE) to transmission. Okay.

ADMINISTRATOR FRENCH: Transmission

methods for those two things are a concern in regards to being able to ensure it is encrypted and protected and safe and doesn't inadvertently get...

COUNCIL MEMBER BANKS: Okay, when it comes down to current payment delivery methods (TIMER), what methods does HRA currently use to transmit payments for programs like One-Shot Deals? Are those payments sent via regular mail, electronically, or through other methods?

ADMINISTRATOR FRENCH: They are sent through mail, primarily, which would be the overwhelming amount. We can provide you with some electronic payment information. (CROSS-TALK)

COUNCIL MEMBER BANKS: But for the record... (CROSS-TALK)

ADMINISTRATOR FRENCH: (INAUDIBLE)

COUNCIL MEMBER BANKS: HRA still sends checks by mail when it comes to arrears, or in this particular situation, an arrears... (CROSS-TALK)

ADMINISTRATOR FRENCH: Yes.

COUNCIL MEMBER BANKS: Okay. Regarding information processing procedures, specifically concerning PII, what is the current process for

collecting and processing information related to HRA services, and, in particular, One-Shot Deals? How does the HRA verify and match the correct apartment, tenant, and landlord to each application?

ADMINISTRATOR FRENCH: That information is provided by the applicant when they apply to us. Through a lease, we would verify the existence of a legal contract between the individual and the landlord. (CROSS-TALK)

COUNCIL MEMBER BANKS: What's the nature of the relationship with HRA and the landlord?

ADMINISTRATOR FRENCH: In a One-Shot Deal application?

COUNCIL MEMBER BANKS: Correct.

ADMINISTRATOR FRENCH: There would not be a direct relationship between us, because the... (CROSS-TALK)

COUNCIL MEMBER BANKS: With the arrears...

ADMINISTRATOR FRENCH: (INAUDIBLE) being provided to the individual, the payment would then be sent to the landlord, but the application and the determination are based upon the actual individual application.

COUNCIL MEMBER BANKS: But there is communication... (CROSS-TALK)

ADMINISTRATOR FRENCH: We will send the payments, yes. The landlords will receive payment, and it will indicate what the payment is for. But it is, in most cases, contingent on the applicant to inform their landlord when they have gotten a determination on the one-shot. That one case you mentioned is concerning, so I am going to ask my folks to also... (CROSS-TALK)

COUNCIL MEMBER BANKS: Well...

ADMINISTRATOR FRENCH: Get... Get (INAUDIBLE)... (CROSS-TALK)

COUNCIL MEMBER BANKS: Is that the reason why (INAUDIBLE)... (CROSS-TALK)

ADMINISTRATOR FRENCH: I would like... I would like to... (CROSS-TALK)

COUNCIL MEMBER BANKS: (INAUDIBLE)

ADMINISTRATOR FRENCH: just know a little bit more about what happened there, because that isn't how... (CROSS-TALK)

COUNCIL MEMBER BANKS: Okay, but for the record, how are landlords currently notified, if at all, when payments are issued?

ADMINISTRATOR FRENCH: Mm-hmm?

COUNCIL MEMBER BANKS: And what information is provided to them?

ADMINISTRATOR FRENCH: So, uh, a landlord for a One-Shot Deal would receive notification through the mail with the checks indicating that this is the arrears payment for the particular individual that they have. There are limited situations where a landlord might receive more real-time information, such as in an eviction case in Housing Court...

(CROSS-TALK)

COUNCIL MEMBER BANKS: Okay.

ADMINISTRATOR FRENCH: Where an individual has legal representation, whether it is through Right to Counsel or someone they have retained. And the landlord has a representative, so in the conversations between lawyers around... (CROSS-TALK)

COUNCIL MEMBER BANKS: Mm-hmm.

ADMINISTRATOR FRENCH: settlement and coming to a conclusion of it, the landlord's representatives have more up-to-date information, because it's part of a preceding and something the judge has... (CROSS-TALK)

COUNCIL MEMBER BANKS: Okay.

ADMINISTRATOR FRENCH: ordered to explore.

COUNCIL MEMBER BANKS: All right. Are checks being issued without clear confirmation that they are reaching the appropriate recipient? How is that being tracked to make sure the check reaches the landlord?

ADMINISTRATOR FRENCH: Uh... (CROSS-TALK)

COUNCIL MEMBER BANKS: And in a timely fashion that doesn't perpetuate the possibility of the tenant being homeless?

ADMINISTRATOR FRENCH: As that relates to it, we do rely on the applicant and the lease to provide the correct mailing address for that. We will track things through the returned mail that we get. We are also really asking the applicants to ensure that they follow up with their landlord once we have informed them that the award was granted...

COUNCIL MEMBER BANKS: Right.

ADMINISTRATOR FRENCH: to let them know and confirm that they also received the checks.

COUNCIL MEMBER BANKS: Okay, and the differences in processing-- like when it comes to the RAD/PACT versus standard NYCHA, is there any difference in how a One-Shot Deal applications or

related services are processed for tenants in RAD/PACT developments compared to those in traditional NYCHA managed properties? If so, can you explain how the processes are different?

ADMINISTRATOR FRENCH: So there should be no difference... (CROSS-TALK)

COUNCIL MEMBER BANKS: Okay.

ADMINISTRATOR FRENCH: between how they are being assessed.

COUNCIL MEMBER BANKS: Yeah, I just want to highlight the fact that the reason why this bill came about is because—and I will just repeat a portion from my earlier statement, we had a tenant who was evicted from her apartment, and during the intervention of my office, when we had reached out to HRA, they kept saying that it was approved or it was in process, it was being processed. And during that three and a half week period, while she was actually sleeping on a friend's couch and moving around, the check somehow, somehow made it to the management company, in three and a half weeks of her being homeless. And the management company called and said, "Okay, we're gonna open the door back up. We got the check, she can go back into the apartment." That was

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Do you know how many New Yorkers apply for One-Shot Deals for rental arrears each month?

ADMINISTRATOR FRENCH: Yes, it's approximately 19,000 a month.

CHAIRPERSON AYALA: So 19,000? Do you know how many of those are denied due to missing documents? I hear that's one of the most common reasons.

ADMINISTRATOR FRENCH: I do not have the denial rates broken down by denial reason. We can look at that and get back to you on that... (CROSS-TALK)

CHAIRPERSON AYALA: Do you have the percentage of the denial rates?

ADMINISTRATOR FRENCH: Yes, so I just want to make sure I'm in the right place here. So, the average approval rate for non-recurring applications is approximately 28%. And that can be due to a variety of different reasons as it relates to One-Shot Deals. There are state requirements as well, in particular around a future ability to pay the rent that has to be taken into account when determining if we would be approving a One-Shot Deal. But that is the average.

CHAIRPERSON AYALA: Okay. Do you look into the data? I'm trying to determine whether DSS or the HRA, specifically, is investigating why the approval rate is 28%. And if we're dealing with disaggregated data, where people are failing to submit documents, as I hear regularly, then why is that happening? Is the issue on our end or the applicant's end? Because when you have a few people, you know, saying, "I had a difficult time," we expect that things are going to happen, uh, a fax didn't get through, a letter that didn't get in, but the majority of the cases that come before us are of individuals that continuously say that they have submitted every document two-three times, four times and that they are repeatedly made to either re-submit or are denied. So that's troublesome, because we should be tracking that and figuring out where the disconnect is to make sure that this process is a little bit more seamless. I agree with Council Member Banks; this is a very stressful process for individuals facing eviction. The more we can streamline and simplify it, I believe, would be beneficial for all of us.

ADMINISTRATOR FRENCH: I agree, and I think some of what's in Council Member Cabán's bill

will also help address some of the potential miscommunication or misunderstandings that may occur, and hopefully catch things a little bit earlier in the system. But we are always looking at ways in which we can improve it and figure out where things are on our side and what we can do to help change that.

CHAIRPERSON AYALA: Okay. I think I had a couple of others on this one.

Do you know the percentage of cases where a landlord did not receive a check that led to an eviction?

ADMINISTRATOR FRENCH: I do not have that information.

CHAIRPERSON AYALA: I can't read my own handwriting, sorry. (LAUGHS) Okay. OMB provided a cost estimate of \$64,000 in annual OTPS to operate and maintain the notification system required for this bill, as well as a one-time OTPS cost of \$305,000.00 to develop the system. DSS already does similar work that is required by the bills, such as text messages and notifications that HRA sends for benefits such as Medicaid and Fair Fares. Can you

provide a more detailed breakdown of what the cost estimate is for?

ADMINISTRATOR FRENCH: We would have to follow up with you on that. But there had to be system issues and changes, because the way in which we communicate through text message and email at this moment is very basic messages, such as for Access HRA. We all would sort of get the standard notification: "You have a new message" or "A new document has been posted to your Access HRA account, please log in to check it,". Notifying individuals about a One-Shot Deal also has requirements at the state level through the Office of Temporary Disability Assistance regarding the level of information that must be provided in notification of an application for public benefits. So there would definitely be additional system issues that would need to happen to be able to communicate in that fashion.

CHAIRPERSON AYALA: Okay. Additionally, DSS has capital funding budgeted for Access HRA and other HRA benefit systems. Would the existing budget capital funds fulfill the course needed to implement the requirements of this bill?

ADMINISTRATOR FRENCH: I will have to get back to you on that, I think...

CHAIRPERSON AYALA: Did we submit these questions to you, Administrator?

ADMINISTRATOR FRENCH: I didn't get that detailed a question; I have not seen it, but I can't speak for the team. They may have, and I just might not have that in front of me, apologies.

CHAIRPERSON AYALA: Okay, just checking. All right, I'm going to move into Intro 0791 in relation to requiring the Department of Social Services to post on its website data concerning vacant supportive housing units. I know Council Member Restler asked a bunch of questions. I just wanted to follow up on a few.

Do you know how long, on average, units sit vacant?

ADMINISTRATOR FRENCH: That number can sort of be for a variety of times, based on many factors. But what I can say is that I can talk about median times for individuals to get into units. I would say vacant units are on a spectrum; most of them are not vacant for more, you know, on the shorter end of zero to six months, and that could be

due to, you know, issues around turnover that's needed in regards to maybe there's minor repairs that need to happen. We then need to go through the referral process, and depending on the units, the lease-up process might have additional requirements that are additional steps, similar to how every unit has LIHTC (Low-Income Housing Tax Credit) funding as part of the lease-up process. There's a special LIHTC packet that needs to be prepared, reviewed, and approved by both the provider but also by the third-party LIHTC representatives... (CROSS-TALK)

CHAIRPERSON AYALA: For repairs?

ADMINISTRATOR FRENCH: No, for a lease-up
and moving in.

CHAIRPERSON AYALA: Oh, for lease-ups.

ADMINISTRATOR FRENCH: So, different aspects may require a unit to be vacant for a little bit longer. But it's actually linked, so that's similar to the 900 or so units I mentioned to Council Member Restler; they're listed as vacant because someone's not actively living there, but they're actually not available, because they are linked to an individual and it's going through the lease-up process.

CHAIRPERSON AYALA: What percentage of those are because they need repairs?

ADMINISTRATOR FRENCH: I would have to get back to you in regards to that. I don't think our system has that to that sort of granularity, because we are not that we don't oversee the contracts for all of these units. So, we'll have them listed as offline, we'll track it from a time per point of view, and then we will be able to provide that information... (CROSS-TALK)

CHAIRPERSON AYALA: Who funds the repairs?

ADMINISTRATOR FRENCH: The repairs would have to be addressed through whatever agency holds the actual service contracts for the unit. So HRA holds contracts with a small number of primarily SROs, as well as our (INAUDIBLE) units. But DOHMH holds the majority of the City units through 15/15, and then the State Office of Mental Health is responsible for their units regarding that contracting. So providers would, if they need additional new needs to support repairs that are not covered within their existing contract, they would have to go to those particular oversights to request those funds.

CHAIRPERSON AYALA: Okay. Have you heard that the delays in repairs are due to funding issues?

ADMINISTRATOR FRENCH: I have not heard that, no.

CHAIRPERSON AYALA: Okay. Can you tell us how many of the vacant units are SROs?

ADMINISTRATOR FRENCH: Sure, of the vacant units, 12% or 611 are SROs.

CHAIRPERSON AYALA: Okay, and do you know how many vacant units are in congregate settings versus a scatter site?

ADMINISTRATOR FRENCH: I do not have the breakdown of congregate versus scatter site, my apologies, we will get back to you with that.

CHAIRPERSON AYALA: Okay. How many move-outs of supportive housing are there on a monthly basis? And can you disaggregate by population site?

ADMINISTRATOR FRENCH: So from June 1, 2024, to June 1, 2025, there were 3,325 verified move-outs from supportive housing, averaging approximately 277 per month. There are nine different categories, so I could read them here, or we can just provide them to you after the hearing.

CHAIRPERSON AYALA: There's nine different categories?

ADMINISTRATOR FRENCH: There's nine different categories of supportive housing.

CHAIRPERSON AYALA: Okay, go ahead, spill it.

ADMINISTRATOR FRENCH: ESSHI (Empire State Supporting Housing Initiative Seniors) is fourth on average is 4% of monthly move outs, the general population is 8%, HASA, single adults is 1%, HUD CoC Service funded is 2%, and New York, New NY/NY I and II are 17% of the monthly moveouts, NY/NY III is 22%, NYC 15/15 - Young Adult is 8%, and then SMI singles is 38%.

CHAIRPERSON AYALA: Okay, thank you. I appreciate that.

ADMINISTRATOR FRENCH: And there is "Other Category", which is zero.

CHAIRPERSON AYALA: Can you tell us what the average amount of time is between the approval and the unit and the move-in? I know that you mentioned it before, but I didn't catch it.

ADMINISTRATOR FRENCH: Median days, so for an individual, the median days from their application

to the determination date of eligibility is one day. The median days from determination date to referral date is 63, and then the median days from determination date to move in is 139 for specific individuals. For most of the units that are vacant, we see that a majority of them are vacant from zero to six months, though...

CHAIRPERSON AYALA: Mm-hmm.

ADMINISTRATOR FRENCH: there are some that are six months to 12 months, and some longer than 12 months. And obviously, the longer they are vacant, the more we focus on them with the contracting agency and the referral agency.

CHAIRPERSON AYALA: Okay. All right, I am going to move on to Intro 1175, in relation to civil legal services for domestic violence survivors in divorce proceedings. In 2022, the New York City Council enacted LL 5/2022, requiring a two-year pilot project that would provide legal representation to domestic violence survivors undergoing divorce proceedings. What is the status of the pilot, and what is the anticipated cost of this pilot program?

ADMINISTRATOR FRENCH: Certainly. So, at the time of the work group, the estimated cost for

the pilot was \$24 million over two years. That was done in 2022-2023, so the estimate would need to be assessed again. Over the years, we have not been able to allocate funds to this pilot. We are in active conversations with OMB about identifying funds to move forward with the pilot. But due to a variety of different fiscal issues over the last several years, that funding was not able to be secured for this specific pilot.

CHAIRPERSON AYALA: So the Administration didn't prioritize these dollars even though this is a Local Law?

ADMINISTRATOR FRENCH: We looked at the Local Law, which was subject to appropriation, and based upon priorities, the funds were not able to be appropriated. But I can say that we are in active conversations about it. So it is something that we are still looking at and hoping that we can do moving forward. So it has not been put to the side. It is just that, given the variety of different factors, it hasn't been funded yet.

CHAIRPERSON AYALA: That's disappointing to hear that services as important as these, that serve such a delicate population, are not a priority

1 in the Administration's budget cycle. So I am really
2 disappointed, because I remember sitting in on the
3 first meeting when we were hearing this bill, and I'm
4 on my way out. So we started talking about this bill
5 maybe, I don't know, six months into my term at the
6 Council, so maybe seven years now. And we still have
7 not seen the pilot.
8

9 Is there any assurance from the
10 Administration that it is going to be funded this
11 year?

12 ADMINISTRATOR FRENCH: We are in active
13 conversations with OMB to see if this can be funded.
14 But those conversations are ongoing at this moment.

15 CHAIRPERSON AYALA: When would you know?

16 ADMINISTRATOR FRENCH: I'm sorry?

17 CHAIRPERSON AYALA: When would you know
18 for sure?

19 ADMINISTRATOR FRENCH: I will get back to
20 you on a timeline as to when we would know.

21 CHAIRPERSON AYALA: I understand your
22 position that you would rather do the pilot before we
23 codify this into law; however, we are in a
24 predicament here. Because the pilot has not been
25 started, even though it is a Local Law, it hasn't

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CHAIRPERSON AYALA: But I don't think that other people get it. And that, for me, is very personal. I remember that hearing very vividly, because it actually triggered me. I was married for a long time, and in a serious domestic violence situation. We had separated, and we were separated for many years before I was able to finally get a divorce, because I couldn't afford to do that. And there were no legal services available to families like mine that would help. And I ended up inevitably getting the divorce years later by paying-- it was one of those ads that you see on the street, they're like, "\$499 divorce," yeah, no, it's true, it's \$499 or \$399 or whatever for a divorce. All they offer are resources to help you fill out the paperwork, which you can then hand over to the court. They stamp it, and then you sign, and it's over. But it separates you from the trauma of that relationship. For me, it was really important to be a part of it and support it. And it really saddens me that we haven't gotten there yet. And I understand that we have a lot of fiscal responsibilities and have been in turbulent times; however, these are men and women who are stuck in situations that they, whether they want to or not,

1 they have serious consequences. In my case, I was in
2 another relationship. I had two children under that
3 relationship. Those two children now legally belong
4 to the husband who abused me, who is not the
5 biological father of those children. A lot happened.
6 If I were to buy a house and die tomorrow, this
7 person could collect my pension. We should have those
8 resources readily available for folks. And I think
9 when we had the pilot, I think you would have seen
10 that most people don't need extensive legal provider
11 services, which would take years, but rather they are
12 probably going to fit into the criteria that I just
13 described about myself. Right? They need somebody to
14 help them fill out the documents that need to be
15 filed through the court, assuming that it's not
16 contested.

18 Okay, we will also push to make sure
19 that's a priority. And I will warn you that they are
20 going to pay for it one way or the other. Because
21 they either pay for the pilot, or they are going to
22 have to pay for it legislatively.

23 What, if any, services are currently
24 available to domestic violence survivors going
25 through divorce proceedings who are DSS clients?

ADMINISTRATOR FRENCH: Certainly.

Individuals who access services, whether through DSS or ENDGBV, as we both have contracts and providers who provide services in the community, individuals who indicate that they may need legal assistance, including with divorce proceedings, will be connected to nonprofits in the community who do provide those services to determine and assist them in any way that they can. So, folks are referred, whether it is through the DV shelter system, our nonresidential programs, or the Family Justice Center, there will be a comprehensive intake done to understand the specific issues the individuals are facing that they need assistance with. So individuals who do need legal assistance, including with divorce proceedings, are referred to providers in the community who do help people with this work.

CHAIRPERSON AYALA: But you don't track that, do you?

ADMINISTRATOR FRENCH: I do not have that information in detail. The majority of these services are overseen by the State Office of Child and Family Services, with much of the direct communication about services occurring between them. Providers are not

required to report to us in that level of detail, as the individuals who hold the contracts are responsible for those services.

CHAIRPERSON AYALA: I mean, I get it, but I think sometimes we hide behind this confidentiality clause so that they are not able to share even the most mundane information. There is information that you can share without putting anybody's safety at risk.

Of the DSS clients, do you know how many individuals seeking services also require support with filing an order of protection against a perpetrator?

ADMINISTRATOR FRENCH: I do not have that level of detail, as that is not reported to us.

CHAIRPERSON AYALA: Are there any additional services that are offered in collaboration with legal services to support survivors of domestic violence while their case is going through the court system? And if so, what are they?

ADMINISTRATOR FRENCH: As I mentioned before, individuals who need legal support would be referred to legal service providers and CBOs in the community to assist them. Individuals who are in a DV

shelter, who are experiencing that, would be provided with other wraparound supports by the shelter. Which I am sure would include checking in with them on how things are going, and if they need assistance to navigate an external referral or system, they would provide that.

CHAIRPERSON AYALA: But DSS would only collect that information if a person is entering domestic violence shelter settings, where it would be pretty obvious. If a person is coming into HRA, do they need to self-disclose, or is there a question asked during this part of the interview process about their eligibility for additional services?

ADMINISTRATOR FRENCH: I mean, for individuals accessing our domestic violence-related services specifically, there are intakes that do ask comprehensive questions of individuals about the specific situation, their priority concerns, fears, and what they might need assistance with.

CHAIRPERSON AYALA: Mm-hmm.

ADMINISTRATOR FRENCH: Someone accessing non-DV-related services, there would not be that level of detail. But I will say, if someone is applying for cash assistance, as part of that, there

are a few questions that would indicate if someone is experiencing domestic violence. And if they need a referral to a domestic violence liaison that we have, they could then speak to someone in more depth to understand what's going on. Regarding cash assistance and child support that is due, we would like to conduct some liaison to avoid inadvertently putting someone at risk by revealing any information. So those are ways in which individuals could be connected to other domestic violence services we offer.

CHAIRPERSON AYALA: Okay. I mean, it's important to squeeze in those questions whenever possible, because people may not voluntarily self-disclose...

ADMINISTRATOR FRENCH: Yes.

CHAIRPERSON AYALA: And sometimes we see in domestic violence situations that victims are reluctant to go through a provider...

ADMINISTRATOR FRENCH: Yes.

CHAIRPERSON AYALA: for fear of retribution by their aggressor.

OMB provided a cost estimate of \$12.7 million for this bill to contract with nonprofit

1 legal service providers. Can you provide a more
2 detailed breakdown of the \$12.7 million cost?

3 ADMINISTRATOR FRENCH: Additionally, I
4 will need to follow up with more detail on that \$12.7
5 million.
6

7 CHAIRPERSON AYALA: Okay. Does HRA
8 estimate how many nonprofit legal service providers
9 will be contracted under the bill?

10 ADMINISTRATOR FRENCH: We have not
11 estimated that in regard to really understanding
12 within the community how many providers would
13 actually be interested who also have the facilities
14 to do this work. So, that is something that we would
15 start to understand through the procurement process.
16 We know of some providers who do this specific type
17 of work, but the level to which others may want to
18 enter into the line of work, we do not know.

19 CHAIRPERSON AYALA: I am going to move on
20 to Intro 1208, in relation to a report on air
21 conditioning in homeless shelters. How many shelters
22 in New York City currently have air conditioners, and
23 how many of these are city-owned and operated?

24 ADMINISTRATOR FRENCH: Approximately 55%
25 of all shelters across the system have air

conditioner units on-site. We can get back to you on how that breaks down across families with children, single adults, and adult families. However, it is approximately that, and then another 44% have either a cooling space and/or fans in those locations, but they don't have air conditioning units at the sites.

CHAIRPERSON AYALA: There would be a fan in the unit?

ADMINISTRATOR FRENCH: Yeah, there would be fans provided to individuals within the unit, plus a specific cooling space within the facility for individuals to go during specifically hot times. Additionally, we make sure that all shelters and all residents within the shelters have a list of all local cooling centers, both indoor and outdoor centers, for them to go to.

We are happy with the new addendum that we put out so that all future traditional shelters will have air conditioning in them as we begin the process of really shifting the system. But, obviously, the system has been built up over decades, and some of the much older sites also have limited capacity to manage air conditioning due to electricity or other factors within the building.

1
2 However, we believe this addendum is a step in the
3 right direction, as it aims to shift the overall
4 system to make air conditioning more widely available
5 in shelters.

6 CHAIRPERSON AYALA: Okay, do you know of
7 the shelters where there are air conditioners, how
8 many, and what percent are family shelters?

9 ADMINISTRATOR FRENCH: It is consistent. I
10 think it is approximately 50%, but we can get back to
11 you with a...

12 CHAIRPERSON AYALA: Fifteen?

13 ADMINISTRATOR FRENCH: Fifty.

14 CHAIRPERSON AYALA: Oh, 50.

15 ADMINISTRATOR FRENCH: But, we'll get back
16 to you to confirm that.

17 CHAIRPERSON AYALA: Okay.

18 What is the process for monitoring and
19 repairing our air conditioners?

20 ADMINISTRATOR FRENCH: So minor or
21 standard repairs are managed by the providers, and
22 they do not report that to us, as that is just part
23 of the standard maintenance they should be doing
24 within their shelters. Larger-scale HVAC concerns
25 that significantly impact the shelter's operation and

resident safety are reported to us, and we track these issues. But the system is so broad, and we don't have a centralized air conditioning tracking system, so many of the repairs would be done through the normal course of the provider.

CHAIRPERSON AYALA: Are you aware of any cases where a family or an individual has reported that they didn't have air conditioning or a fan?

ADMINISTRATOR FRENCH: I do not have that information here with me today. I don't have (INAUDIBLE)... (CROSS-TALK)

CHAIRPERSON AYALA: Do you collect that information?

ADMINISTRATOR FRENCH: reported it. I will check with DHS, but there is a standard avenue for individuals to report issues to us through the ombudsmen's office and others. So we could check to see if there is any indication of someone not getting what they should have in that particular shelter.

CHAIRPERSON AYALA: In July 2024, The New York Times released an article discussing homeless shelters in New York City requiring a doctor's note for families to receive a room with air conditioning. The article highlights a family in the Bronx who

ADMINISTRATOR FRENCH: In DHS, there is a standard reasonable accommodation process that allows individuals to submit requests for accommodations. One such request is for an air conditioner unit, which can be requested based on a disability or medical need. As part of that, they would need to submit some type of medical documentation that speaks to the reason they would need an air conditioner in their unit or a unit with an air conditioner.

ADMINISTRATOR FRENCH: It would depend on a case-by-case basis, depending on what particular

shelter the family was in at that point. Obviously, we would love to accommodate people where they are and keep them where they are, especially families. But if they are in a shelter that maybe couldn't maintain an air-conditioner due to electrical wiring or something like that, the family would likely need to be relocated. We would obviously work to minimize disruption of the relocation, so hopefully to another shelter, if that were needed, within the area in which they currently are would definitely be a priority for DHS.

CHAIRPERSON AYALA: Has DHS considered maybe allowing residents to be able to purchase and bring in their own air conditioner?

ADMINISTRATOR FRENCH: We have not. That is not something individuals do on their own. That is not something given sort of the whole of the building approach we need to take in regards to the shelters. But, for individuals who do need it for a reasonable accommodation request, we do encourage them to do that. And we hope with the new addendum that more and more shelters will provide air conditioning to residents in our shelters.

CHAIRPERSON AYALA: What concerns you about-- what would prevent-- what is the reason behind DHS's reluctance to allow folks who bring in their own air conditioning units? Because I'm pretty sure there are families that cannot afford and maybe don't have that level of support, but there are families that do who may be able to donate, you know, a new air conditioning unit. What would be the rationale for denying them that?

ADMINISTRATOR FRENCH: I think there are a variety of factors regarding the installation of the units and ensuring that they are installed correctly, as I don't believe we would really want individuals to install the units on their own. It also really depends on what the building can and cannot take, are some of the key factors. But we can get back to you with some additional factors that might be of concern there, and any other regulations that might guide what individual families are able to bring into their units or not bring into their units as over time units will transition between families and individuals who need them.

CHAIRPERSON AYALA: I mean, starting tomorrow, we're going to be entering a serious heat wave.

ADMINISTRATOR FRENCH: Yes.

CHAIRPERSON AYALA: And with climate change, that is becoming more and more common. I cannot sleep if I'm hot. There's no way I'm going to be able to sleep. And if I have a person has a respiratory issue and they haven't yet been able to get to the doctor and having to sleep like that or live like that in a space-- and I get that the common areas are available, but I'm sure that they aren't as accommodating as they could be for individuals to sleep through the night if they needed it. So, I would love to see some sort of data on the conditions and the buildings that you contract with that would prohibit families from being able to buy their own equipment. I've heard many reasons, and I don't want to, you know, I don't want to get into that and share misinformation on what that is, but I think that is a more cost-effective way to do that, and I think it would really go a long way.

How long does it take on average for families who have a doctor's note or other proof of

ADMINISTRATOR FRENCH: I will I have to get back to you with that information. I think it depends based upon whether a unit needs to be installed; that is probably something that could happen relatively more quickly than if we needed to relocate the family. But we can get back to you with, on average, how long it takes.

ADMINISTRATOR FRENCH: That would be approximately 44% of the shelter system. There are over 400 shelters.

CHAIRPERSON AYALA: Has the City created a plan to ensure that families in New York City shelters are not sleeping in rooms without air conditioning during extreme heat temperatures?

ADMINISTRATOR FRENCH: During periods where there is extreme heat, we do have our Code Red procedures, and we'll work with families to have them go to cooling-- if they don't have an air conditioner, to the cooling room, having fans in

their room to address how to help them through that period of time, as well as connecting them to local cooling centers.

CHAIRPERSON AYALA: Again, cooling centers are only open for a certain amount of time.

Okay, I'm moving on to a Resolution 362, calling on the New York State Legislature to pass, and the Governor to sign, A.5291/S.5975, the Social Worker Workforce Act. Social workers make up what percentage of the social services employees--the social service employees employed by DHS in New York City?

ADMINISTRATOR FRENCH: So there are, across DHS HR or DHS, there are 90 social workers, which is 0.7% of the 13,243 employees we have. A large bulk of our employees are Benefit and Eligibility Specialists, which is the key social service we provide. We also have caseworkers who provide supportive case management and other activities. So, I just don't want it to seem as if social workers are the only title that provides these services. Obviously in the case of DHS as well, a majority of their services are provided by nonprofit vendors who have their own staff that provides mental

health supports and other supportive services to our residents.

CHAIRPERSON AYALA: I mean, that number seems pretty minimal to me considering the type of services that DSS provides. And, I get it, right? We all have to kind of pivot, depending on how much funds are coming in. So we hire, you know, case workers that are not-- but they have to have a certain level of experience that social workers bring to, you know, to the table?

ADMINISTRATOR FRENCH: Mm-hmm.

CHAIRPERSON AYALA: Being able to recognize mental health disorders, being able to identify domestic violence, and being able to provide the level of information and care that each individual in need of services is entitled to or should be entitled to. It is difficult because of fiscal matters, and we are not hiring the appropriate staff. So that is where it kind of (INAUDIBLE)...

(CROSS-TALK)

ADMINISTRATOR FRENCH: Right. I would say the services we have, where the level of service and support needed is through a licensed social worker, a majority of those services are provided by nonprofit

1 vendors. So, through the DV system, that is done
2 through providers. The DHS system through providers.
3 Then, obviously, we have some social workers through
4 some programs that are not provider-driven or
5 operated. So, I would say that there are, you know,
6 people who do access those services. Oftentimes,
7 they're accessing them through a nonprofit that we've
8 contracted with, rather than those services and
9 directly... (CROSS-TALK)

11 CHAIRPERSON AYALA: But is a nonprofit
12 contract... Does a nonprofit contract require that
13 the organization has a social worker on staff?

14 ADMINISTRATOR FRENCH: So, depending on
15 the specific contracts, yes, there will be staffing
16 requirements as related to what type of staff are
17 required and expected through the provision of those
18 services. So, depending on the service, we will
19 identify where there are expectations around social
20 workers or other licensed clinical mental health.
21 That will vary across programs, depending on what the
22 program needs, but that would be part of the scope
23 and expectation for providers, depending on the
24 service that they're providing, to have access to
25

those to those types of individuals with that type of training.

CHAIRPERSON AYALA: So the 0.7% is basically just under the purview of the of the Administration? You're... (CROSS-TALK)

ADMINISTRATOR FRENCH: Just City staff...

CHAIRPERSON AYALA: Not...

ADMINISTRATOR FRENCH: So, it will be a City staff civil service title. Yes, we can get back to you with estimates on what is within the provider community that provides our services and where they are. So, I want to make sure everyone knows that we are providing access to social workers. Much of that is going to be done through a nonprofit rather than directly through a City worker.

CHAIRPERSON AYALA: I mean, I'll tell you there's no way you can convince me that I'm not a social worker, and I'm not.

ADMINISTRATOR FRENCH: Mm-hmm, yep.

CHAIRPERSON AYALA: I'm not. Right? But I was trained by some of the best social workers, and I picked up a lot of really valuable information. So I'm actually really good. But, I can tell you that there's a very clear distinction between what social

work is-- the level of services that social workers are trained to do (INAUDIBLE) somebody that we're hiring that has good intentions and maybe, you know, isn't familiar with some of the issues that impact our communities. I'm not insinuating that that service is not, you know, it's not great, but there is a difference.

ADMINISTRATOR FRENCH: Yes.

CHAIRPERSON AYALA: There's a really big difference. When I started working, my first job out of college was at a senior center. And we had so many people coming into the center who visibly had serious mental health issues. I mean, they were waiting for me outside, praying in the middle of the street, you know, blessing cars. I had one that, I mean, I could go on and on, you know, on the issues, and nobody was there. I mean, they have been there for years, and nobody recognized that in them. So my supervisor, you know, she used to say, they weren't here before you got here, but I'm like, they were here, but we didn't have the experienced staff to pick up on if a person is repeating themselves, right? It may be that they're starting to get, you know, dementia, but it could also be a medication issue. It could also, you

1 know, it could be so many different things. And
2 social workers are trained to identify those issues.
3 So, they are a really critical part of the social
4 services umbrella. Whatever you can do to
5 (INAUDIBLE)... (CROSS-TALK)

7 ADMINISTRATOR FRENCH: I completely agree
8 with you. I, too, worked in Aging before I came to
9 the city. I worked for SAGE... (CROSS-TALK)

10 CHAIRPERSON AYALA: Yeah, it's different.

11 ADMINISTRATOR FRENCH: And I understand
12 the real importance of social workers and what they
13 bring to it, and how they can really work with
14 individuals to identify what needs they have.

15 CHAIRPERSON AYALA: Is there any way for
16 you to track how many a licensed social worker
17 candidates passed the licensing exam on the first
18 try?

19 ADMINISTRATOR FRENCH: That is not
20 information we would have on that. That would be
21 information that the licensing board would
22 probably...

23 CHAIRPERSON AYALA: Yeah.

24 ADMINISTRATOR FRENCH: need to provide.
25

CHAIRPERSON AYALA: Okay. All right, moving on to Reso 0839, calling on the New York State Legislature to pass, and the Governor to sign A. 03578/S.00403 to establish a SNAP and cash assistance fraud victims compensation fund.

Do we know how many New York City residents have been impacted by SNAP and cash assistance fraud this calendar year and in 2024?

ADMINISTRATOR FRENCH: I can report how many claims have been filed, which would be a proxy, but I will say that, given the ability to reimburse for SNAP federal benefits ended at the end of December, this is going to be an undercount, as individuals would not have submitted a claim, given that they were not able to. Total claims filed for cash assistance this year are 12,476 to date. In comparison, the prior calendar year 2024 saw 35,312 claims for SNAP. So far this year, it's been 22,538 claims filed; last year it was 86,232.

CHAIRPERSON AYALA: Do you know what that amounts to in the total benefits that were stolen?

ADMINISTRATOR FRENCH: Yes. The total reported stolen for cash assistance this year is approximately \$3.1 million. In 2024, it would have

been approximately \$8.6 million. For SNAP, so far this year, it's approximately \$11.7 million, and last year it was \$42.3 million.

UNKNOWN: Whoa!

CHAIRPERSON AYALA: I think it would be more cost-effective for the states to just create the chip card, and we can all be... (CROSS-TALK)

ADMINISTRATOR FRENCH: I agree with you that the chip card is the way to go. I know there are two bills at the state level, which are similar to this Reso. We will now have to wait until they come back, but it is something that we continuously advocate for as well. The way to really address this is to utilize modern technology.

CHAIRPERSON AYALA: Okay. Okay. All right, Administrator French, thank you so much for being here...

ADMINISTRATOR FRENCH: Thank you so much.

CHAIRPERSON AYALA: It's always a pleasure to have you, and we look forward to getting the responses to the questions that we were not able to get a response to. Thank you.

ADMINISTRATOR FRENCH: Thank you very much.

CHAIRPERSON AYALA: All right, we are going to take a very quick five-minute bathroom break, and then we will start.

(PAUSE)

(BACKGROUND NOISE)

CHAIRPERSON AYALA: All right, we're back.

I now open the hearing for public testimony. I remind members of the public that this is a formal government proceeding and that decorum shall be observed at all times. As such, members of the public shall remain silent at all times.

The witness table is reserved for people who wish to testify. No video recording or photography is allowed from the witness table. Further, members of the public may not present audio or video recordings as testimony, but may submit transcripts of such recordings to the Sergeant at Arms for inclusion in the hearing record. If you wish to speak at today's hearing, please fill out an appearance card with the Sergeant at Arms and wait to be recognized. When recognized, you will have three minutes to speak on the legislation being heard at today's hearing.

If you have a written statement or additional testimony you wish to submit for the record, please provide a copy of that testimony to the Sergeant at Arms.

You may also email written testimony to Testimony@council.nyc.gov within 72 hours after the close of this hearing. Audio and video recordings will not be accepted.

We will now call up the first panel: Noam Cohen, Karla Aguilar, Calvin Michael, and Diana Ramos.

(PAUSE)

CHAIRPERSON AYALA: You may begin. You can start.

NOAM COHEN: Thank you, everybody, for being here today. My name is Noam Cohen; I'm a proud member and leader in VOCAL NY's Homelessness Union. Here at VOCAL, we directly organize people who are directly impacted by homelessness and fight for what our communities need.

I currently live in a shelter run by CAMBA, and I've been living there for over a year and a half now. For almost two weeks now, we've had no AC in my room, there's a large room in which I have—

1 this is a large room in which I have 22 roommates.
2 The venting in the building is so poorly designed
3 that the vents on the ceiling don't even work at all.
4 Several months ago, with the Callahan inspection
5 approaching, they installed a temporary fix for the
6 heating by installing a single ceiling fixture in the
7 middle of the room. That fixture no longer works now.
8 Right now, we only have two electric fans for the
9 entire room. At first, they only put in one small fan
10 on my side of the room, a very loud industrial fan
11 that makes it very hard to sleep. I tried putting in
12 foam earplugs, you know, those ended up hurting my
13 ears. I was not going to do that for too long. I
14 can't really afford noise-canceling headphones now.

15
16 When we asked our shelter director what
17 the plan was or what date they could fix this by, we
18 didn't really get any answers. We didn't get a plan,
19 we didn't get date plan to fix it by.

20 I think it's worth noting that we have
21 elderly people in my shelter. We have people with
22 disabilities in my shelter. People are being put at
23 serious risk of heat-related health issues. This is
24 all because shelters are failing to meet a basic
25 human need, a safe and environment.

The bill proposed by Council Member Gutiérrez would require that city agencies put out reports on the status of AC in the shelters every 12 months, one year after its passage.

I'm really here to say that's not adequate. All you need to do--this is an urgent issue, and it's really concerning to me that this isn't really being treated with the urgency it deserves. All you need to do to find out whether the hundreds of shelters in New York City have proper ventilation, proper heat, proper AC, is to simply talk to the people inside. We need enforcement mechanisms. We need hefty fines when you find that a shelter is either refusing to turn on the AC and heat, or refusing to repair it. And when it comes to shelters that don't have AC at all, there shouldn't be any that don't have AC or heat at all. These are basic human rights that we're talking about, and this should be treated with the urgency it deserves.

CHAIRPERSON AYALA: Can you pass the mic?

Yes, thank you. Make sure the light is red.

DIANA RAMOS: Good afternoon, my name is Diana Ramos. I am a member of the Safety Net Activists, a part of the Safety Net Project. I am

here to give testimony about the need for a recovery fund for benefit recipients who have had their benefits skimmed.

This month, I was a victim of my SNAP benefits being skimmed straight off my card. June 4th, I received my SNAP, and by 2:46 a.m. that morning, while I was asleep, they were stolen off my card. I am very mindful and careful with where I use my benefits. I never give others my PIN; I only use my card at businesses I trust or big corporate stores. I have changed my PIN every three months, and I even downloaded the recommended app that would allow me to lock my card and keep track of all transactions. That still didn't prevent my SNAP benefits from being skimmed in three separate transactions from Buffalo, Eastchester, and Staten Island. I didn't find out until 4 p.m. in the afternoon. I immediately took action, and I reported my card stolen and received a replacement. I notified my advocate at Safety Net, Adrianna Mendoza, and the three organizers I frequently work with on various campaigns. I suffered a severe panic attack because I didn't know at that moment what I was going to do for food for the month. I am a diabetic, and I have a

certain eating plan I follow to keep me in good health. I also suffer from heat sensitivity, which makes standing in line at food banks dangerous. I get SSI, and after paying my bills I have very little left over to cover a month of food.

Thousands of New Yorkers have been robbed with no way of recovering what was stolen from them. New Yorkers on benefits feel abandoned by the state. Many children, the elderly, and disabled New Yorkers are starving, because there is no a way for them to recover funds or even obtain nutritious food.

I got very lucky this month, and because of the situation, I was able to get a food grant from Safety Net to get my groceries—HRA would have done nothing.

There are two solutions that would not only combat this problem but also help New Yorkers recover what was stolen:

Solution one is Resolution 0839, which calls on the State Legislature to pass, and the Governor to sign A.03578/S.00403 that would establish a compensation fund for victims of Benefits fraud.

The second solution is to have chip cards, which have been proven to be more secure than

the current cards. There are many states switching to chip cards, including New Jersey. (TIMER) These two solutions together would not only keep New Yorkers' benefits safer but also help those who have had their benefits stolen. I thank you for allowing me to speak.

CHAIRPERSON AYALA: Just make sure that the light is red.

CALVIN MICHAEL: Good afternoon, my name is Calvin Michael. I am speaking to you about the Safety Net Activist Group in conjunction with the Urban Justice Center. The main focus and topic of my testimony this afternoon is because of a distribution of New York City shelters that do not have air conditioning. I am specifically speaking about that.

I would not be speaking about this if I didn't have intimate knowledge about the reality of this situation because I was at (INAUDIBLE) men's shelter, which had no AC—300 men in an open floor with no AC for the three years that I was there.

Four in 10 NYC shelters have no AC in sleeping areas. According to the New York City paper, the Gothamist, there seems to be quite a large number of clients who are without proper climate control in

given areas. I spend my entire tenure, (UNINTELLIGIBLE) men's shelter on Randall's Island, Wards Island, without air-conditioning. They also mentioned the facility had 300 men, yes, on an open floor. No AC. What was provided in lieu of air conditioning were several industrial fans that were installed on the walls. The air conditioning in homeless shelters is not just about comfort; it's about preventing heat-related illnesses, protecting basic human dignity, and ensuring that folks have what they need to stay cool and healthy.

I would also like to comment on a related health risk that is associated with not having sufficient air-conditioning in close to half of New York City shelters and the hazard that it creates. Some people are at higher risk of getting sick from heat than others (INAUDIBLE) risk for people, for example, who take medication that makes it hard for them to regulate their body temperature properly. Hot days can be dangerous for anyone, but it can be especially dangerous for those who have chronic medical conditions, such as... and create uncomfortable situations for those who have symptoms from diseases such as asthma and multiple sclerosis,

which could create huge difficulties for them. Some of the heat-related symptoms are muscle cramps, headaches, nausea, and vomiting.

I can relate and empathize with this personal experience of my former shelter mate being in an environment of 110 degrees. We are hot, sweaty, and angry. Fights erupted in the shelter every 20 minutes in July and August. It didn't matter which month it was. Some of the current residents can experience temperatures in the summer that can be quite unbearable. Temperatures (TIMER) are about to ramp in New York City right now. Many people, including those in the shelters I stayed in, will experience them without any air conditioning. Safety Net is strongly opposed to the lack of air-conditioning in existing shelters and proposes that the Department of Homeless Services appropriately address the lack of air-conditioning across 50% of New York City's shelter population.

While we are glad this issue is being discussed, we also need to make sure that a report is made. We call on the Council to pass legislation to create a solution to the problem by requiring DHS to install air-conditioners in New York City shelters.

I will leave you with this, people die every year because of the heat. People in shelters have higher rates of disabilities, much higher rates than the general public, making them even more vulnerable to the heat. We ask the Department of Homeless Services use whatever financial resources that are available to provide air-conditioning for existing clients in the New York City shelters and that New York City Council require them to do so. Thank you, Council Member Ayala, for allowing me to speak.

One thing I want to end with is that I am very grateful for what they are doing for the air-conditioning in shelters. As a shelter resident, I am grateful for the help that you have been giving to us, especially as an activist. So my gratefulness is unending. Thank you very much.

KARLA AGUILAR: Good afternoon, my name is Karla Aguilar, and I recently earned my MSW from NYU Silver School of Social Work. I am here in strong support of the Social Work Workforce Act.

While getting my MSW, I completed thousands of hours supporting some of the most vulnerable people in our system—recently migrated

1 teenagers in the foster care system and cancer
2 patients in one of NYC's medical facilities. I have
3 built trust with people in crisis, helped families
4 navigate systems stacked against them, and now I
5 can't even get hired. I have been constantly told
6 that I am "overqualified" for jobs that don't require
7 an LMSW and "not qualified" for the ones that do, all
8 because I haven't been able to schedule a licensing
9 exam that has nothing to do with how we actually
10 practice social work and everything to do with who
11 can afford the time, money, and mental capacity to
12 pass a biased, exclusionary test.

14 My partner was recently hospitalized in a
15 psychiatric unit, not just from a mental health
16 crisis, but from the cumulative weight of financial
17 instability, much of it stemming from my not being
18 able to find stable work after graduating. I have the
19 training and skills, but I am locked out, and so is
20 my entire household. My father, a 63-year-old cancer
21 survivor, still works every single day and helps us
22 cover groceries. This is what it means to be a social
23 worker from a working-class, generation background.
24 We care for everyone else while barely surviving
25 ourselves. We are told that this profession is about

1 justice, but what justice is there in a licensing
2 system that systematically excludes people like me—
3 people who speak the languages of our communities,
4 who carry lived experience, and who are deeply ready
5 to do this work.
6

7 The Social Workforce Act is a step
8 towards repairing that injustice. It removes an
9 unnecessary and harmful barrier, allowing states to
10 license us based on what actually matters: our
11 training, ethics, and practice. We are not asking for
12 a shortcut; we are asking to serve the communities
13 we've already been showing up for— with dignity,
14 with stability, and with the chance to finally make a
15 living doing the work we are trained to do. Please
16 support the Social Work Workforce Act. Thank you.

17 CHAIRPERSON AYALA: Thank you, and thank
18 you all for coming to testify and really raising some
19 of the concerns that really highlight why it is
20 important that we pass these bills.

21 I have a question for Mr. Cohen. Mr.
22 Cohen, you said that you had no AC, but they put in
23 two fans. Were those the industrial fans?
24
25

NOAM COHEN: Yeah, and I am referring to two industrial fans, electric fans, plugged into an outlet.

CHAIRPERSON AYALA: And how many people were in the room? (CROSS-TALK)

NOAM COHEN: With an extension cord.

CHAIRPERSON AYALA: And how many people were in the room?

NOAM COHEN: Twenty-three, including me. I have 22 roommates.

CHAIRPERSON AYALA: Okay. Has anyone in the room, that you know of, asked for reasonable accommodation?

NOAM COHEN: Yes, I have asked them to fix the AC. I don't know about a reasonable accommodation.

CHAIRPERSON AYALA: So, a reasonable accommodation, it would be a request to say, "I have asthma or a respiratory issue that requires that I have air-conditioning..." (CROSS-TALK)

NOAM COHEN: No, I don't believe I have that. That's the thing...

CHAIRPERSON AYALA: No, not you, but I am saying, the folks that are in the room, are you aware of anyone that has any of those issues?

NOAM COHEN: I am aware of people with health conditions that make them adversely affected by heat or high temperatures, yeah.

CHAIRPERSON AYALA: I appreciate that, okay.

NOAM COHEN: Yeah.

CHAIRPERSON AYALA: And during the daytime, is there a cooling space that you can go to?

NOAM COHEN: There is a room downstairs that has working AC.

CHAIRPERSON AYALA: Okay, and it has chairs for you?

NOAM COHEN: Right, but not in the sleeping area. That is really the issue right now.

CHAIRPERSON AYALA: Yes. Okay, thank you for that.

Miss Ramos, did HR ever refer you to any programs, or how did you become familiar with the Safety Net Project, and did that referral come from HRA? Did they recommend-- Because I'm trying to-- I'm trying to, to figure out if there's a process. I

brought it up at a couple of hearings prior to this, where, when a person is reporting that their benefits were stolen, they're automatically granted information on, you know, programs and services that can be helpful, like food pantries, nonprofit organizations that are, you know, offer some sort of grant. Is that something that you've heard of, or were you just coincidentally connected to the Safety Net Program?

DIANA RAMOS: I'm actually part of the membership of Safety Net Activists. And so that's why I say I was lucky. There aren't very many people like me who are connected. And Adriana Mendoza (phonetic), my advocate through Safety Net, who has helped me with the loveliness that is HRA so many times. Bless her. She was the one who connected me with the food grant. We had discussed my reaching out to HRA, and I was basically told they would direct me to the food banks and whatnot. But as I said, I am heat sensitive. I have heat sensitivity, and if it were like in the fall, like when they started screwed up my food stamps in September, it was a little easier. It was cooler. As it's getting hotter, I have to be careful. I've already been in the hospital once

1 because of the heat sensitivity. And that is not
2 something I want to do. I mean, I have a dog at home,
3 she's my baby, and there's just too much to do. It's
4 bad enough that my apartment gets really hot. So
5 yeah, HRA would not have done nothing in truth—in
6 truth. I probably would have had to call 311 to find
7 any connection to food banks or similar resources.
8 And I'm just lucky that I am part of Safety Net. But
9 there's so many others who aren't...

11 CHAIRPERSON AYALA: No, I...

12 DIANA RAMOS: And, and it's my neighbors
13 too. I'm just one, and in my building, I think I'm
14 going to say about 30% of neighbors, single and with
15 families, have had their benefits taken—one a
16 mother of four who had, I think, a total of \$900
17 taken from her SNAP benefits.

18 CHAIRPERSON AYALA: Yeah, no, we've seen a
19 lot of that. We have seen a lot of that.

20 So, when you called in to HRA to report
21 that the benefits were stolen, there was nothing...

22 DIANA RAMOS: I just reported my card
23 stolen...

24 CHAIRPERSON AYALA: But they didn't...

DIANA RAMOS: and just got a replacement and that's it, uhm, through the number that they told-- because they tell you, you know, if this has happened, you have to replace your card first.

As far as trying to contact HRA on my own, I really did not have the mental capacity to wait five hours to be either hung up on or talk to someone who would just give me the answer of, "There's nothing we can do for you."

CHAIRPERSON AYALA: No, no, no, it's important. I'm trying to gauge the level of information shared in cases where cards are stolen, to ensure that folks are not going without, you know, without food.

DIANA RAMOS: The information I got was from my advocate, who understands my heat sensitivity issues. I know of some food banks, but you have to stand out there for hours to at least get something. I am a diabetic, so I have to eat higher protein. There are certain processed foods I shouldn't be eating all the time. Every once in a while, if you get a hankering, it's fine, but to do that for a month-- even before I was able to get the grocery order, in that week or whatever, I am feeling it. My

1 numbers are all off. I have to now hit eating
2 windows, because my sugar will drop suddenly. And
3 then I have to be careful of what I eat. It's a whole
4 process, especially, and then having fibromyalgia, I
5 can't eat certain foods, because it exacerbates
6 inflammation. It's a "Yay!" moment. But having a fund
7 to be able to say, "Hey, this is what happened," I
8 mean, I'm sorry, but Buffalo is nine hours away. The
9 last time I checked, the Super Price Chopper is not
10 open at 2:45 in the morning. But yet they managed to
11 take \$92.00.

12
13 CHAIRPERSON AYALA: Yeah.

14 DIANA RAMOS: And then, you know, East
15 Chester and Staten Island. These are places I have
16 never been. And I have been to Staten Island, but I
17 never bought anything.

18 CHAIRPERSON AYALA: Mm-hmm. I know, it's
19 awful. I appreciate you coming in to share your
20 experience with us. Thank you, guys, so much for
21 coming in.

22 PANEL: Thank you.

23 CHAIRPERSON AYALA: Karla, you should
24 speak to-- You have a whole bunch of social workers
25 back there, get the hookup.

ALL: (LAUGHTER)

CHAIRPERSON AYALA: Thank you, thank you
all.

The next panel will be Laura Russell,
Rachel Braunstein, Deborah Berkman, and Raji
Edayathumangalam.

(PAUSE)

CHAIRPERSON AYALA: Whichever corner wants
to start first, you can feel free. Just make sure
that the red button is on.

LAURA RUSSELL: Thank you. I am Laura
Russell, the Citywide Director of the Family Domestic
Violence Unit at The Legal Aid Society. I am speaking
in support of Bill 1175.

The Legal Aid Society is the Nation's
oldest and largest legal services and social services
organization. The Society's Civil Practice, of which
I am a part, provides comprehensive legal assistance
in a broad variety of legal matters, representing
litigants in most courts within New York City. The
Family Domestic Violence Unit represents litigants in
both the Family and Supreme Court in an array of
family law and matrimonial matters, with a focus on
divorce for domestic violence survivors. Our staff,

housed in each of the five boroughs, specializes in handling complex divorces.

The Legal Aid Society is grateful for your recognition of the need for representation in divorce for domestic violence survivors. As you are aware, there is no Right to Counsel for financial matters of a divorce or in the actual filing of the divorce itself. Divorce is complicated, the Supreme Court is not user-friendly, and the paperwork can easily overwhelm a survivor. In an uncontested divorce, the simplest divorce, you may have to file 25 separate documents before you can get divorced. Contested divorce is even more complicated, sometimes taking years to complete and requiring multiple court appearances. Furthermore, as many domestic violence survivors are also survivors of economic abuse, these divorces become even more complicated as assets and income have been hidden from the survivor, and the assets are not in the survivor's name. Divorce is expensive even for those with means, and litigants who have wiped out college funds, bank accounts, and even retirement assets to afford a representation. Low-income litigants have none of those and resort to going alone in court. Without representation,

1 survivors give up much-needed assets. In a divorce,
2 issues such as rent-controlled apartments, child and
3 spousal support, and even retirement accounts are
4 decided. Survivors are often fearful of going to
5 court alone and will waive these either to stay safe
6 or because they do not know what they are entitled
7 to. They become homeless, lose substantial retirement
8 benefits, or are even forced onto public benefits,
9 because they are not able to secure support and the
10 assets they deserve. This legislation will allow
11 survivors to have representation where they are
12 seeking what they deserve— their share of marital
13 assets, support, and a divorce.

14
15 The Legal Aid Society, together with the
16 New York Legal Assistance Group, has applied for
17 funds utilizing Local Law 5 of 2022 to create a pilot
18 project to assist low-income survivors in divorce,
19 just as this legislation has proposed. I did hear
20 HRA's testimony, and I would like to say that we are
21 seeking \$1.9 million for a pilot project, a
22 substantial amount less than what HRA claims a pilot
23 project would cost. Furthermore, we extrapolated the
24 data as to how many divorces would exist from the
25 already existing data that the Office of Court

Administration puts out almost annually on divorces, some of the data that HRA asked for (TIMER)-- may I continue? Some of the data that HRA asked for does not exist because the Office of Court Administration does not collect it. I ask that you push this bill forward, regardless of the fact that some of this data does not exist, because you can extrapolate from the data that does exist, many of the numbers that would be needed for support, and for how much it would cost for a pilot project for divorces for domestic violence survivors. In the proposal that we mentioned, we also stated that we would look at representing litigants who are 200% or below the poverty guidelines, looking, of course, at just the income that the domestic violence survivor has, not the income of the marriage, noting that it is impossible, with the income of the marriage, for the lawyers to be paid from the other side. So, therefore, we are looking at just the domestic violence survivor. Legal Aid and NYLAG have done this jointly, and we have put this forward for two years, and unfortunately, it has not been funded to date. I would appreciate your consideration in reviewing the data and the numbers.

Finally, a divorce is a final step in the process of being freed from abuse. Survivors need representation to be free from abuse. This legislation will provide them with the needed piece to be free, and that is why the Legal Aid Society supports this essential legislation. Thank you.

RACHEL BRAUNSTEIN: Good afternoon, thank you for the opportunity to testify. My name is Rachel Braunstein, and I am the Director of Policy at Her Justice, a nonprofit organization that has advocated with and for women living in poverty in New York City for more than 30 years. The Council has long supported Her

Justice in our work on behalf of women living in poverty, and we thank the Council for recognizing the need for more resources through this proposal of 1175. We are grateful for the opportunity to raise some additional considerations for making the proposal as effective and sensitive to the needs of survivors as possible.

The proposal recognizes that there is a civil justice gap in divorce, a critical life-altering legal process for many. Given the significant legal need for domestic violence

1 survivors and the resources required for effective
2 representation, we propose that the Council moves
3 forward with implementing a fully funded pilot
4 program in partnership with expert legal services
5 organizations and leverage the pilot to evaluate the
6 most effective way to expand legal services for
7 survivors in divorce. A fully funded pilot program
8 would support legal services organizations with
9 expertise and a proven track record of effectively
10 serving survivors.
11

12 Her Justice, and our pro bono partners in
13 the city, provide legal representation to clients,
14 including survivors of domestic violence, in both
15 uncontested and contested divorces. Legal
16 representation in all divorce cases requires
17 expertise and time. Contested divorces are inherently
18 high-stakes and typically last months, if not years.
19 Generally, legal representation in these complex
20 cases can be incredibly costly, and for many, it is
21 simply unaffordable.

22 Research shows that the average cost of
23 divorce in New York is substantial, at an overall
24 average of \$13,800, rising to nearly \$19,000 for
25

cases involving children. And the figure may be far higher.

Many Her Justice matrimonial clients are those who have experienced domestic violence. In one year, we had 69% of our matrimonial clients reporting domestic violence in their marriage, with the divorce being a critical moment for them in their journeys.

Divorce can be complicated for DV survivors in custody and visitation, in seeking orders of protection, and because they suffer economic abuse leading to, among other things, coerced debt or nonconsensual credit-related transactions that occur as a result of coercion or fraud.

Complex legal issues require the services of expert counsel. Her Justice and the organizations here provide a extensive and knowledgeable legal representation to survivors and, along with legal representation, essential other services, including, as we do, running credit reports for our family and matrimonial clients to identify additional financial services they may need.

The pilot should encourage and fund partnerships with organizations with holistic and

1 trauma-informed service models and lawyers who are
2 cross-trained to understand (TIMER) systemic barriers
3 that complicate survivors' needs.
4

5 If I may just quickly point out the topic
6 of data, we think this is an opportunity, this pilot,
7 as proposed, to assess the extent of need and
8 resources for divorce representation. There is a data
9 gap, as my colleague pointed out, around the needs of
10 survivors in divorce, the prevalence of domestic
11 violence in divorce cases, and the experience and
12 outcomes for survivors in divorce. An investment in
13 collecting and reporting on court data, combined with
14 the knowledge and expertise of long-providing legal
15 services organizations, would be valuable for
16 understanding how to best expand services through
17 this proposal for those in need in the city. Thank
18 you so much.

19 DEBORAH BERKMAN: Good afternoon, Deputy
20 Speaker Ayala, Council Members, and staff. Thank you
21 very much for the opportunity to speak today. My name
22 is Deborah Berkman, and I'm the Director of the
23 Shelter and Economic Stability Project at the New
24 York Legal Assistance Group, or NYLAG.
25

I have prepared remarks, but before I get started, I just want to answer one question that you had asked the representative from DSS who was here earlier today, and you said, "Why is the One-Shot Deal acceptance rate only 28%?" And one of the things that he didn't say is, but which so many of my clients struggle with, is the interview. So, there are two components: one component is that people don't know that they have to spontaneously call for an interview. It does say it in very small print at the end of the application, but there's no sort of warning that says, "Your application will not be processed unless you call in," and that's actually what happens. The second part is that when people call in, the wait time for the interview is so long, and people have jobs, and they are working. I mean, there are so many reasons that they can't spend five hours on hold—so just as an aside.

I want to start by saying NYLAG enthusiastically supports Intro 1208, which mandates reporting on the availability of air conditioning in shelters. And it's no surprise to the Council that New York City experiences extreme heat during the summer, and those temperatures are rising due to

1 climate change. In fact, each summer, more than 500
2 New Yorkers die as a result of extreme heat. And
3 unsurprisingly, these deaths don't fall evenly across
4 racial lines. Black New Yorkers are more than twice
5 as likely to die from heat stress as white New
6 Yorkers.
7

8 According to New York City's Mayor's
9 Office of Climate and Environmental Justice, the lack
10 of access to home air conditioning is the most
11 important risk factor for heat stress death. Clearly,
12 access to cooling is essential for summer safety.
13 Many New York shelters lack air conditioning, and we
14 just heard about the experiences on the last panel.
15 My clients consistently report stifling conditions
16 that make it unbearable to sleep at night. These
17 conditions are often worsened by sealed windows and a
18 lack of fans or other cooling devices. In some cases,
19 my clients are forced into street homelessness during
20 the summer because the shelter conditions are so
21 oppressive inside.

22 This bill isn't essential for a step
23 towards providing New Yorkers experiencing
24 homelessness with safe, livable environments during
25 the summer, but NYLAG also urges the Council to pass

1 this legislation and to take next steps and mandate
2 that all shelters provide air conditioning and
3 allocate funding to bring older shelters in
4 compliance. Additionally, funding will be needed
5 because some older buildings may not support the
6 infrastructure easily.

7
8 My colleagues in the Domestic Violence
9 Law Unit, have prepped me on this issue, and
10 regarding Intro 1175, NYLAG commends this Council for
11 considering additional funding to provide legal
12 assistance to domestic violence survivors seeking to
13 separate and divorce from their abusers. However,
14 (TIMER) we urge careful consideration and further
15 research before moving towards practical
16 implementation.

17 Just very quickly, we recommend that this
18 Council implement the pilot project that was proposed
19 by the Legal Aid Society and NYLAG to start with the
20 one-borough approach and see where we go from there.
21 It's important to start with a pilot project because
22 these cases do differ significantly from those
23 addressed in other Right to Counsel programs.

24 Finally, NYLAG gets so many SNAP and cash
25 assistance skimming cases. There was a time that

those benefits could be replaced for SNAP, but now they cannot, so many of our clients have nowhere to turn—they don't know about the Safety Net Assistance Program—when the money that they rely on for food is suddenly gone. This particularly impacts our elderly clients, so we very much urge this council to pass Resolution 839. Thank you.

RAJI EDAYATHUMANGALAM: Good afternoon. Thank you, Deputy Speaker and Chair Ayala, and thank you to the staff and Council Members on the Committee of General Welfare for holding this timely hearing on the fractured supportive housing process. I would like to take a moment to thank you, Chair Ayala, on behalf of all the social workers on the frontline, for recognizing the work we do in various interlinked areas.

I am Raji Edayathumangalam, Senior Policy Social Worker at the New York County Defender Services. I have served approximately 300 clients who have cycled in and out of jails, prisons, the shelter system, and various other institutions.

Our office supports Intro 791, and we aim to provide a solution to address the bewildering bureaucratic chaos and fragmentation that we've all

1 heard about and witnessed firsthand alongside our
2 clients. It's basically, as we've heard today, left
3 us with a surplus of approximately 5,000 units, and
4 there are obviously nuances and details to that that
5 DSS went over. But, then on the other hand, you have
6 people in crisis and with unstable housing or
7 unhoused on the other hand.

8
9 In 2024, New York County Defender
10 Services served nearly 6,000 clients, with data
11 indicating that over one-third were unstably housed
12 or unhoused. As the Committee has already raised, the
13 issue is that the right hand doesn't know what the
14 left hand is doing, as seen in the example of the
15 one-shot deal that was also just referenced. And so
16 much is left to the individual to navigate on their
17 own. I would liken the supportive housing process to
18 going to the DMV. And I did that a month ago, uh,
19 close to the, the Real ID deadline. It's like going
20 to the DMV blindfolded, over and over again, every
21 week for months on end, with an added twist that
22 every time you're told to start all over again, each
23 time because you didn't do this one task or you bring
24 this other document—Chair Ayala, you also referenced
25 your own experience in your own life.

Such a fractured process has left people like my former client, whom I'm calling K., spinning his wheels for years, amidst his ongoing housing crisis. K. successfully completed his arduous Manhattan Treatment Court Mandate more than two years ago. He's been in stable recovery from decades of heroin use. He's been working full-time for a few years now, and he's steered clear of any criminal legal contact, but still, he has no stable housing. K. is every fractured system's poster child. We should all be celebrating him, because this is not easy to do, as we all know. He's done everything humanly possible, against all odds, and he needs all the help he can get to find secure housing, not in the distant future, but now.

Let's talk about all the walls that K. has faced. He's been (TIMER) unable to access any of the housing options or rental assistance programs in the city, be it Section 8, CityFHEPS, (INAUDIBLE), market-rate apartments, or even affordable housing. His successful recovery actually disqualifies him from many of the supportive housing categories that he may have been eligible for earlier while he was in

the treatment court. So, K. is just one of the thousands of NYCDS clients in this predicament.

So, I want to wrap up by offering a solution, because the New York County Defender Service wants to help clients like K. and others in a housing crisis. To do that, we need the necessary funding and staffing infrastructure to provide the specialized benefits and housing navigation services that our clients need. You know, for instance, in the case of K., had our office had such expertise in place, maybe K. would have been approved for supportive housing while he was already participating in The Treatment Court.

So why is the public defender's office so uniquely positioned to close some of these bureaucratic gaps? We work closely with our clients, like K, who have open cases. We work with them throughout their legal case. We build trusting relationships with our clients and gather crucial information to support their legal defense. This information is also pertinent to their supportive housing application. Rather than sending them to 20 other places while we work with them for a couple of

years, we could actually be working with them from day one.

So what our office is proposing is, if we got the funding to hire benefits and housing specialists in-house, these specialists would work alongside the legal defense team. And, Chair Ayala, as you had alluded before, the specialists would work alongside the social workers and the defense attorney in a two-pronged approach. One goes towards housing, and another goes towards legal defense. We want to do this, and we can do this, so we're actually requesting this kind of help in order to help our clients.

In closing, as with so many New Yorkers in our client case situation, supportive housing is often their only housing option. Dare I say it to the Committee that the housing crisis our clients grapple with may actually be solved by the timely help of a few dedicated and skilled specialists who know how to build these stable bridges over fractured processes. I would say, let's replace fragmentation with coordination. It is possible. And we can start to begin to end this homelessness. And, again, we

support the local bill, Intro 791. Thank you for your time, and I am happy to answer your questions.

CHAIRPERSON AYALA: Thank you. Thank you for all of the work that you guys do. I know that you are helping many, many, many New Yorkers navigate a very complicated system that is not intended to, you know, to make it easy on folks that are already stressed out and at their wits end from having to go from place to other without any clear clarity on what they are expected to do and who is supposed to call them and follow up. It is a lot of work. And we are hoping that these bills will help simplify some of that and remove some of those barriers to service. But your testimonies are as critically important because you have that firsthand experience. So, I appreciate you coming, thank you.

Okay, our next panel will be Alison Wilkey, Jonathan Chung, Luisa Lopez, and Shyvonne Noboa.

(PAUSE)

CHAIRPERSON AYALA: Okay, you may begin.

ALISON WILKEY: Hi, my name is Alison Wilkey, and I am the Director of Government Affairs and Strategic Campaigns at The Coalition for the

Homeless. Thank you for holding this hearing, Deputy Speaker.

I'm going to talk about Intros 1208 and 791.

Last year, 2024, DHS issued 18 Code Red alerts. And those alerts are when temperatures are so high that they do extra street outreach to bring people indoors to spaces like drop-in centers, other spaces where there is cooling. It is kind of sadly ironic that not all shelters have air conditioning when they issue these alerts to bring people indoors.

According to our data from our monitoring of DHS shelters, and this is since fall 2024, only 48% of shelters for families with children have air-conditioning throughout the building-- And I didn't say my name-- oh, I did say my name, okay-- for shelters for adult families during this period, 64% had AC and 76% of adult shelters inspected had air-conditioning throughout the building. That's not every shelter, but it's a vast majority that we reach in our inspection cycle.

So there are a lot of shelters that don't have AC throughout the building. It's also important to understand why having AC in all parts of the

1 building is crucial. There may be AC in one room,
2 like a cafeteria or a common room, but what we hear
3 from shelter residents is that they end up sleeping
4 on the floor of those rooms, because that's where
5 they can get AC at night.

7 And then you are also restricted from
8 being in dorm areas during the day. But for people
9 who get a special pass because they have a disability
10 that requires them to rest during the day, or because
11 they work evening hours, that means that they have to
12 be in sleeping areas that don't have air conditioning
13 during the hottest part of the day.

14 As Calvin and Noam were talking about,
15 you know, homeless New Yorkers have higher rates of
16 disabilities than the general public. They can face
17 particular hazards and health risks in excessive
18 heat. For instance, individuals taking medication
19 that causes dehydration or increases their
20 susceptibility to heat may experience numerous side
21 effects.

22 We work with a lot of shelter residents
23 to file for reasonable accommodation requests to get
24 AC because of their health conditions. But a lot of
25 people don't really know that that process is

1 available. And even when we file, it can take weeks
2 and months for people to be accommodated, during
3 which their health is at risk. We still encounter
4 people who have been granted reasonable accommodation
5 requests but are not receiving AC.
6

7 So we support Intro 1208. We would like
8 to see a requirement that every shelter has AC.
9 Still, we would also urge that the report include,
10 for each agency, the number of reasonable
11 accommodation requests filed for AC, the number that
12 are actually fulfilled, and then the time it takes to
13 fulfill those from the time the request is submitted.

14 And then turning to Introduction (TIMER)
15 791 really quickly, you know, there's only one
16 available supportive housing unit for every five
17 people eligible. But the City reported, back in
18 January, that there are over 4,000 vacant supportive
19 housing units. And this bill would speak to those
20 vacancies, but some of what we learned from our
21 programs that help place people in supportive housing
22 is that there can be issues with units that make them
23 not appropriate for people. Some of the units can be
24 shared units, and for people, especially those who
25 may have psychiatric disabilities, that's just not a

situation that works for them. Some of them are older and need repairs. Some of the units may have funding streams where they take 70% of a person's income, rather than your typical 30% towards rent, which doesn't leave people money to live on.

So we would really urge that the report go deeper into why these units are vacant, like, what are the necessary fixes that are needed to make these units meet the needs of people who are seeking supportive housing, and also understanding more deeply what the different funding streams are for these vacant units, so that we can drill down into why the units are vacant instead of just having a static report showing that units are vacant.

And then the final thing I'll note just about that is that, you know, that bill only covers units that are in the CAPS system, the Coordinated Assessment and Placement System. And that's not all the supportive housing in the city. CAPS has about 36,000 units in it, but there are over 40,000 supportive housing units in the city. So if we just make this about what is in CAPS, then it's just not going to capture the full extent of vacancies because not every unit is in CAP.

CHAIRPERSON AYALA: I appreciate that. And our team is taking notes, thank you.

ALISON WILKEY: Thanks.

JONATHAN CHUNG: Good afternoon, Deputy Speaker Ayala, staff, and Members of the Committee. My name is Jonathan Chung, and I am the Director of Public Policy and Advocacy for the National Alliance on Mental Illness of New York City, or NAMI-NYC. Thank you for holding today's important hearing.

We are grateful to you, Speaker Adams, and the entire City Council for recognizing the growing mental health crisis in New York City and for working in a comprehensive manner to try to address this issue. Even with the work that has been done to date, much more still needs to be done to address the gaping holes in our mental healthcare system. In addition to the many operational and funding gaps, a major issue plaguing the behavioral health community is a depleted and overworked workforce. We are currently experiencing a shortage of social workers, depriving many New Yorkers of the community-based, culturally competent care that they need. Factors such as low pay, high caseloads, and increasing

burnout are significant reasons for these shortages.
Another reason? A biased licensing exam.

Many New Yorkers have completed their
Master of Social Work, yet struggle to pass the
third-party written LMSW exam. The Association of
Social Work Boards, ASWB, who administer these exams,
own data shows that there are glaring racial and age
disparities in pass rates for the exam, particularly
amongst Black and older test takers, when compared to
their white and younger counterparts.

There are several states in the nation
that do not require a licensing exam. One of those
states, Illinois, can be a good case study on how
removing the licensing exam can positively impact the
workforce shortage. In 2021, recognizing the glaring
racial and age disparities in the test, the Illinois
State Legislature passed, and the Governor signed
legislation to abolish the exam. By the end of 2023,
the Illinois Chapter of the National Association of
Social Workers reported that more than 10,000 new
social workers entered the workforce during that
time.

NAMI-NYC is a proud member of the Social
Workers for Justice Coalition. We joined the call in

advocating for the passage of the Social Worker Workforce Act (A.701/S.988) in the State Legislature. And, we joined them today, along with Council Member Bottcher, to support the passage of City Council Resolution 362-A, urging the New York State Legislature to enact this important piece of legislation on the state level to significantly address the workforce shortage crisis we are experiencing.

Thank you again to the Committee for your consideration of our testimony. We appreciate all your efforts, and we look forward to continuing to do this important work together and being a resource to you all. Thank you.

LUISA LOPEZ: Good afternoon, Deputy Speaker Ayala and Members of the Committee. My name is Luisa Lopez, and I'm the Executive Director of the Latino Social Work Coalition Scholarship Fund and Co-Chair of the Licensing Committee of Social Justice.

I'm here today to urge the Council to pass Resolution 362 in support of the Social Work Workforce Act. New York City is in a mental health crisis, and we see it every day on the train, on the

bus, and on our streets. Communities of color, especially, are facing compounded trauma, housing instability, and immigration stress. They deserve a workforce that reflects their realities, speaks their languages, and understands the context of their lives. But right now, the very professionals that we need, multilingual, culturally competent social workers, are being locked out of the field by an outdated and discriminatory licensing exam.

Social workers are the backbone of New York's Mental health infrastructure; 75% of all mental health services in this city are delivered by social workers, and 80% of our clients are people of color. But our workforce does not reflect our client base, and agencies across the city report critical shortages and have reported critical shortages for a long time, not because of a lack of talent, but because of outdated and discriminatory barriers to entry like the SWB Exam.

Let me be clear, this is not about lowering standards; every other requirement for licensure would remain in place: graduate education, supervised field work, and coursework. This is about removing one arbitrary, unvalidated exam that has

never been proven to measure clinical competence and disproportionately block social workers of color from entering the field.

The mental health crisis is now, and we cannot keep asking New Yorkers to wait. The workforce shortage is now, and the moment to act is now. By passing Resolution 362, the Council will be taking a powerful stand for equity, mental health access, and a workforce that truly reflects and understands our communities.

Thank you for your leadership and for recognizing that mental healthcare doesn't just require more social workers, it requires the right social workers. Thank you.

SHYVONNE NOBOA: Good afternoon, Chair Ayala and Committee on General Welfare, for the opportunity to testify on behalf of the Social Work Workforce Act. I'm Shyvonne Noboa, Associate Executive Director for Older Adult Services at Sunnyside Community Services (SCS), a proud social worker, and a member of Social Workers for Justice.

A little bit about Sunnyside Community Services, we are a community-based not-for-profit, and we believe that every person deserves meaningful

support to achieve their aspirations. And we're proud to serve over 16,000 people across Western Queens and beyond.

As a lifelong advocate for older adults, I am deeply concerned about the unacceptable delays in care our older clients face due to a shortage of licensed master's level social workers. This testimony will highlight the urgent need for change.

We know there is a growing number of master's level social workers who are ready, willing, and able to serve—you are going to hear from them today—but they are held back by a requirement to take an exam that does not reflect their ability to provide high-quality, competent care. These social workers, many of whom are bilingual and culturally competent, reflect the vulnerable communities that need their services most. We need them, and I cannot say that enough. They are essential in meeting the growing mental health needs of older adults, but the odds are stacked against them as they are expected to pass an unbiased and unscientific licensing exam.

At Sunnyside, we provide Geriatric Mental Health services under one master's level social worker—one. He provides critical support to older

adults facing isolation, depression, anxiety, and the added challenges of living with chronic illness, as older adults continue to live longer. He leads three support groups, each with over 20 older adults participating. And then he does one-on-one counseling sessions. This fiscal year, he has already seen over 220 clients and counting. That is an incredibly overwhelming caseload for one social worker. When he can't and he has to create a wait list, he refers them out to community-based services where, unfortunately for clients, especially Spanish speakers and those for whom English is a second language, they often wait weeks or months for an appointment to seek mental health care. We should all be outraged here.

We need more social workers to manage growing caseloads and meet the needs of our aging populations.

So Sunnyside is just one agency that is grappling with this challenge; multiply the issue by many other community-based nonprofits across New York City and the state, and the siren gets louder and louder.

So I'd like to end today, Chair Ayala, on a personal note. In 2020, I lived in Corona, Queens, that is my neighborhood, and we were the hardest hit in the pandemic. My grandfather died after spending five weeks in the hospital, and I lived with four generations under one roof, without the ability to isolate and without the vantage of vaccines.

In the aftermath of his death, my grandfather, Tobias Noboa, one of my family members was paralyzed by grief. And I spent months searching (TIMER) for a licensed social worker to provide grief counseling. There simply weren't enough social workers. The doors were closed. There were no waitlists. There was no access to mental health care for my family member. We were ultimately able to find a student psychologist at a school-based mental health clinic, but that experience fell short of the care they needed. As a social worker, I could not help my own family member. It felt like a personal failure, but let's be clear: it was a systemic failure that affects far too many in our community.

So, I would appreciate the endorsement of the New York City Council for the Social Work Workforce Act. It would send a clear message that we

as a city are fully committed to prioritizing mental health and the well-being of all New Yorkers, especially older adults, and that we recognize and elevate the vital role of social workers in this effort. This isn't just a policy change, it's a call for justice and equity in mental healthcare. Thank you.

CHAIRPERSON AYALA: Thank you so much for sharing that, and my condolences. I recognize everything that has been said. It is something that we need to work harder to address. I think one of the ways that we have been trying to be helpful is by creating, independent of the licensing issue; it's also how to engage Black and brown folks in the social worker field, how do we bring them on board, how do we keep them, how do we retain them in our communities? Because they are coming out of school with debt already, and not being paid adequately. So we have been having those conversations for a number of years. There have been a couple of difficult fiscal budget cycles, so we have not gotten to the point where we have fully funded that initiative, but I look forward to ensuring that it is there so that it offers some financial relief to students that are

in that field who would commit to working in communities of color for a certain number of years. That way, we wouldn't have the excessive turnover with the limited staff that we already have available. But thank you all so much, and thank you for the work that you do. I know it's important work, and we appreciate it. Thank you.

Our next panel will be Gabriela Amara Lis; I'm sorry if I mispronounced it, Jacqueline Mondros, Ellen Mischinski, and Maria Lizando.

(PAUSE)

ELLEN MISCHINSKI: Hi all, my name is Ellen Mischinski. I am a current social work student pursuing my master's at NYU Silver. So thank you to the Committee for the opportunity to testify today.

I'm here with Social Workers for Justice calling on the Council to pass Resolution 362-A in support of the Social Work Workforce Act, eliminating the entry-level licensure exam for social workers.

I'm someone who has always thrived in academic settings. I'm a huge nerd, so next year I'll be able to take the prep course, study for the test, and pass the exam. It's not going to cause me too much stress. But I did still come out here today to

The ASWB licenser exam was designed for people exactly like me, privileged, academically inclined white women. But the field of social work needs to include more than just people like me, people who have the experience and the understanding of the marginalization and the struggles that clients face. This diverse city needs a diverse workforce of social workers to improve our ability to address people's needs.

Everyone is talking about how we need to address this mental health crisis, and passing this resolution can bring us one small step closer to that. It opens up the door for professionals who have meaningful experience in the field to fill the vacancies where more social workers are desperately needed, people who are fully qualified master's level professionals who just couldn't afford the expensive prep material to navigate this exam that doesn't

measure competence but rather wants access to resources and test taking tips and tricks.

The exam requirement for licensure is a discriminatory barrier for individuals, as well as a barrier to the City providing the level of quality services that New Yorkers deserve.

By asking you to pass Council Member Bottcher's Resolution 362-A, support the Social Work Workforce Act to empower the incredible social workers on the front lines of this mental health crisis. Thank you.

CHAIRPERSON AYALA: Thank you.

MARIA LIZARDO: Good afternoon, and thank you, Deputy Speaker Ayala, for having us today. I am Maria Lizardo, and I am the Executive Director at NMIC, a settlement house serving 14,000 community members in Upper Manhattan and the Bronx. I am a proud social worker and a graduate of Hunter College School of Social Work, where I majored in Community Organizing. I am here today as a member of Social Workers for Justice. Thank you for the opportunity to testify at today's hearing.

I am testifying in support of Resolution 362-A, which is in support of the Social Work

Workforce Act. This legislation would eliminate the entry-level ASWB licensing exam as a condition for licensure because of its long-standing and extreme racial biases in pass rates. It lacks any evidence that it scientifically measures the competence of social workers: 49% of Black social workers and 62% of Latino social workers who graduate pass the exam; in comparison, 88% of white social workers who graduate pass the exam.

This exam excludes the very social workers we need—most of them practicing—and those who reflect the populations we serve in high-need communities in both public and non-profit agencies.

When I graduated in 1997, a long time ago, I had no intention of taking the exam. After spending two and a half years in school, completing two semesters of an internship, and having worked in the field, I was not going to let the exam be the only measure of my social work skills. Although years later I was able to obtain my license when the licensing regulations changed and I was grandfathered in, I still firmly believe that the foundation of my skill sets is based on the academics, good supervision, and experience in the field. A biased

test cannot and should not determine people's employability and skill sets necessary in the field.

New York State would not be the first state to eliminate the social work licensing exam. When Illinois passed similar legislation in 2022, they welcomed 10,000 new social workers in two years. Rhode Island doubled its workforce. We are likely to see an increase of 20,000 social workers when the exam is eliminated, and they will deliver the essential mental health services that New York City and New York State need.

To summarize, I submit this testimony in support of the Resolution submitted by Council Member Bottcher, and the Social Work Workforce Act as sponsored by Senator Brouk and Assemblymember Jessica Gonzalez-Rojas. Thank you for your time.

GABRIELA AMARA LIS: Hello, good afternoon. My name is Gabriela Amara Lis, and I'm a graduate student at Columbia University. I work at a psychiatric office where I have been employed for the past eight years. I'm also here today as a member of Social Workers for Justice. Thank you for allowing me to testify at this workforce hearing.

I'm testifying today in support of Resolution 362-A, which supports the Social Work Workforce Act. This legislation would eliminate the ASWB licensing system, citing its documented racial bias, pass rates, and lack of scientific validity in measuring a social worker's competence.

I'm fluent in three languages, and my goal is to broaden my skills to help non-English speakers who are treated unfairly every day. During my first year of graduate school, I completed 600 hours of clinical work under supervision, where I provided therapy for non-English speakers to support their mental health and help them navigate crises.

The burden of passing this (INAUDIBLE) exam next year is affecting my well-being, as English is my third language. Many people are choosing not to pursue a master's degree in social work due to the disproportionately low passing rates for non-native speakers. As my colleague said, Rhode Island doubled its workforce. We are likely to see an increase of 20,000 social workers when the exam is eliminated, and they will deliver the essential mental health services that New York City and New York State need.

To summarize, I submit this testimony in support of the Resolution submitted by Council Member Bottcher, and the Social Work Workforce Act as sponsored by Senator Brouk and Assemblymember Jessica Gonzalez-Rojas. Thank you so much for your time.

JACQUELINE MONDROS: Good afternoon, I'm Jacqueline Mondros, and I've been a social worker for 52 years—former Dean at Hunter and Dean and Professor Emeritus at Stony Brook University. I have literally worked with thousands of social workers. Thank you, Deputy Speaker Ayala, for the opportunity to testify today on behalf of Resolution 362, which supports the Social Workforce Act.

We are seven days away from the mayoral primary. Every candidate has proposed an expansion of mental health services. And indeed, the City Council has also supported the expansion of such services. And for good reason! We provide services in all the areas you mentioned today, including domestic violence, schools, homeless services, healthcare, justice, and courts, as well as Rikers Island and wherever else you can think of. And as you have said, a good social worker is worth their weight in gold. They see things no one else sees; they say things

1 that no other person will say, and they cut through
2 the red tape that gets people the services that they
3 need. Seventy-five percent of all services are
4 delivered by social workers, and we don't have enough
5 of them, and the ones we have do not adequately
6 represent the communities we serve.

7
8 The obvious and indefensible obstacle to
9 growing our workforce is the entry-level ASWB exam.
10 It has a long-standing and national track record of
11 extreme racial bias, and it doesn't follow any of the
12 standards for psychological and educational testing,
13 which would ensure its validity, reliability, and
14 norming to different groups. We have been asking ASWB
15 since 2014 to fix this exam, and the disparities have
16 only worsened. And yet, the outcomes have such
17 serious consequences; more than half of Black
18 graduates and more than a third of Latino graduates
19 fail the exam. And that prohibits them from working
20 as social workers. Others today will testify on the
21 disastrous impact of that.

22 We applaud all our public officials for
23 proposing more funding for mental health services. It
24 is urgently needed and important. But it won't make a
25 bit of difference if there is no one (TIMER) to fill

those jobs. If we pass the Social Work Workforce Act, we will put thousands of new and culturally diverse social workers to work in our communities. If we delay, we won't. It's as simple as that. We urge the City Council to support Resolution 362 and to urge our state legislature to pass the Social Work Workforce Act. Thank you for hearing out our testimony.

CHAIRPERSON AYALA: Thank you, so nice to see you!

JACQUELINE MONDROS: Good to see you.

CHAIRPERSON AYALA: Thank you. Thank you, guys.

We are going to call our next panel: Stella Horwitz, Maria Miranda, Grace Downs-Liguori, and Tara Escudero Alameda.

(PAUSE)

CHAIRPERSON AYALA: Okay, you may begin, just make sure the red light is on.

TARA ESCUDERO ALAMEDA: My name is Tara Escudero Alameda. Thank you, Chair, for taking this opportunity to listen to my story.

I've been impacted; I was terminated due to the license exam. I became a school social worker

1 for the New York City Department of Education,
2 working with students with disabilities since 2014.
3 In 2021, I was terminated. Prior to, the testing
4 sites opened up, because during the pandemic they
5 were locked, you know, closed down. I had to fly to
6 Georgia just to get a seat. None of the neighboring
7 states or New York had any seats available. I do
8 suffer from testing anxiety, so I get extra test
9 time. It impacted my life because I took a huge pay
10 cut. It impacted my family and my quality of living,
11 making me feel like a failure.
12

13 I've taken the exam 11 times, and saw on
14 the screen "Failed", only missing by a few points.
15 And I always thought there was something wrong with
16 me. I was doing, like, therapy, and all these
17 different things to come to find out they released
18 the data that there's nothing wrong with me, and
19 everything is wrong with this exam.

20 I still work for the schools. I was
21 demoted to a lower position, yet I have licensed
22 social workers coming to me for support and guidance.
23 And I am not going to stop supporting my community,
24 because, at the end of the day, they still need me.
25 But it has impacted me so much, and all I pray for is

my job back to be in my rightful seat. Because a lot of people who are passing, they don't know anything. So we need to be able to push this bill, so we can work with our communities. Thank you.

MARIA MIRANDA: Good afternoon. Thank you, Deputy Speaker Ayala, for the opportunity to testify today. My name is Maria Miranda, I'm a member of Social Workers for Justice, and I'm a Bronx-based social worker providing in home support and services to homebound older adults and their family caregivers—a majority of whom are people of color. I work at Presbyterian Senior Services, an agency that contracts with New York City Department of Aging to provide case management services to these Bronx older adults and their families. I'm testifying today in support of Resolution 362-A, which supports the Social Work Workforce Act.

I'm in support of this act, because the ASWB exam does not and cannot measure the true essence of our profession, which is the bond we develop with our clients. These bonds are formed through trust, rapport, and collaboration, and are especially strong when social workers and clients

share the same language, culture, and lived experiences.

In the three years that I have been a social worker, I have been able to facilitate the greatest change within my clients by using my lived experience as a caregiver to my late grandparents. The only thing that the ASWB exam measures is one's aptitude for test taking. This was said to me directly during one of my test prep sessions. I was told to ignore my field work in favor of recalling a list of strategies for different questions, and to even imagine the clients as people who lived in a middle America. Now if that doesn't indicate bias for a certain group, then I don't know what does. And it's certainly not reflective of the Bronx.

It needs to be understood that clients throughout New York City are not middle America, and the scenarios we encounter are not AI generated. Clients like mine in the Bronx look for authenticity that can only be learned by listening and understanding their stories, meeting them where they are, and by social workers who respect and understand them.

And on a personal note, I am deeply concerned for the 1.3 million caregivers in New York City who are in a very serious mental health crisis. They're having to balance caring for their family members, caring for themselves, and having to face a system that continuously ignores their basic needs. They need our help, and they need social workers who understand them.

I end this by encouraging The City Council to support this resolution submitted by Council Member Bottcher and the Social Work Workforce Act as sponsored by Senator Brouk and Assemblymember Gonzalez-Rojas. Thank you for your time.

DR. GRACE DOWNS-LIGUORI: Good afternoon, and thank you, Chair, for your time. My name is Dr. Grace Downs-Liguori I hold doctorate in social welfare, and I'm a clinical social worker.

I'm here today in support of Resolution 362-A calling on the New York State Legislature to pass the Social Work Workforce Act and eliminate the ASWB test requirement for Licensed Master Social Workers, an obvious obstacle in expanding the social worker workforce in New York, especially for immigrant communities.

I currently work as an oncology social worker in Queens, the most diverse county in the United States, and I have spent the last 10 years of my career working in medical settings primarily with immigrant individuals and their families facing life-altering illnesses and disabilities. It can be next to impossible to find adequate support and mental health services to meet the needs of my clients, most of whom require culturally informed and adaptive mental health services in their native languages. Immigrants face disproportionate disparities in cancer care, including financial stress, and many struggle in adjusting and coping with their cancer diagnosis; in many ways, it impacts their lives, hopes, and aspirations. Many are unable to access needed mental health services due to the shortage of diverse bilingual social workers in our city.

Most recently, I have worked with clients who are Bengali-speaking, Urdu-speaking, Spanish-speaking, Chinese-speaking who are in need of support after receiving advanced cancer diagnoses and are having difficulty coping—not sleeping, ruminating thoughts and worries, but we cannot find services, and many of them, when I do find services, many of

We need more social workers, and particularly diverse social workers to meet the needs of our clients. I urge you to pass Resolution 362-A supporting the Social Work Workforce Act. Thank you.

In my capacity at the school, I teach, hire adjuncts, advise students one on one, develop continuing education programs for New York City social workers from DSS, HRA, and DHS. Among my other responsibilities, I oversee our licensing preparation courses.

My amazing and dedicated students reflect the demographic of New York City and are primarily students of color. Many of my colleagues have spoken about the exam's bias and provided a number of statistics; I would like to speak from my perspective

as a social work educator and share two stories reflecting negative impacts of the exam and how it stands in the way of qualified social workers:

The first is how one of my students working in child welfare lost her job after failing the exam, a condition of her employment was to pass the exam within a year of hire. Everyone lost, the highly committed social worker on the front lines as well as her clients. She felt humiliated, depressed, and desperate. Who does this help?

One of my adjuncts, (INAUDIBLE) call her Carolina, had years of direct practice experience with DV and justice impacted patients. She failed the exam five times, but eventually passed it after investing thousands of dollars in licensing preparation courses and then the ASWB exam. Carolina is single parent of three children, and she is also responsible for her father who has Alzheimer's disease. She pays for his care out of her pocket. To support her family, she works two full-time social work jobs. She did not need the additional expenses associated with the ASWB exam.

It should not be this hard for social workers who have committed to making the world a

1 better place to become licensed and to find
2 employment. The exam is a major roadblock that acts
3 as a barrier and it's a revenue resource benefiting
4 only ASWB and harming New Yorkers who desperately
5 need social workers. Thank you for your time and
6 support.
7

8 CHAIRPERSON AYALA: Thank you. We have
9 still have quite a number of people, so we are trying
10 to move it along, sorry—Xai Yang, Allison Jordan,
11 Khivah Fequierz, and Alyson Rosenthal.

12 (PAUSE)

13 (BACKGROUND CONVERSATION)

14 CHAIRPERSON AYALA: Okay, you can begin.
15 No, is the red light on?

16 ALYSON ROSENTHAL: There we go. All right,
17 well, thank you to the to General Welfare Committee
18 Chair Diana Ayala for holding today's hearing and the
19 opportunity to submit this testimony. My name is
20 Alyson Rosenthal, I am the Chief Program Officer and
21 Registered Dietitian at the West Side Campaign
22 Against Hunger (WSCAH), we are an anti-hunger
23 organization that for 46 years has been focused on
24 providing access to healthy, fresh produce, and
25 direct benefits enrollment to New Yorkers in need.

Last year alone WSCAH provided over five million pounds of food to 110,000 New York City customers, which included the distribution of over three million pounds of fresh produce.

The West Side Campaign Against Hunger's mission is to make sure all New Yorkers have access with dignity to a choice of healthy food and supportive services. Right now, we are experiencing a hunger crisis, even prior to this new federal administration taking office, one in eight New Yorkers were experiencing food insecurity—and that was up from one in 10 the year prior.

The number of people seeking food from our organization is at an all time high, and we need the City's help. Today I was joined by dozens of emergency feeding organizations on the steps of City Hall urging you all and the Mayor to increase the Community Food Connection Program, CFC, the funding from \$57 million to \$100 million. Collectively, the emergency food programs in New York City serve over 3 million hungry New Yorkers annually. They rely on us to help feed their families.

The current proposed budget of \$57 million is simply not enough to meet the growing

1 demand for food. SNAP cuts are looming, federal
2 budgets have been cut, grocery prices are continuing
3 to rise, and we need for our city to step up. The CFC
4 program budget needs to be significantly increased to
5 \$100 million and that money needs to be baselined in
6 the budget.
7

8 We urge you to do the right thing and
9 increase CFC to \$100 million. We appreciate your
10 leadership and are grateful for your support. Thank
11 you.

12 KHIVAH FEQUIERZ: Hi, I do apologize, this
13 is my first time ever being to one of these council
14 meetings, and this is a bit after I've been in an
15 accident and I have been abused for a bit, so I do
16 apologize if I am not up to par on every aspect of
17 where I can fully see envision where I see not just
18 legislation but also the people being able to reap
19 the most of what we have come to fruition in our
20 society today. But in part with what is you guys are
21 testifying to in terms of social work, I don't want
22 everybody to think I'm in opposition to the growth
23 and expansion of healthcare services or the general
24 welfare, if you will, for community standards. It is
25

one of the greatest things that we could ever ask for.

One of my key things with that is just if we can streamline a concise and stable ecosystem in which it doesn't necessarily cross over into violating the natural rights that we have established with time and with how far we have come from a lot of the things that we've experienced historically in history. But also being able to not necessarily grow independence on these resources in the sense that-- not that we are not saying to establish and maintain of a fund pool for those services, but being able to expand from where we are socially to a more independent, individual, like, nature with time.

Separate from that, what it is that I was here to be able to speak to in addition to necessarily just saying, like, for example, I am a bit underweight, I was wrongfully incarcerated going to school out of school out of state for a bit. And I told everybody the case was going to get disposed and it did. But I have experienced residual affects, I've lost my job. I got paid less, and not to say that that's necessarily what I'm complaining about. But those are just some of the things that I have been

1 affected by. You guys had legislation coming to
2 effect in 2020. I tried to file an injunction, but
3 with my disability, getting both my hands crushed in
4 the door at the shelter, and losing my apartment. It
5 has been a bit hard to stay on track with getting
6 work done. I also was recently hit by a car again
7 after I was hit as an adolescent, close to almost a
8 year ago from today. All I am saying is (TIMER) I was
9 hospitalized, I do apologize for going over just a
10 little bit. I have a disability, just give me two
11 more seconds. I was hospitalized several times. I
12 started experiencing lockjaw. I start foaming at the
13 mouth from over secretion of mucus in my brain as a
14 result of my brain injury as a child. But this side
15 effects of the heavy medication, these hospitals
16 aren't honoring when you're making objections over
17 medication. You're not seeing the judge before they
18 are medicating you, and on top of that, the social
19 worker team is not being—I get it, they're only
20 there Monday to Friday from a certain time to a
21 certain time, but they are not being as diligent as
22 they should be in advocacy. I have a traumatic brain
23 injury, I had over five concussions, I have been
24 banned from being able to congregate sports for the
25

1 rest of my life. Even if I went and got my master's,
2 I can't do it. I asked if I could take some time off,
3 and they said, no. So I tried to work very hard in
4 being able to maintain and reestablish my medical
5 regimen in being able to be an independent version of
6 myself in completing those daily activities of
7 living. But, for example, one thing I have asked for--
8 - I was attacked and handcuffed at the HRA office,
9 the government system doesn't want to allow me to get
10 a phone. They keep cutting it off. Every five
11 seconds, they send me a phone, and I'll use the
12 phone, make one phone call, the phone cuts off. I
13 can't do the interview for my HRA, they rejected my
14 application, they told me I need to wait for a court
15 date from the OCDA Office, but it's taking forever. I
16 have been asking since January. I am having
17 difficulties-- at one point, I was having
18 difficulties being able to find nutrition...

19
20 CHAIRPERSON AYALA: I'm sorry, can you
21 wrap up...

22 KHIVAH FEQUIERZ: certain

23 CHAIRPERSON AYALA: because we have a few
24 people, thank you...

1 KHIVAH FEQUIERZ: certain resources. What
2
3 I'm saying is, with time, there's a lot of distress
4 out there. Right? There's the honking, there's
5 parking in the crosswalks, there's the people that
6 stop their cars in the crosswalks and then pretend
7 that they were doing you a service by telling you.
8 There's the people sitting on the train pointing
9 their cameras at everybody. There's the other people
10 who are sitting there, like, being unaware and
11 mindful of others...

12 CHAIRPERSON AYALA: Mm-hmm

13 KHIVAH FEQUIERZ: in their daily
14 activities of living. And all I'm saying is as an
15 individual with a disability, I ask social services
16 to be able to get nutritional resources on way out of
17 the hospital, they refused to even let me get dressed
18 inside the hospital, they refused to get me any
19 Ensure or nutrients or any of that stuff despite what
20 my circumstances were. What I am asking for is a
21 proposal for budget funding to able to establish an
22 OTC fund card, a manager credit booster OTC fund
23 card. So if you partner with a bank, you can
24 establish an account plus. Right? These businesses
25 should be able to streamline their finances...

CHAIRPERSON AYALA: I'm...

KHIVAH FEQUIERZ: through a government
account (TIMER)...

CHAIRPERSON AYALA: Can you go ahead
and...

KHIVAH FEQUIERZ: that would allow us
to...

CHAIRPERSON AYALA: Thank you.

KHIVAH FEQUIERZ: establish OTC funds that
would allow individuals like myself... (CROSS-TALK)

CHAIRPERSON AYALA: All right, we have to
move, Honey, I'm sorry...

KHIVAH FEQUIERZ: to be able to have
resources.

CHAIRPERSON AYALA: Thank you...

KHIVAH FEQUIERZ: What I'm saying is
that...

CHAIRPERSON AYALA: I'm sorry...

KHIVAH FEQUIERZ: if we can provide...

CHAIRPERSON AYALA: I'm sorry, we have to
move on... (CROSS-TALK)

KHIVAH FEQUIERZ: funding for social
services...

CHAIRPERSON AYALA: I know... (CROSS-TALK)

KHIVAH FEQUIERZ: what I'm saying is those services (INAUDIBLE)...

CHAIRPERSON AYALA: I'm sorry, Honey, we can talk after. Okay?

KHIVAH FEQUIERZ: Okay.

CHAIRPERSON AYALA: Give me a second.

(PAUSE)

ALISON O. JORDAN: Hello, good afternoon, my name is Alison O'Connor Jordan. I am here to share my reasons for supporting Resolution 362-A and the Social Work Workforce Act. I also shared with you my CV, so that if you have other questions about things that have been testified about today, we thought (INAUDIBLE) was the solution, and apparently it's not, too bad. I am here to answer questions if needed.

I am a licensed social worker. I began my career as Program Director in New York City's largest senior center, and I graduated from CUNY's Hunter College School of Social Work. I retired from the New York City government after 39 years in February 2020, having worked at HRA and the Health Department. I now support the implementation of proven models and volunteer with national organizations to advocate for

1 policies that support continuity of care and services
2 after incarceration.

3
4 Throughout my career, I encouraged many
5 to enter the field of social work and mentored dozens
6 of primarily Black and brown social work students and
7 early career professionals for over 30 years, I
8 think, signing off on thousands, must be thousands,
9 of completed internship hours. I did this knowing
10 that one day, I would need to have "The Talk" and
11 advise my mentees that in order to pass the LMSW
12 exam, you need to "think like someone who looks like
13 me, an older white woman," not be, "but afraid of
14 Black and brown men and take the exam through that
15 lens." Those who find a way to pass, often after many
16 tries and arguments with their conscience, must
17 ignore best practices and social work values; they
18 take expensive prep courses that they can't afford,
19 and carry extreme financial burdens. As you heard
20 earlier, white women like me pass the exam; people of
21 color do not.

22 We know that the exam is unnecessary and
23 indeed detrimental to the profession. Initially, it
24 was waived for those with experience and supervisors'
25 attestations. Today, the exam is a disservice,

creating barriers to accessing social work services for those with the greatest need, and it needs to be eliminated, so we applaud your efforts.

People incarcerated are overwhelmingly Black and brown. Those from the poorest areas are Black and brown. Social workers with lived experience, reflective of the people in need of social workers most, matter. It matters to the profession. It matters to us all.

I want to thank you for your time, and I submit this testimony in support of the Resolution submitted by Council Member Bottcher, and the Social Work Workforce Act as sponsored by Senator Brouk and Assemblymember Jessica Gonzalez-Rojas. Thank you very much for having this hearing and for welcoming us today.

CHAIRPERSON AYALA: Thank you.

XAI YANG: Hi, thank you so much for having us here. My name is Xai, and I am a social worker fighting for justice. I would like to thank you all again for just having us here and holding this hearing, because it's critical for social workers.

I am Hmong, an indigenous ethnic group from Southeast Asia that helped the United States and fought in the war, and that's why we're here. I'm from a refugee family, my mom and dad are refugees, and I have nine siblings. I've dedicated my life as a social worker to serving the communities here in New York City. I'm here to serve, give back, and share our experiences with their exam.

As a social worker, I've been in the field for 10 years, working in family court, foster care, the ACT Team, and currently in mobile crisis in Brooklyn. I see every day in Brooklyn how intense the mental health crisis is. And we need more social workers. We need more diverse social workers. We need more because the broken system is affecting us. I am overwhelmed. I've never been in a place that has been fully staffed. Almost always, someone's leaving, and almost always, someone's picking up for someone else. So, as you can imagine, that trickles down to our clients.

We have recent graduates, we have our social workers, such as Tara, who spoke, who cannot pass the exam. They are here, you know. And how do I know? Because I failed myself in 2012. It took me

seven years to have the courage to do it again, and I only did it because I had to. It's horrifying and devastating. We want to prevent the future generation from going through that.

Passing the exam allowed me to serve my community more, and I want to give other social workers that opportunity. This exam is restrictive. So, thank you for your support. I come to you all with passion, dedication, and personal obligation for the next generation, and let's make it a reality.

CHAIRPERSON AYALA: Thank you, and thank you all for coming to testify. We have quite a few people online waiting to testify as well, so I am trying to move it along. But thank you all for coming.

Christopher Leon Johnson, come on up.

(PAUSE)

CHRISTOPHER LEON JOHNSON: Yeah, hello?

Hello, my name is Christopher Leon Johnson, and I am supporting Erik Bottcher's Resolution for the Social Worker Justice-- Social Worker Workforce Act. We need more social workers in the city of New York. At the same time, I'm calling on the City to defund all Cure Violence nonprofits,

1 because I see that these nonprofits are taking all
2 that money and they're not doing the right thing with
3 the money. And they're saying that they're gonna take
4 that money and hire social workers, and hire these
5 types of people that they should be hiring, but
6 they're not doing that. And that money should be
7 defunded out of these budgets, out of the next
8 mayoral budget and executive budget to the City
9 Council and give it to these social work
10 organizations. We need these workforces. I like
11 social workers. They do a lot of great work for the
12 City. They help me out when I need their help. So I
13 don't have an issue with that.

14
15 But one thing I want to make clear is
16 that when it comes to the SNAP fraud stuff, why did
17 the City cut that off with SNAP fraud? I mean, I know
18 there's somebody that I know who has SNAP and they
19 took her money away and they couldn't reimburse her
20 the money, because they went to the store and bought
21 out the SNAP, and they (UNINTELLIGIBLE) one time, and
22 some shady store person took the PIN, and in the next
23 two days, it was gone. I know before (UNINTELLIGIBLE)
24 the mayor and the governor, when you have SNAP or you
25 lost your SNAP to fraud, you could get that

1 reimbursed. I want to know why they decided to cut
2 this off. I think it was a bad mistake by the mayoral
3 administration to do that to everybody. I mean,
4 there's still SNAP fraud going on in the city. So I'm
5 calling on the City Council to find a way to put that
6 program back to the way it was, because a lot of
7 people will need that. I understand that you can't go
8 back and prorate it, but if you do it now or later on
9 down the road, it will help people out going forward.
10 Because I know that there's a lot people in this city
11 that go through SNAP fraud, and it was wrong how they
12 were treated with that. So, like I said, calling on
13 the City Council to stand behind that.

14
15 So, going back to the social worker
16 thing, like I said, I'm hoping you pass that bill
17 with Erick Bottcher, the Resolution for the Social
18 Worker Workforce Act, and it should go through. And
19 like I said, with the SNAP fraud stuff, they need
20 their money back. They all need their money back. It
21 was wrong how they were treated. And I hope the City
22 Council does the right thing and helps to push all
23 these bills through.

24

25

So, we need more social workers, and like I said, that was wrong how people get treated with SNAP fraud and how they're not getting paid back.

So, yeah, so I hope these bills go through, and thank you so much, enjoy your day, thank you.

CHAIRPERSON AYALA: Thank you, Christopher.

CHRISTOPHER LEON JOHNSON: Thank you.

CHAIRPERSON AYALA: Thank you.

We will now move on to our online panel. And we will begin with Shakira Kennedy.

SERGEANT AT ARMS: You may begin.

DR. SHAKIRA A. KENNEDY: (NO RESPONSE)

CHAIRPERSON AYALA: Shakira?

DR. SHAKIRA A. KENNEDY: Hi, okay, I was just unmuted, thank you.

CHAIRPERSON AYALA: Thank you.

DR. SHAKIRA A. KENNEDY: Hopefully, you can hear me and also see me.

Good afternoon, Chair Ayala, and members of the Committee on General Welfare. My name is Dr. Shakira Kennedy, and I am a licensed social worker (LMSW) and the Executive Director of the National

Association of Social Workers-New York, representing both upstate and downstate regions. Our association serves over 9,000 social workers across the state.

Today, I offer testimony on behalf of our membership, the NASW-NY Board of Directors, and NASW with Social Workers for Justice, in strong support of Resolution 362-A, the Social Work Workforce Act.

We support this resolution because we have heard—and many of us have lived—the stories of those demoralized and discouraged by the Association of Social Work Boards (ASWB) licensure exam. Whether they ultimately passed or failed, the experience is too often marked by anxiety, fear, and financial burden.

Many test-takers report doing everything "right": enrolling in prep courses, studying extensively, and taking the exam early, only to fall short of passing by a few points. One test-taker described the exam as "bogus," expressing disbelief at failing multiple times despite rigorous preparation and afterwards calling it "a profit-making machine." Another said, "I failed my exam for the third time, and I feel stupid and hopeless. It's like ASWB doesn't want you to pass."

These sentiments are not isolated. They are far too common. The cost of taking the exam can exceed \$800 when factoring in multiple attempts, study materials, and test prep services, an expense that affects social workers who are not paid adequately throughout New York and disproportionately affects candidates of color.

I know this because I have lived it. After graduating from my MSW program, I took the ASWB exam and failed by one point. I was devastated. Years later, I tried again, this time failing by two points. The feelings of inadequacy, frustration, and professional stagnation were overwhelming. It wasn't until after I completed my doctorate and was teaching full-time at a graduate school of social work in New York City that I felt confident enough to try again.

What changed? I didn't study the content; I studied the test. I had to unlearn what I knew about social work and learn how to take a standardized test...

SERGEANT AT ARMS: Your time has expired.
Thank you.

CHAIRPERSON AYALA: You can also submit your written testimony to the Council for review.

The next person we will hear from is
Jocelin Narciso.

SERGEANT AT ARMS: You may begin.

(PAUSE)

JOCELIN NARCISO: (NO RESPONSE)

CHAIRPERSON AYALA: Jocelin?

(PAUSE)

JOCELIN NARCISO: Sorry, I wasn't able to
unmute on my end.

Hi, thank you so much for letting me
speak. My name is Jocelin Narcisco (INAUDIBLE). I am
a proud daughter of Mexican immigrants, a recent MSW
graduate, and an advocate for Social Workers for
Justice. I am here in full support of the Social Work
Workforce Act and the removal of the LMSW exam as a
requirement for licensure in the state of New York.

New York City is facing a growing crisis
in equitable access to culturally competent mental
health services and social services, and related
communities, including the backstretch workforce at
Beaumont (UNINTELLIGIBLE), where I was raised, are
among the most underserved. This labor force,
primarily composed of Latino immigrant workers, many
of whom are legal permanent residents or on a pathway

to citizenship, operates in isolated high-stress environments with limited access to care. Language barriers, stigma, and the lack of culturally responsive providers make these challenges worse.

The current licensure process, particularly the LMSW exam, adds another barrier, not just for aspiring social workers, but for the communities who depend on us. The test does not assess compassion, lived experience, or community trust. It reflects privilege, rewarding those with access to test prep, time off, and fluent academic English. It weeds out brilliant bilingual community-embedded professionals who have already proven their readiness in real-world settings.

According to the ASWB, pass rates for Black, Latino, and multilingual test-takers are significantly lower than those of their white test-taker counterparts. This isn't about merit; it's about systematic exclusion. And the cost of the exclusion is real. Communities like mine go without care, and dedicated social workers are kept in limbo or pushed out altogether.

The Social Work Workforce Act provides a path forward by removing the LMSW exam. It opens up

the profession to a broader, more diverse group of candidates, many of whom are already serving on the front lines. It creates a licensing structure that reflects what the work already requires—trust, cultural competency, language access, and sustained supervision, not standardized answers. So I please ask you to support the Social Work Workforce Act. Thank you so much.

CHAIRPERSON AYALA: Thank you. Our next panelist is Nancy Gallina.

SERGEANT AT ARMS: You may begin.

DR. NANCY GALLINA: Thank you. My name is Dr. Nancy Gallina, and I am appearing before you today as the Dean of the Touro University Graduate School of Social Work here in Manhattan. Touro has been involved in the issue of licensure pass rates for several years. We have met with all the state and national social work organizations working on this issue, and I am a member of the National Task Force of Deans working to eliminate this exam. We have been actively involved because our student demographic consists of returning adult learners, students for whom English is not their first language, and students of color, the very demographic that is

1 failing their entry-level social work exam as
2 identified by ASWB's own data in 2022. As a result,
3 the pass rates for our graduates as first-time test
4 takers are in the 50th percentile. This pass rate has
5 implications for Touro as an institution, as the New
6 York State Education Department arbitrarily withholds
7 approval plans or places stipulations on programs
8 that are tied to this specific pass rate. Currently,
9 (INAUDIBLE) has a cap on enrollment, which is
10 preventing Touro from educating those who would
11 choose to go into the field of social work at a time
12 when social workers are so desperately needed.

14 Touro's mission and the mission of social
15 work school is to create opportunities for education,
16 where there has not been opportunity before. We have
17 been the recipient of federal funding for disabled
18 students for the last eight years. This grant allows
19 us to subsidize up to 90% of tuition for students who
20 are eligible by virtue of economic, environmental, or
21 educational disadvantage. Touro has the lowest
22 private institution tuition rate and a schedule that
23 attracts many adult learners.

24 Since ASWB released their data and
25 (INAUDIBLE) the extreme disparities, seven states and

the District of Columbia have eliminated the exam, joining 10 states that never had an entry-level exam, and eight others that are pursuing legislation similar to ours.

Each accredited social work school must prove students reach competency in 10 areas, and this in itself is sufficient for licensure at the entry-level.

This biased and unscientific exam is dashing the dreams of aspiring social workers and adding significant obstacles to providing mental health services in underserved communities. At a time when New York so desperately needs more trained and committed social workers to work for some of the neediest citizens of our city and environment, we should be creating opportunities and pathways, not barriers. We support Resolution 362-A supporting the passage of the Social Work Workforce Act. Thank you.

CHAIRPERSON AYALA: Thank you. Our next panelist is Alexey Dmitriyev.

SERGEANT AT ARMS: You may begin.

ALEXEY DMITRIYEV: (UNINTELLIGIBLE)

CHAIRPERSON AYALA: Alexey?

ALEXEY DMITRIYEV: (UNINTELLIGIBLE)

CHAIRPERSON AYALA: Alexey?

SERGEANT AT ARMS: You may begin.

ALEXEY DMITRIYEV: (INAUDIBLE)

CHAIRPERSON AYALA: Hello?

ALEXEY DMITRIYEV: (INAUDIBLE)

CHAIRPERSON AYALA: Okay, Matthew DeCarlo?

SERGEANT AT ARMS: You may begin.

(PAUSE)

DR. MATTHEW DECARLO: Sorry, I was just
able to unmute myself.

Thank you very much to the Committee on
General Welfare. I'm here to argue in support of the
Social Work Workforce Act. I was asked to be here by
Social Workers for Justice based on my series of
peer-reviewed journal articles on the psychometric
invalidity of ASWB exams. In short, they are not
legally defensible and should be abolished.

On March 31st, ASWB changed the rules of
their exams with negative-15 days of notice. For a
long time, their rules were quote, "You'd be given
the entire exam time at the beginning of the test, no
individually timed sections, manage your time
accordingly." The new surprise rule set that was
added to the exam guidebook on April 14th is that

Similarly, they're going to make significant structural changes to the content areas, down from four to three, with no confirmatory factor analysis. They went down from ABCD to ABC answer

options. Questions are now 8% easier to guess and 25% faster to read. We have no idea what the impact of these things will be, because they don't conduct the required psychometric studies.

I offered to do some of them alongside two esteemed social work psychometricians for \$0.00 in an open-source software package—we were rejected. Instead, they funded a study that found that their 2022 survey results, which found descriptive results that sort of motivated this entire session, were actually understating it. And the odds of clinical exam failure are two to six-and-a-half times more likely for Asian, Latina, and Black test takers.

Despite being a nonprofit, ASWB and its IRS Form 990s revealed an average 17% profit margin, ballooning from under \$10 million to over \$40 million in net assets. But as New York City knows from the billion-dollar Julino (phonetic) decision, it's not the test developer that actually faces the music; it's the government organizations and employers that are financially liable for invalid exams.

New York State should follow in the footsteps of Washington, D.C., which removed the exam requirement two weeks ago. They joined the 13 other

states that license master's-level social workers without an examination. Then New York State should form a multi-stakeholder work group of legislators, advocates, and regulators as Maryland and other states have done to recommend workforce-wide changes on exam supervision and licensure...

SERGEANT AT ARMS: Your time has expired.
Thank you.

CHAIRPERSON AYALA: Thank you. Our next panelist is Victoria Rizzo.

SERGEANT AT ARMS: You may begin.

DR. VICTORIA RIZZO: Good afternoon. My name is Dr. Victoria Rizzo; I am a member of several national organizations that support the Social Work Workforce Act—the National Association of Social Workers, I am the past president of the New York State Chapter Board of Directors, the Council on Social Work Education, and the National Association of Deans and Directors of Schools of Social Work.

I am a social worker with 35 years of experience as a licensed clinical social worker, an educator, a researcher, and an administrator (INAUDIBLE) education. I am here testifying today as a member of Social Workers for Justice. I thank you

for the opportunity to testify at this workforce hearing.

I am passionately in support of Resolution 362-A, which supports the Social Work Workforce Act. This legislation would eliminate the entry-level ASWB licensing examination as a condition for licensure in New York State.

Under my leadership as president of the National Association of Deans and Directors (INAUDIBLE) in 2014, we conducted the first national study to examine the ASWB examination for racial bias and pass rates. This study drew on the experiences of Deans and Directors and the pass rates they observed in their schools within New York State.

In 2016, the results of this study suggested that the examination was racially biased. We met with the ASWB to present our findings and propose a national study of the examination in collaboration with schools and programs of social work. They refused to collaborate with us and refused to share data with us.

The study they released in 2022 revealed that first-time pass rates for Black and Latino test takers were much lower than those of their white

counterparts. (INAUDIBLE) Dean's National Association of Deans' response was to create their own National Task Force on Licensure, which I am also a member of.

New York State is in a severe mental health crisis. New York City and New York State desperately need a diverse pool of social workers who can work with populations that need them the most—communities of color, older adults, children in schools, child welfare, and the homeless, to name a few.

As an educator, I have witnessed the anxiety and fear that newly graduated MSWs, especially students of color and first-generation students, experience prior to the exam. Many do not pass the first time. Some of my most talented interns and students did not pass the exam the first time, despite their competence. Earning an MSWF from an accredited school of social work provides them with entry-level competence for licensure. The licensing exam demonstrates no evidence that measures competence. The exam is a discriminatory, systematic barrier to increasing the New York social work workforce in a critical time.

I submit this testimony in support of the Resolution submitted by Council Member Bottcher and the Social Work Workforce Act sponsored by Senator Brouk and Assembly Member Jessica González-Rojas. Thank you.

CHAIRPERSON AYALA: Thank you. Our next panelist is Luis Pena Chalas.

SERGEANT AT ARMS: You may begin.

LUIS PENA CHALAS: Hi, good afternoon, everyone, and thank you for everyone's time. I'm here because I'm trying to testify against, uh, on behalf of myself. I'm concerned about HRA's timeline of communication and the violations of Fair Hearing Court Orders.

On January 2nd, I applied for a One-Shot Deal for my rent arrears. Around February 14th, when I had Housing Court, I was told that my application was approved, and I went to the HRA Housing Court Office in the Bronx, where I was given an approved application and handed it to the judge to postpone the eviction until HRA makes the payment.

It wasn't until two weeks later that I contacted HRA to find out why the payments hadn't been sent to the landlord, as the landlord had been

1 asking me about the payment. They had informed me
2 that, according to the notes, I was ineligible due to
3 my immigration status and that my voucher had
4 expired.

5
6 Around March 12th, I requested a Fair
7 Hearing, and on March 25th, the judge ordered HRA to
8 make their payment. I'm still unsure why, almost four
9 months later, I'm waiting for HRA to comply with the
10 Fair Hearing decision. I have court on July 1st, and
11 I have legal aid now involved with this. I also
12 reached out to some of my council members to try to
13 get assistance, but they shouldn't have to be waiting
14 for so long to try to get assistance on my behalf
15 because HRA is not in compliance with the court
16 order. It doesn't make any sense.

17 Despite meeting all the other income
18 eligibility requirements, I'm still being denied
19 assistance for my rent arrears. I'm confused about
20 why I received an acceptance notice, only to be told
21 by Orion (phonetic) that I'm not eligible due to my
22 immigration status. And I think that people who have
23 expired DACA, we need to be included in the Orion
24 eligibility standard, because it's not fair that
25 we've been here for so long in this country. We're

not treated the same way as everybody else who was born here, just because we were brought here to no fault of our own. I think that is totally unjust, and I think that HRA needs to fix its timeline. Their communication is off, as no one informed me that I was denied after being approved. So the (INAUDIBLE) judge ordered them to make the payment, and it's almost three or four months later, and I'm still waiting on HRA to comply. And HRA (INAUDIBLE) said that they're not going to follow the judge's order, that my eligibility doesn't meet the required standard. I just don't understand how that is possible. So, thank you for your time, and I appreciate it. I am here to express my concerns that HRA's failure to comply with a court order from a Fair Hearing judge is unacceptable, and I am being forced to go through considerable effort to get HRA to comply. Thank you.

CHAIRPERSON AYALA: Thank you. Our next panelist is Pamela Clipper.

SERGEANT AT ARMS: You may begin.

PAMELA CLIPPER: Good afternoon, my name is Pamela Clipper, and I am a member of Social

Workers for Justice. Thank you for the opportunity to testify at today's workforce hearing.

I am testifying today in support of Resolution 362-A, which is in support of the Social Work Workforce Act. I am just going to just give you my story, my anecdote.

I graduated with a social work degree in 2016. I took the exam in 2017, and I failed. I retook the exam in 2022, but I failed again. I'm up for another retake this year in October, at the end of October. I already paid my money, and there's no refund. But I feel that this exam has been a serious burden on me, because I've spent thousands and thousands of dollars doing prep studies, individual studies with folks, and I just can't seem to get over that hump. I have two master's degrees, so I know I'm not dumb. And I've, you know, really felt inadequate and, you know, this is making me feel very fearful, and I am having some anxiety.

I also want to touch on one of the members of the Social Workers for Justice, he works in mobile crisis, and I work for New York City Department of Health and (INAUDIBLE). I'm responsible for the 19 adult mobile crisis teams in New York

1 City. And I do know that there is a shortage of
2 social workers, because anytime a social worker from
3 one of the mobile crisis teams calls out, it puts
4 that whole team on diversion. And, on the City side,
5 where I work, we have to scrounge around to find a
6 team to cover a team that's out on diversion.
7

8 So, it's been very hard to even move up
9 in rank, because I don't have a license. I can't
10 leave the city government for other positions because
11 in the community, because it requires a license. So
12 I'm safe to stay where I am, because my position
13 doesn't require the license, but in other departments
14 where I work at, it requires a license, so I am not
15 able to move around. And it is just a burden on me
16 and my family, both financially and mentally, and
17 also physically.

18 To summarize, I submit this testimony in
19 support of the Resolution submitted by Council Member
20 Bottcher... (CROSS-TALK)

21 SERGEANT AT ARMS: Your time has expired.
22 Thank you.

23 PAMELA CLIPPER: and the Social Work
24 Workforce Act, as sponsored by Senator Brouk and
25 Assemblymember Jessica Gonzalez-Rojas. Thank you.

CHAIRPERSON AYALA: Thank you. Our next panelist is Kersey Neau.

SERGEANT AT ARMS: You may begin.

KERSEY NEAU: Hi, my name is Kersey Neau, thank you for holding this hearing, Deputy Speaker Ayala.

I am a Master of Social Work graduate, and I am in support of the Social Work Workforce Act, Resolution 362-A. Just like one of the previous panelists, I have graduated from my university and found it difficult to find a job due to not having my license. I was fortunate enough to be able to work at a shelter for four years; however, I was told I must obtain my license. I have taken the exam three times. The last two times I took the exam were during COVID. I was within the passing range of 90 to 107. According to their criteria, I was within the passing range, as I scored 96. However, I was informed that the exam was out of 100.

I was devastated, as I am capable and competent as a social worker. However, failing for the third time left me questioning my capability. I later received many testimonies from other minorities like myself who have had the same experience.

(PAUSE)

We are making a final call for Zoom registrants who have not yet testified: Muhamid (INAUDIBLE), Marie Mimose Nelson, Jennifer Zelnick, Alexey Dmitriyev?

SERGEANT AT ARMS: You may begin.

ALEXEY DMITRIYEV: Hi, how are you? My name is Alexey Dmitriyev, uhm...

CHAIRPERSON AYALA: Hello?

ALEXEY DMITRIYEV: Hello, can you hear me?

CHAIRPERSON AYALA: Yes, we can hear you.

ALEXEY DMITRIYEV: Okay, great. My name is Alexey Dmitriyev, I am a bilingual (INAUDIBLE) social worker, and a proud member of Social Workers for Justice. Thank you for the opportunity to testify in strong support of Resolution 362-A, the Social Work Workforce Act. This legislation would eliminate the requirement for the ASWB entry-level licensing exam. This exam has been shown to be racially biased and lacks evidence that it accurately measures social worker competence.

One of the greatest challenges test takers face is the ambiguity of this exam. Every prep course acknowledges that these questions are a deliberately vague, open design to test how well candidates can read between the lines. Even well-prepared social workers are left unsure of what's being asked. Furthermore, the questions and formats reflect cultural and linguistic bias.

The fact that most graduates need to pay for expensive prep courses just to pass this exam after completing an accredited master's program shows that the test is not measuring competence and readiness—it is measuring access to money, time, and privilege.

I know this struggle personally. After earning my MSW in 2007, I began working full-time, earning just \$41,000 a year while carrying \$60,000 in student loans. It took me three years to pass this test, not because I lacked skills or preparation, but because I couldn't afford prep courses or the cost to pass the test. Also, after each failed attempt, I was forced to wait 90 days, which is the mandatory waiting period before I could try again. That three-month period made me fall behind my peers, watching job opportunities disappear, and forcing me to live with the anxiety of not knowing if I could stay on the job.

When I finally passed my test, I came down with the flu that same day. That's how much stress I was under. What this test does is shut out the very people that this workforce needs, those who know our communities and are deeply committed to

1 serving them. Meanwhile, residents in your districts,
2 those facing mental health crisis, housing
3 instability, chronic illness, and grief, are left
4 without timely support or go without care entirely.
5 These are the roles that the social workers with MSW
6 degrees have already held, either before graduate
7 school or during the intensive, supervised
8 internships required by their accredited programs.
9 These exams do not protect the public. It creates a
10 bottleneck (TIMER) to a profession...

12 SERGEANT AT ARMS: Your time has expired.

13 ALEXEY DMITRIYEV: (INAUDIBLE)

14 SERGEANT AT ARMS: Thank you.

15 CHAIRPERSON AYALA: Thank you. We are
16 making a final call for Jennifer Zelnick (phonetic)?

17 (NO RESPONSE)

18 CHAIRPERSON AYALA: Katherine Thompson?

19 (NO RESPONSE)

20 CHAIRPERSON AYALA: Ace Moreal (phonetic)?

21 (NO RESPONSE)

22 CHAIRPERSON AYALA: John Carpenter?

23 (NO RESPONSE)

24 CHAIRPERSON AYALA: Stephanie Smiley?

25 (NO RESPONSE)

CHAIRPERSON AYALA: And Armondo Rodriguez
(phonetic)?

(NO RESPONSE)

CHAIRPERSON AYALA: Alex Stein?

(NO RESPONSE)

CHAIRPERSON AYALA: And Desiree Pena?

(NO RESPONSE)

CHAIRPERSON AYALA: Okay, if we
inadvertently missed anyone who would like to testify
virtually, please use the Zoom Raise Hand Function,
and I will call on you in the order of hands raised.

(NO RESPONSE)

CHAIRPERSON AYALA: No? Okay. Seeing no
one else, I would like to note that written
testimony, which will be reviewed in full by
Committee staff, may be submitted to the record for
up to 72 hours after the close of this hearing by
emailing it to: testimony@council.nyc.gov.

With that, this hearing is concluded.

[GAVEL]

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 no interest in the outcome of this matter.



Date August 1, 2025