

CITY COUNCIL
CITY OF NEW YORK

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TRANSCRIPT OF THE MINUTES

Of the

COMMITTEE ON AGING

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January 26, 2024
Start: 1:42 p.m.
Recess: 1:54 p.m.

HELD AT: Council Chambers - City Hall

B E F O R E: Crystal Hudson
Chairperson

COUNCIL MEMBERS:

Chris Banks
Linda Lee
Darlene Mealy
Yusef Salaam
Lynn C. Schulman
Susan Zhuang

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

James Fenton
Volunteers of Legal Services

Raul Rivera

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2 SERGEANT AT ARMS: Good afternoon and
3 welcome to the Committee on Aging. At this time we
4 ask if you could please place phones on vibrate or
5 silent mode. Thank you. Chair, we are ready to
6 begin.

7 CHAIRPERSON HUDSON: Thank you so much
8 and I appreciate everyone's patience as we work
9 through some technical difficulties. Good afternoon
10 and welcome to the first Aging Committee hearing of
11 the new legislative session. I'm Council Member
12 Crystal Hudson. My pronouns are she/her, and I'm the
13 Committee Chair. As Chair, I look forward to building
14 on this committee's achievements, and continuing the
15 important work of advancing age inclusivity in New
16 York City so that older adults may age in place with
17 dignity. To that point, today, we are hearing a pre-
18 considered Introduction sponsored by Council Member
19 Eric Dinowitz which would require the Department of
20 Housing, Preservation and Development, or HPD, in
21 coordination with the Department of Finance to
22 provide application forms pre-populated with
23 applicant information for the Senior Citizen Rent
24 Increase Exemption program, also known as SCRIE, to
25 eligible Mitchell-Lama Residents. It's no secret

1 that New York City is in the midst of a worsening
2 affordable housing crisis. This crisis hits older
3 adults, particularly older adults of color especially
4 hard. According to a report from the City's
5 Department of Finance, the escalating cost of rent
6 and growing income inequality cause many low-income
7 New Yorkers to pay a greater share of their income on
8 housing which means they have less money for other
9 important needs. That is why it is more critical
10 than ever to increase enrollment in both SCRIE and
11 the Disability Rent Increase Exemption, or DRIE,
12 program. This important benefit freezes the rent of
13 eligible older adults and renters with disabilities
14 at the time of enrollment and provides valuable
15 financial assistance to some of the City's most
16 vulnerable citizens. According to the Department of
17 Finance, as many as 155,000 households may qualify
18 for SCRIE and DRIE. Approximately 61,000 households
19 already receive these benefits, and upwards of 94,000
20 additional New York City residents may be eligible
21 but are not enrolled. This suggests that the current
22 enrollment rate is approximately 39 percent. As the
23 older adult population increases, the number of
24 households eligible for SCRIE and DRIE is also likely
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1 to increase; 39 percent is far too low in the face of
2 skyrocketing costs of living and an accelerating
3 eviction rate. The City needs to significantly step
4 up its efforts to enroll eligible New Yorkers into
5 SCRIE and DRIE. I appreciate that the Administration
6 has previously shared concerns on this bill and we
7 will continue our conversations. And I look forward
8 to a productive discussion about the ways we can
9 meaningfully boost enrollment in these programs. We
10 need to think creatively about closing the enrollment
11 gap so that we can keep our city's older adults in
12 their homes. Older adults overwhelmingly want to age
13 in place. SCRIE and DRIE help them do just that, and
14 we should be making every effort to connect eligible
15 households to these essential benefits. The
16 legislation being considered today was heard last
17 session in this committee on November 28th, 2023, and
18 all testimony from that hearing will be incorporated
19 into the record for today's hearing. The
20 Administration is not appearing before the committee
21 today and is instead submitting new written testimony
22 for the record which the committee will consider.
23 The committee will additionally consider any new
24 public testimony submitted up to 72 hours after the
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2 close of this hearing. Testimony may be submitted to
3 testimony@council.nyc.gov. Thank you to my colleague
4 and Aging Committee members. I would also like to
5 thank my staff, Casey Addison [sp?] and Andrew Wright
6 [sp?], and Aging Committee Staff Christopher Pepe
7 [sp?], Chloe Rivera [sp?], Julie Heramas [sp?], and
8 Samuel Heme signs. I'd like to acknowledge we are
9 joined here by Council Members Lee, Zhuang, Salaam,
10 and Banks. I'll now turn it over to the Committee
11 Counsel. And Council Member Schulman remotely.
12 Thank you.

13 COMMITTEE COUNSEL: Thank you, Chair. At
14 this point, we will be turning to in-person
15 testimony. We will first hear from James Fenton
16 [sp?]. Turn your microphone on.

17 JAMES FENTON: Thank you. My name is
18 James Fenton. I'm a Senior Staff Attorney with
19 Volunteers of Legal Service. We're here today in
20 further support of proposed legislation. VOLS was
21 established in 1984 and our purpose is to leverage
22 private attorneys to provide free legal services to
23 low-income New Yorkers to help fill the justice gap.
24 For over three decades, VOLS has assisted New York
25 City older adults with high-quality free legal

1 services through our dedicated staff and our network
2 of pro bono attorneys. In just the past year we
3 worked on over 2,000 cases for older adults living in
4 New York City. We provide legal assistance on a wide
5 range of civil legal issues including end-of-life and
6 incapacity planning, landlord/tenant matters, access
7 to benefits, consumer matters, and other civil legal
8 needs. We work closely with dozens of community-
9 based organizations working with older adults, many
10 of the City's older adult centers and naturally
11 occurring retirement communities. Additionally, our
12 Benefits Law Project helps older adults with their
13 senior citizen rent increase exemption applications
14 and we conduct legal workshops to educate the public
15 about these life-saving benefits. Most older adults
16 live on fixed incomes and the ability to freeze their
17 shelter costs can often mean the difference between
18 being able to age in place in the community with
19 dignity or being at risk of experiencing
20 homelessness. Over the past few months we've
21 conducted several SCRIE legal clinics, including at
22 Mitchell-Lama buildings. At some of these events
23 we've worked alongside the City's Department of
24 Finance and HPD. Through all of this work we've
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1 spoken with many older adults about the SCRIE
2 application and re-certification process. As such,
3 we are well-positioned to weigh in on the proposed
4 legislation as it pertains to this vulnerable
5 population. We found that many older adults are
6 confused by the SCRIE application process and re-
7 certification. They have questions on eligibility,
8 requisite documentation, their pending application,
9 and of course, application denials. These
10 individuals don't know whether their application or
11 documentation was incomplete or whether there's a way
12 to cure a deficient application. Moreover, many low-
13 income older adults living in Mitchell-Lama housing
14 are unaware that they're eligible for SCRIE and do
15 not know where or how to apply for the benefits. Our
16 clients often do not have access to the technology
17 which would allow them-- allow help-- help them to
18 understand and engage with the SCRIE application
19 process and are therefore reliant on assistance from
20 others. Providing eligible residents with pre-filled
21 applications could ensure that more older adults will
22 be able to access SCRIE benefits and will at a
23 minimum make more older adults aware that they are
24 eligible. VOLS recognizes New York City's efforts to
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1 better assist older adults with their SCRIE
2 applications but there is much more that can be done
3 to increase access to SCRIE benefits and make the
4 application process easier. The provisions contained
5 in the proposed legislation would have a positive
6 impact on ensuring that more older adults are aware
7 of the program and will help the ease of filing out
8 the application. We also believe that any
9 administrative burden created by the bill would
10 likely be offset by the time pre-populating the forms
11 would save later on in the application process. We'd
12 be happy to work with Council Members offices and the
13 Administration to screen people and help them with
14 their applications. Our city's older adult's
15 lifetime experiences and achievements are woven into
16 the fabric of our city and we should strive to
17 provide them with all the support they need to remain
18 in their communities, stay socially connected and
19 remain active and healthy as they age. Thank you for
20 allowing us to submit this testimony and for
21 supporting the needs of New York City's older adults.
22 Thank you so much.

24 CHAIRPERSON HUDSON: Thank you so much,
25 James, and we appreciate all the work that VOLS does.

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JAMES FENTON: Thank you.

CHAIRPERSON HUDSON: Thank you.

COMMITTEE COUNSEL: Thank you very much.

This time, we're going to call up Raul Rivera.

CHAIRPERSON HUDSON: We don't allow tripods in the chambers. We don't allow tripods. So you can use the camera if you'd like, but we don't allow tripods. The rules of the chambers are that we do not allow tripods.

RAUL RIVERA: This is-- I don't know how this is going to help me if I have to hold it. This is what you call transparency, Council Member? That's pretty despicable.

CHAIRPERSON HUDSON: You may proceed with your testimony.

RAUL RIVERA: Well, I'm here today because of something that took place on Tuesday. We understand that this is the Committee for Aging, and anything that benefits our elderly I'm for, but in particular I'm here to speak to you, Mr. Salaam. I went to your office yesterday. We would like a meeting with you. We don't a maybe, or so-so. We hope that you're willing to sit down. We know your story.

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2 CHAIRPERSON HUDSON: Sir, this is not
3 relevant to the topic of today's hearing. Do you
4 have testimony that's relevant?

5 RAUL RIVERA: It's about transparency.
6 Because you say you defend people of color, right?
7 That's what you say, right? You was here Tuesday
8 defending people of color.

9 CHAIRPERSON HUDSON: This is the
10 Committee on Aging.

11 RAUL RIVERA: Yes, we know that.

12 CHAIRPERSON HUDSON: So if you have
13 testimony for--

14 RAUL RIVERA: [interposing] We know that,
15 but you don't--

16 CHAIRPERSON HUDSON: pertaining to the
17 legislation--

18 RAUL RIVERA: [interposing] Your office
19 doesn't--

20 CHAIRPERSON HUDSON: that we're hearing.

21 RAUL RIVERA: Your office doesn't
22 respond. You don't respond. You have my phone
23 number. So how can we talk to you? We have to come
24 here. That's what we have to do. What is your
25 office good for? Can you answer that, Council

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2 Member? Council Member, hello? I'm speaking to you.
3 I'm trying to speak to you. What you do is just
4 wasting time? You want me to leave? That's what you
5 want? If you want me to leave, I'll leave.

6 CHAIRPERSON HUDSON: I've asked if you
7 have testimony relevant to today's topic.

8 RAUL RIVERA: We're trying to talk to you
9 and to this committee and to the people that--

10 CHAIRPERSON HUDSON: [interposing] I'm
11 happy to speak to you after the hearing, but if you
12 have testimony pertaining to today's topic, we're
13 ready to hear that.

14 RAUL RIVERA: I want to talk to you. I
15 want to talk to you, and I want to speak to Mr.
16 Salaam when you have the time, alright? Can you do
17 that? Is that a yes? Is that a yes?

18 CHAIRPERSON HUDSON: I said I would speak
19 with you after the hearing.

20 RAUL RIVERA: Okay.

21 CHAIRPERSON HUDSON: If you don't have
22 testimony pertaining to today's topic--

23 COMMITTEE COUNSEL: Thank you. At this
24 time, if there's anyone else in the room who would
25 wish to speak, please fill out an appearance card

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COMMITTEE ON AGING

with the Sergeant at Arms, make your way up. Seeing none, moving to virtual testimony. Seeing none on Zoom, moving back to the Chair.

CHAIRPERSON HUDSON: This hearing is now adjourned. Thank you.

[gavel]

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C E R T I F I C A T E

World Wide Dictation certifies that the foregoing transcript is a true and accurate record of the proceedings. We further certify that there is no relation to any of the parties to this action by blood or marriage, and that there is interest in the outcome of this matter.



Date February 1, 2024