

**Statement of William Heinzen, Deputy Counselor to the Mayor New York City Council
Committee on Governmental Operations
December 11, 2009**

Good morning Chairperson Sears and members of the Governmental Operations Committee. My name is Bill Heinzen, and I am Deputy Counselor to Mayor Bloomberg. Thank you for the opportunity to provide you with the Administration's comments on Intro 1025.

The Administration shares your frustrations over the budgetary hit on our City treasury presented by rampant litigation. The Law Department specializes not only in defending against litigation, but in risk management to avoid future litigation. While we share the goal of reducing the number and amount of settlements, we believe that the reporting requirements mandated by Intro 1025 would not contribute significantly to accomplishing this bill's goals, but would instead impose burdensome requirements for collecting information that the Law Department does not currently collect. Additionally, the types of information sought would not in fact yield constructive data.

Intro 1025 would amend section 7-109 of the Administrative Code, which delineates the role of the Corporation Counsel in representing agencies and their officers and employees. A new subdivision (b) would be added that would require the Law Department to provide quarterly reports concerning all civil actions filed against the Police Department and its police officers. These reports would be required to include the following information: (1) the number of actions pending; (2) the number of claims in each action; (3) the amount of time each action has been pending; (4) the nature of each claim; (5) the resolution of each claim; (6) whether the resolution was achieved through settlement or trial, and (7) the amount of any settlement.

We do not believe that these new reporting requirements will further the goal of reducing the number or amount of claims against the Police Department, or settlements paid on those claims. First, the information required by this bill is not readily available. Although the Law Department tracks lawsuits as they are served on the City, it does not compile information about the number of individual claims contained in those lawsuits, either as a gross number of claims, or by category of claim.

Collecting this information would require significant additional legal staffing at the Law Department simply to review each complaint and to analyze and log each claim. The Law Department has excellent administrative staff, but the data analysis contemplated by this bill would not be a merely ministerial task; it would instead require extensive legal review. Nor would the burden of these reporting duties conclude following intake and analysis of the complaint; the bill would require continued analysis of each claim within each lawsuit, as claims

are amended, abandoned or dismissed. It would also require the updating of information about the length of time each action is pending, and information about resolution by settlement or trial.

But the data sought would not further the goals of this bill. Each complaint is a unique document, varying in length, clarity and merit. By definition, at least half of the complaints served on the City are below average – many are unusually organized, with scattershot allegations that are poorly pleaded and duplicative. The actual claims are not always apparent on first read. Most complaints include multiple claims, many of which overlap. As many of you know from your own legal practice, the number of claims in an action reveals very little about the merits of that action, or even its actual scope.

To give an example of a lawsuit against the Police Department, a typical complaint will generally be based on a single incident – an arrest. Yet that complaint may allege false arrest, as well as allegations of excessive force and malicious prosecution; it will likely assert those allegations under both federal and state law; and, it will likely state those claims against both an individual officer and against the City. Additionally, complaints often allege these claims against the Mayor, the Police Commissioner, perhaps a prosecutor and various unknown, or non-existent, John Does. These loose pleading practices give rise to several claims within one lawsuit, but they tell little about the actual merits of the case. Knowing the number of claims in a given year would reveal nothing about managing potential litigation risks for any City agency.

For these reasons, collecting data at intake, that is, when complaints are served upon the Law Department, will not only impose significant staffing burdens and insert another layer of process into the City's legal defense, the data themselves will not provide meaningful lessons or trends. There are several reasons for this. One is simply time – the delays inherent in our overburdened legal system. Lawsuits are filed months or years after the alleged wrongdoing, and cases reach a conclusion, through trial or settlement, years later. In the meantime, City employees, including police officers, are transferred or retire. Thus, as the Police Commissioner has stated, the better source of data concerning individual officers is often the complaints filed with the Civilian Complaint Review Board, which are resolved more quickly than cases filed in the state or federal courts. Another reason is that the mere fact of a settlement in any litigation is not an acknowledgement of wrongdoing, or of the truth of the facts alleged. This is no less the case in actions involving allegations of police misconduct than it is in any other case. Similarly, it is important to note that, regardless of how many claims are alleged in a particular lawsuit, settlements are typically negotiated to resolve all claims alleged in an entire action, rather than individual claims.

A further reason why settlement data do not provide instruction about potential litigation risks is simple economics. While some settlements seem unfair or even outrageous to us, and to the public, the Law Department's decision to settle a matter is largely separate from the merits of the litigation. It is a fact in the American legal system that most cases settle, and the decision to settle reflects a business judgment based on the anticipated risks and costs of litigation. These risks and costs include the limited human resources that the City can commit to defending against lawsuits: even with hundreds of attorneys, the City simply cannot afford to fully litigate each case filed against it. Lawsuits against the City involve burdensome discovery, in which depositions and document identification, review and production consume not only huge amounts

of Law Department attorney time, but also the time of agency attorneys and agency personnel, including New York City Police Officers, nurses and caseworkers. Added to these factors are the costs of potential attorneys fees, along with several other strategic and resource considerations.

Nothing I say today is meant to suggest that the City and its agencies, including the Police Department, are not willing and able to learn from past litigation history. Rather, our message today is that the Law Department simply does not have the resources to collect the information sought by this bill, and that the information would not further the Council's intent in addressing frivolous litigation against the City's taxpayers. Again, thank you for the opportunity to give our views on Intro 1025.



Testimony of

The Legal Aid Society

In support of:

Int. No. 1025: A Local Law to amend the Administrative Code of the City of New York, to require the Corporation Counsel to submit quarterly reports to the City Council detailing the number and disposition of civil actions filed against the New York City Police Department.

at a public hearing on December 11, 2009

Presented to:

**The New York City Council Committee on Governmental
Operations**

Presented by:

Steven B. Wasserman

Attorney

Criminal Practice – Special Litigation Unit

December 11, 2009

Introduction

I am Steven Wasserman, an attorney with the Legal Aid Society's Criminal Practice. The Legal Aid Society welcomes the opportunity to testify at this public hearing before the New York City Council Committee on Government Operations, concerning the monitoring of tort claims against the NYPD.

Since 1876, the Legal Aid Society has provided free legal services to New York City residents who are unable to afford private counsel. Annually, through our criminal, civil and juvenile offices in all five boroughs, our staff handles about 300,000 cases and legal matters for poor families and individuals. The services we provide reflect the entire gamut of the needs of our clients, from immigration representation for the newest arrivals, to health care benefits for the oldest New Yorkers.

By contract with New York City, the Legal Aid Society serves as the primary defender of poor people prosecuted in the State court system, at both the trial and appellate levels. We meet most of our criminal clients at their arraignments within hours of their arrests. Therefore, we are often the first agency to receive reports and to observe evidence of abuse of authority, false arrests and excessive force that result in the bulk of Civil Rights and other tort claims against the NYPD. While we do not pursue tort claims we frequently assist clients with filing State notices of claim, and putting them in contact with agencies that refer prospective plaintiffs to specialists in the Civil Rights Bar.

Int. No. 1025

The Legal Aid Society supports the proposal before this Committee to require quarterly reports to the City Counsel detailing the number and disposition of civil actions filed against the New York City Police Department. Tort claims are an important index of the more serious

forms of police misconduct, as well as a serious drain on government operations. Most actions have been carefully vetted by experienced attorneys, who accept them for a contingent fee, and thus have a substantial investment in their merits.

There has been no significant change in the trend of the past 10 years, when the Comptroller first reported that New York City paid \$96.8 million in settlements and judgments in police misconduct cases from 1994 to 1997, a 59 percent increase over the prior four-year period, and nearly 10% of what the city paid in all personal injury cases. However the number of tort claims and payouts is not the only measure, or even the most adequate measure of the costs associated with police misconduct. As the NY Times Editorial page observed, "Police brutality has always scarred its victims and diminished public confidence in law enforcement." "The Cost of Police Brutality" NY Times Editorial, April 22, 1995

We applaud the decision to monitor tort claims as an essential first step toward bringing police misconduct under control.



**TESTIMONY OF
CITIZENS UNION OF THE CITY OF NEW YORK
Before the New York City Council Committee on Governmental Operations re: Int. 1025
December 11, 2009**

Good morning Chair Sears and other members of the Committee on Governmental Operations. My name is DeNora Getachew, and I am the director of public policy and legislative counsel for Citizens Union of the City of New York and I am joined by my colleague Rachael Fauss, policy and research associate for the organization. Citizens Union is an independent, nonpartisan, civic organization of New Yorkers who promote good government and advance political reform in our city and state. For more than a century, Citizens Union has served as a watchdog for the public interest and an advocate for the common good. We thank you for holding this public hearing meeting and giving us the opportunity to present Citizens Union's thoughts regarding Int. No.1025 and how best to address the rising trend and cost of civil lawsuits against the New York Police Department (NYPD) relating to, among other things, police misconduct.

As you know, Citizens Union has weighed in on issues involving political reform and those of good and effective government and is increasingly weighing in on issues that rise to a level of significant citywide importance. For example, the organization recently extensively reviewed New York City's policies and procedures governing the handling of alleged police misconduct and the subsequent internal disciplinary action and issued a series of recommendations about how to improve that process in our Report and Recommendations on Public Oversight of Police Misconduct (Report) which was released in April 2008. Believing that the vast majority of police officers are honest, hard-working individuals who perform the vital and dangerous function of protecting our city, our Report proposed a series of reforms geared towards creating additional public confidence and support in the police force. Most notable of our recommendations is to transfer prosecutorial authority to the Civilian Complaint Review Board (CCRB) to substantiate the cases it prosecutes, which we believe will go a long way towards improving public confidence and integrity of the system, as well as overall making the system more efficient, functional and transparent. The other components of our five point plan for legislation and regulations to reform the civilian oversight system, as first provided in our Report, are as follows:

1. Expand the range of penalties available to the Police Commissioner;
2. Reinstate the Zero Tolerance penalty for False Statements;
3. Provide the CCRB with the authority to prosecute officers found guilty of lying during CCRB investigations; and
4. Create of a permanent and stronger Commission to Combat Police Corruption.

Speaking more specifically to the subject of today's hearing, the organization is concerned about the rising trend of police claims over the last several years, especially the data from Comptroller Thompson's March 2009 Claims Report indicating that there were 2,863 new police action claims filed in Fiscal Year 2008, up by fifteen percent (15%) from FY 2007 totaling \$35.2 million. When Citizens Union reviewed the number of complaints filed with the CCRB alleging

police misconduct during the same period, the claims had declined to 7,405 – still a relatively high number of complaints for the CCRB. If we look at the complaint data available for 2009, year to date the number of claims has increased by about 5% (five percent) above last year's numbers. When viewed together, this data may be indicative of a negative trend towards increased claims filings for both civil and disciplinary actions with allegedly aggrieved parties believing it is necessary to pursue civil claims more frequently as an alternative to or in conjunction with filing disciplinary claims.

Citizens Union supports Int. 1025 being considered by this committee today because by mandating that the corporation counsel file quarterly reports with the council regarding police action claims hopefully will create greater transparency regarding such claims. This requirement, in addition to Citizens Union's 5 point plan outlined above, will also create an opportunity for the council, the administration, and the public to more transparently view trends between allegations of police misconduct and civil actions in order to establish best practices for how to mitigate this important issue going forward in a more holistic manner.

We thank you for the opportunity to testify today at this important hearing and look forward to working with you to accomplishing meaningful reform. Citizens Union plans to continue to advance Int. No. 1048 prime sponsored by Councilmembers Garodnick and de Blasio, among others, which would transfer prosecutorial power over substantiated cases to the CCRB, and looks forward to continuing to work with the council and the administration on this and other important issues.



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Statement of the New York Civil Liberties Union

Before

The New York City Council Committee on Government Operations

Regarding

**Int. No. 1025: Reporting by the New York City Corporation Counsel on Civil Damage
Claims Related to Police Misconduct**

**Prepared by NYCLU Associate Legal Director Christopher Dunn
and Legislative Director Robert Perry**

December 11, 2009

The New York Civil Liberties Union submits this testimony regarding Int. No. 1025, which would require quarterly reports by the Office of Corporation Counsel regarding the nature and status of civil lawsuits brought against the New York City Police Department. We commend the Council for this bill and support the bill's goal.

We believe, however, that much more needs to be done to establish effective oversight and monitoring of the police misconduct that has cost the city nearly \$500 million over the last ten years. And even in the limited area of reporting by the Office of Corporation Counsel, we believe the Council can and should require much more, both in terms of what information is reported and to whom it is reported.

Before addressing these issues, however, we address the scope of the underlying problem implicated by this legislation.

Police Misconduct Lawsuits Filed Against New York City

From 1999 to 2008, the City of New York paid out nearly \$400 million in damages to individuals who filed civil lawsuits against members of the NYPD:

**Police Misconduct Lawsuits against New York City:
Claims Filed & Settlements, 1999-2008¹**

	1999	2000	2001	2002	2003
Number of Claims Filed	2,400	1,779	1,984	1,793	2,067
Number of Settlements/Judgments	749	835	788	563	613
Claims Paid (in millions)	\$41.0	\$38.0	\$89.0	\$21.7	\$32.9

	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	Total
Number of Claims Filed	1,930	2,588	2,211	2,485	2,863	22,100
Number of Settlements/Judgments	693	567	554	710	951	7023
Claims Paid (in millions)	\$42.6	\$40.4	\$24.6	\$25.2	\$35.2	\$390.6

On top of this, the mayor's office has estimated that the legal costs of defending these cases amounts to approximately \$78 million. In this ten-year period, then, the city has expended close to half a billion dollars to resolve damage claims related to acts of police misconduct against civilians.

¹William C. Thompson, Comptroller of the City of New York, *Claims Report: Fiscal Year 2004, November 2005*, Table 3; Thompson, *Claims Report: Fiscal Years 2007-08, March 2009*, Tables 1, 3, 5. Claims paid in fiscal year 2001 include a \$50 million settlement of a class action civil rights claim against the police department for damages related to illegal strip searches (*Tyson v. City of New York*, No. 97 Civ. 3762 (S.D.N.Y. Dec. 2000)).

And there are indications the underlying problem – serious conflict between police and civilians – is growing worse. There were 2,863 claims alleging police misconduct filed in 2008, the greatest number filed in any year since the mid-1990s, when the department significantly expanded the ranks of police officers. And the claims filed in the years 2005, 2007, and 2008 exceed the number filed in any other year since at least 1986.²

It was 1992 when then Comptroller Elizabeth Holtzman urged that the NYPD analyze legal claims, lawsuits, and CCRB complaints for purposes of imposing discipline and identifying and correcting problems with police department policies and practices.³ The city failed to act on her recommendations.⁴ In 1997 Comptroller Alan Hevesi made the same recommendations, observing that there is a “total disconnect between the settlements of civil claims and police department [disciplinary] actions.”⁵

A subsequent report prepared by the Association of the Bar of the City of New York found that the absence of police accountability gives tacit approval to dangerous police practices. That report, issued in 2000, concluded that “the city consistently misses opportunities to increase the protection of the rights of persons in the city and to reduce injuries that poison the relations between police and citizen, and in doing so saving millions of dollars.”⁶

²Ibid, Table 1; Alan G. Hevesi, Comptroller of the City of New York, *Claims Report: Fiscal Year 1995, August 1996*, Table 1

³ Association of the Bar of the City of New York, Committee on New York City Affairs, “The Failure of Civil Damages Claims to Modify Police Practices, and Recommendations for Change,” *The Record*, Vol. 55, No. 4, July/August 2000, p. 535.

⁴ Ibid., p. 536.

⁵ Ibid. The internal quotation appears in a news account by Deborah Sontag and Dan Berry, “The Price of Brutality: A Special Report,” *New York Times*, September 17, 1997.

⁶ Ibid., p. 536.

The Need for a Comprehensive Lawsuit Early-Warning System

While the NYCLU supports Int. No. 1025, we want to emphasize that we believe that reporting by the Office of Corporation Counsel about police-misconduct lawsuits is only one small part of what should be a comprehensive system of responding to lawsuits alleging police misconduct. Given the enormous costs to the city and the threat that police misconduct poses to public safety and to the integrity of the police department, the City Council must work to create a comprehensive system of tracking, analyzing, and responding to lawsuits that reveal misconduct. Such a system would require a coordinated approach involving the Office of Corporation Counsel, the NYPD, the local District Attorneys and United States Attorneys, the Civilian Complaint Review Board, the Comptroller's Office, and the City Council.

We recognize that creation of such a system is well beyond Int. No. 1025, but we believe that this bill marks a valuable starting point for the creation of a more comprehensive system of oversight. We therefore urge the Government Operations Committee and the Council to view this bill as only the beginning of a much broader undertaking.

Proposed Amendments to Int. No. 1025

While we believe the city must work towards a comprehensive system for responding to police-misconduct lawsuits, we fully recognize that reporting is an important part of any such system and therefore fully support the concept of Int. 1025. Nonetheless, we believe the bill should be strengthened by broadening the information that must be reported and by broadening the agencies to which the information should be reported.

Starting with the issue of the scope of information to be reported, we note at the outset that there is virtually no city reporting about police-misconduct lawsuits. To our knowledge, the only reported information is about total annual payments as reflected in the annual claims report issued by the Comptroller. This contrasts starkly with reporting about other related NYPD activity. For instance, the Civilian Complaint Review Board (CCRB) produces detailed reports on a monthly, semi-annual, and annual basis about police-misconduct complaints filed with that agency. And, pursuant to legislation recently adopted by the City Council, the NYPD produces detailed reports about police shootings and stop-and-frisk activity. These reports provide useful benchmarks for the types of reporting the Council should expect about police-misconduct lawsuits. Among other areas, the bill should be amended to require much more specific information about those filing lawsuits (e.g., race, age, gender, neighborhood), about the officers accused of misconduct (e.g., race, age, gender, command, time on force, prior lawsuits), and the specific allegations being made. We also believe that the Office of Corporation Counsel should produce copies of every complaint filed and every settlement or other disposition. Simply put, there is much more information about lawsuits that can and should be produced.

We also believe that the bill should be amended to require that NYPD lawsuit information be reported not just to the Council but also to the Comptroller and to the CCCB. The Comptroller, as the chief fiscal officer, has a duty to examine the city's liability exposure as regards police misconduct and to recommend measures to reduce that exposure. In the most recent claims report issued by his office, Comptroller William C. Thompson states that city agencies must be held fiscally accountable for damage claims,⁷ and the report recommends

⁷Thompson, *Claims Report: Fiscal Years 2007-08, March 2009*, p. 3.

financial incentives to hold down claim activity and costs.⁸ Timely access to civil lawsuit information involving police misconduct along with cumulative data regarding complaints filed would facilitate the comptroller's ability to establish fiscal oversight and accountability regarding police-misconduct litigation.

The CCRB is charged under the City Charter with conducting complete, thorough and impartial investigations of police misconduct complaints; and based upon these investigations the CCRB makes recommendations regarding police department policies and practices, with the objective of preventing misunderstanding and conflict when police officers interact with civilians. The CCRB's staff could utilize information and data regarding police misconduct lawsuits to identify police officers with a history of conflict with civilians; to analyze the circumstances that give rise to such conflict; to determine whether training or counseling is called for; and to make recommendations regarding the need for heightened supervision or disciplinary sanctions.

It is quite likely that the CCRB has no record of, or access to, the information contained in a police misconduct lawsuit. (Particularly when more serious forms of misconduct are involved, the complainant often proceeds directly to court.) With this information, however, the agency could expedite investigations against a police officer subsequently named in a CCRB complaint who may pose a serious risk of harm to the public. Information regarding civil damage claims would enable the CCRB to flag serious flaws in police department practices.

For example, with timely access to civil damage complaints, the CCRB might have been able to identify police officers with a record of using unauthorized choke holds; and with the

⁸ Ibid., p. 3-4.

NYPD's reliance on questionable intelligence provided by informants when executing "no-knock" warrants. The agency might have brought attention to these highly dangerous police practices before they led to the deaths of Anthony Baez and Alberta Spruill.

Additional Technical Amendments

In addition to the foregoing, the NYCLU proposes the following amendments to Int. No. 1025:

- (1) Include in the reporting provision cases in which corporation counsel may not have "appeared or agreed to represent" a party. A decision not to represent a police officer may indicate a serious breach of the law or NYPD rules.
- (2) Include in the reporting provision information related to settlements and judgments (that is, pursuant to a jury verdict).
- (3) Make clear in the bill's reporting requirements that new claims as well as pending claims must be separately identified.

We thank the Committee for the opportunity to testify, and we look forward to working with the Council in developing a comprehensive and sensible system of monitoring lawsuits revealing police misconduct.

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Re: Testimony to the Government Operations Committee Hearing regarding Int. No. 1025 – A Local Law to amend the administrative code of the City of New York, in relation to requiring the Corporation Counsel to submit quarterly reports to the City Council detailing the number and disposition of civil actions filed against the New York City Police Department.

Unless this amendment includes reporting requirements connecting the precincts and officers involved to the costs of civil rights lawsuits, the City Council is poised to miss its opportunity to gather the data it really needs in order to begin managing NYPD liability.

Fiscal responsibility requires the City Council to act – last year at least \$80 million was paid out in civil rights lawsuits against NYPD.¹ Since 2002, the City has spent over half a billion dollars on claims against the NYPD.² A fraction of those claims are settled for \$250,000 or more – the majority are claims of repeat routine misconduct often by a handful of officers at a handful of precincts.³

But there's no reporting or oversight mechanism by which the NYPD keeps track of repeat routine misconduct resulting in civil rights lawsuits by precinct or by individual officer. While civil rights attorneys know from experience that officers and precincts named in their lawsuits are likely to have a history of multiple lawsuits, this information, available and on public record, is simply not reviewed by the NYPD. For example, I took 50 officers from a Brooklyn precinct sued by our firm. From those 50 officers, we know that at least 13 of them have been sued in at least 3 or more other federal lawsuits, several were named in 4-6 other lawsuits. Without knowing the source of the civil rights lawsuits, the City Council cannot begin to act on the cost of NYPD liability.

Requiring the NYPD to track its civil rights liability will be inexpensive. In addition to the data already being available in filed civil rights complaints, the technology already exists to connect precinct and individual officers with the City's civil rights costs. Pursuant to a consent decree with the US DOJ, the City of Los Angeles created Training Evaluation and Management System [TEAMS] to track its officers and precincts civil

¹ The City has spent \$102.8 million dollars on lawsuits involving the NYPD in Fiscal Year 2008, an 11% increase from 2007. See Fiscal Years 2007-2008 Claim Report, <http://www.comptroller.nyc.gov/index.asp>, page 41 (last visited on March 30, 2009).

² "Cop in Sodomy Case Had History of Excessive Force Suits" by Bob Hennelly December 9, 2008. <http://www.wnyc.org/news/articles/117941> (last visited on March 30, 2009).

³ A New York Daily News Article "Chasing Cops' paper trail: NYPD panel to scour lawsuits for police misconduct" reported on November 5, 2009 by Rocco Parascandola, suggested that this panel would limit its "scouring" to lawsuits of \$250,000 or more. From my review of New York City Comptroller's Office claims for the past four years (2006-July 2009), there were six lawsuits settled for \$250,000 or more.

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12/11/09

rights liability.⁴ The City Council could simply require the NYPD to adopt the LAPD's TEAMS II system.

Connecting civil rights lawsuits to precincts and officers will (1) limit future liability by revealing leadership or training issues at the precinct level or revealing early at-risk behavior of individual officers which can be addressed with retraining or discharge, (2) foreclose the City's potential municipal liability for failing to have a policy addressing the issue of officers and precincts with lengthy civil rights lawsuit histories, and (3) improve police practices by supplementing COMPSTAT performance evaluation of precincts and officers with civil rights statistics and 4) most importantly, give individual members of the Council a fuller factual understanding of the precincts so they can have informed discussion with their commanding officers.

Without a meaningful oversight mechanism, there is no way that the City Council can begin to act on the cost of NYPD liability.

⁴ United States of America v. City of Los Angeles, California, Board of Police Commissioners of the City of Los Angeles, and the Los Angeles Police Department, 00-11769 GAF(RCx), United States District Court of the Central District of California

**THE COUNCIL
THE CITY OF NEW YORK**

Appearance Card

I intend to appear and speak on Int. No. 1025 Res. No. _____

in favor in opposition

Date: 12/11/09

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Name: CHRIS DUNN

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I represent: New York Civil Liberties Union

Address: _____

**THE COUNCIL
THE CITY OF NEW YORK**

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in favor in opposition

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**THE COUNCIL
THE CITY OF NEW YORK**

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I represent: Office of the Mayor

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

**THE COUNCIL
THE CITY OF NEW YORK**

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