

**Testimony Of Jordan Dressler, Civil Justice Coordinator**  
**Office of Civil Justice, New York City Human Resources Administration**  
**New York City Council, Committee on Housing and Buildings**

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Good morning Chairman Williams and members of the Committee, thank you for this opportunity to discuss the work of the City's Human Resources Administration (HRA) and our focus on carrying out the Mayor's priority of fighting poverty and income inequity and preventing homelessness. My name is Jordan Dressler and I am the newly appointed Civil Justice Coordinator of the Office of Civil Justice at the New York City Human Resources Administration.

With an annual budget of \$9.9 billion and a staff of 14,000, HRA provides assistance and services to three million low-income children and adults. This includes:

- Economic support and social services for families and individuals through the administration of major benefit programs (Cash Assistance, Supplemental Nutritional Assistance Program benefits (food stamps), Medicaid, and Child Support Services);
- Homelessness prevention assistance, educational, vocational, and employment services, assistance for persons with disabilities, services for immigrants, civil legal aid, and disaster relief;
- And for the most vulnerable New Yorkers: HIV/AIDS Services, Adult Protective Services, Home Care and programs for survivors of domestic violence.

Today I am here to discuss in general the City's extraordinary investment in legal services to level the playing field for low-income New Yorkers who otherwise appear alone in court when other parties like landlords are represented, and specifically about our efforts to provide quality legal representation for low-income tenants who face eviction actions and other pressure tactics by landlords seeking to harass them out of their homes. Affordable housing, a precious resource, is permanently lost to the City when tenants are evicted from rent-regulated and rent-controlled apartments and rent is increased above affordable levels. Protecting these affordable units throughout the city for families and seniors and protecting tenants in small buildings is critical.

It is important to note that even as we are making these commitments to provide access to justice, we recognize that the circumstances low-income and vulnerable New Yorkers are facing have built up over many years and will not be solved overnight. But for every family that stays in their home, it spares the city the expense of emergency shelter services – and more importantly spares the family the trauma of homelessness, including disruption of education, employment,

and medical care. HRA's legal services programs are aimed at keeping these New Yorkers in their homes, preventing displacement and preserving and protecting the City's affordable housing stock.

Our commitment to expanding civil legal services to more New Yorkers in need, and making those services more effective, can be seen in the actions and investments of this Administration over the past two years, specifically in the area of providing legal services to tenants facing harassment and eviction. The Mayor's first budget, for FY 2014 provided an unprecedented level of funding to civil legal services for low-income New Yorkers. During the course of that year we allocated a total of \$13.5 million to protect tenants facing eviction and harassment by unscrupulous landlords. The vast majority of landlords do follow the law and treat their tenants with respect. We are focused on the few that do not, and have sought to ensure that tenants in those buildings have the quality legal representation they need in the face of unfair and illegal actions or unacceptable living conditions.

In Fiscal Year 2015, the Administration significantly expanded the anti-eviction tenant protection program, and made a \$5 million down payment on the creation of our new anti-harassment program for rezoning areas, which next year will grow to \$36 million. This program focuses on 14 zip codes throughout the five boroughs and includes neighborhoods such as East New York, East Harlem, Flushing, the Bay Street area, and Highbridge. The initiative is focused on ensuring that more than 13,000 of our city's low-income residents can stay in the neighborhoods they built as those areas grow denser, and see considerable investment in the coming years.

In the current FY16 budget, the City again increased the commitment to fund tenant protection legal services for low-income New Yorkers. This year's budget already included over \$33 million to help New Yorkers to stay in their homes. In September of last year, the Mayor announced that we are further deepening this commitment, by allocating an additional \$12.3 million to the anti-eviction legal services program for providers already hard at work so we can reach more New Yorkers as quickly as possible. This brings the total investment in tenant protection legal services in the Administration's current FY16 budget to nearly \$46 million.

Our program is by far the largest initiative of its kind in the nation, enough to provide more than 113,000 New Yorkers each year with legal services to protect against harassment and unnecessary evictions—which also has the benefit of protecting our affordable housing stock.

Tenant protection is the cornerstone of our initiatives to provide access to justice for low-income New Yorkers, but the City is working on many additional fronts to support legal services, by investing:

- \$4.3 million for Executive Action legal assistance programs for immigrants, operated by HRA in conjunction with the Mayor's Office of Immigrant Affairs and CUNY;

- \$3.2 million for comprehensive immigration legal assistance (that will begin to be implemented through a new RFP process during FY16);
- \$2.1 million for civil legal services for seniors; and
- \$2.6 million for legal services to secure federal disability benefits.

When all of these programs are fully implemented in FY17, New York City will be allocating more than \$70 million annually in our baseline budget to provide access to justice for low-income New Yorkers.

Our commitment to provide access to justice for low-income tenants is complemented by other major agency initiatives to prevent homelessness. Among them is HRA's Homelessness Prevention Administration, which includes an Early Intervention Outreach Team that seeks out families and individuals on the verge of losing their homes, and who can be helped by legal assistance or emergency rental assistance.

By providing free legal representation to low-income New Yorkers who would otherwise appear alone in court when other parties like landlords are represented, we give New Yorkers fair and equal access to our civil justice system, while working to fight poverty and inequality. These services help low-income New Yorkers to keep a roof over their heads, stabilize families, keep food in the kitchen, keep students in school, and preserve neighborhoods. We are working to help those who need it most to gain and maintain the security and dignity they deserve.

Investing in access to justice is also smart economics. Former Chief Judge Jonathan Lippman's Task Force found that for every dollar invested in civil legal services, taxpayers see a return of more than six dollars in federal benefits, such as federal disability benefits. These benefits not only improve the living standards of the people who receive them, but help lift up local communities as more resources are put into neighborhood economies. Real neighborhood impacts include: declines in evictions; reductions in the loss of subsidized and rent stabilized housing; improvements to the housing stock such as addressing buildings experiencing lack of heat and hot water, and other essential services and lack of repairs; and the preservation of affordable rents.

Further, the City sees tremendous savings in averted shelter costs. Providing civil legal services also reduces the costs of litigation and increases court efficiency, which benefits all litigants, regardless of income level.

We also want to recognize the deep commitment of this legislative body and City Council Speaker Melissa Mark-Viverito to expanding access to justice. In FY16, HRA is overseeing \$19.1 million in discretionary funding added by the City Council during the budget process to support a diverse array of civil legal services, including family reunification immigration defense, assistance for domestic violence survivors and veterans, and anti-eviction and SRO legal services, and more.

No other municipality allocates even a small fraction of what New York City is committing to provide access to justice. This is one of the best investments we can make – because it can so clearly change lives for the better, as we are already seeing across the city.

We recognize that the challenges low-income and vulnerable New Yorkers face are complex and deep-rooted. But we know, too that we have powerful tools at hand to address those challenges, and lift up our neighbors who need it most. And together, we become a stronger and more just city.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify today, I'm happy to answer any questions the committee may have.