

Testimony Of Steven Banks, Commissioner Of The New York City Human Resources Administration, at the New York City Planning Commission

January 6, 2016

Good afternoon Chairman Weisbrod, 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. 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 many of whom reside in and around the area considered within the East New York rezoning plan. 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.

Much of the work that HRA does aligns directly with what residents report are necessary interventions to preserve the community as well as improve the lives of residents of East New York.

Protecting affordable units in East New York for families and seniors and protecting tenants in small buildings is critical as the rezoning plan moves forward. HRA's legal services programs are aimed at achieving just that. This Administration's investment of \$46 million in this fiscal year for legal services to protect against harassment and unnecessary eviction will grow to over \$62 million next year. That is more than ten times the \$6.5 million spent in Fiscal Year 2013. It 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.

This Administration is committed to protecting tenants from displacement, preserving affordable housing, stabilizing neighborhoods and averting homelessness.

Homelessness Prevention Administration: Legal Services

To carry out the Mayor's longstanding priority of addressing poverty and preventing homelessness, HRA streamlined existing programs targeted at homelessness prevention and we

continue to enhance our ongoing efforts to provide low-income New Yorkers with access to legal assistance under HRA's new Homelessness Prevention Administration. These services are available regardless of whether individuals are HRA clients. These commitments to provide access to justice for low-income tenants are also complemented by other major initiatives to prevent homelessness. Among them is HRA's new 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.

The importance of civil legal services cannot be overstated. By providing free legal representation to 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, including those residing in East New York, 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. The Chief Judge's Task Force's found that for every dollar invested in providing 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.

Our commitment to expanding civil legal services to more New Yorkers, and making those services more effective, can be seen in the actions and investments of this Administration over the past two years.

The Mayor's first budget, for July 2014 through June 2015, 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 \$18.5 million to protect tenants facing eviction and harassment by unscrupulous landlords, which is a major cause of homelessness. The vast majority of landlords do follow the law and treat their tenants with respect. We are focused on the few that do not.

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, like East New York, which next year will grow to \$36 million. This program 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, helping prevent homelessness and disruption in the lives of thousands. This year's budget already included over \$33 million to help New Yorkers to stay in their homes. In September, the Mayor announced that we are further deepening this commitment, allocating an additional \$12.3 million to the anti-eviction legal services program, allocated among the 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 budget to nearly \$46 million.

Tenant protection is the cornerstone of our initiatives to provide access to justice for low-income New Yorkers, but we are also working on many additional fronts, 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 \$74 million annually in our baseline budget to provide access to justice for low-income New Yorkers.

We also want to recognize the deep commitment of City Council Speaker Melissa Mark-Viverito, and the entire City Council, 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. And specific to today's hearing, we are currently serving 65 buildings through our legal services programs in the East New York Community District representing 566 apartments.

We recognize that the challenges low-income and vulnerable New Yorkers are facing 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. Every family or individual who can

keep their home with the help of legal assistance is spared the trauma of homelessness, including the disruption of education, employment and medical care. The City is also spared the expense of emergency shelter services. And together, we become a stronger and more just city.

The Mayor's Action Plan (MAP) for Neighborhood Safety

Additionally, HRA has a presence in East New York at the following New York City Housing Authority (NYCHA) residences: Boulevard, Brownsville and Van Dyke Houses.

The Mayor's Action Plan (MAP) for Neighborhood Safety is a collaborative effort among NYCHA, eleven city agencies, community groups, and non-profits aimed at making New York City's neighborhoods and housing developments safer and stronger. As part of MAP, HRA launched an outreach initiative to assist NYCHA residents, in and around three East New York developments, with information about benefits eligibility and how to access benefits for which they may be eligible.

With locations in a senior center, a community center, and a management office, HRA Outreach Specialists provide support, information, and referrals to development and community residents who have questions about open cases or are seeking temporary assistance for the first time. We also conduct targeted outreach in the surrounding communities; our HRA team meets regularly with community stakeholders at community outreach events and workshops and partner presentations; and has a regular presence at community board and district cabinet meetings. Whether providing general information on HRA programs and services, assisting community residents with completing online applications for SNAP/food stamps and Public Health Insurance, facilitating referrals to program offices, or troubleshooting case concerns, our goal is the same: to provide support to New Yorkers in need.

Additionally, Outreach Specialists assist development and community residents who have unforeseen emergencies, which can lead to the loss of their home and all of the associated collateral damage, with information about emergency assistance through HRA. Through referrals to eviction prevention assistance and emergency rent assistance, the Outreach Team helps keep New Yorkers in their homes. We continue to build and maintain relationships within the East New York Community by participating in monthly community meetings and working closely with community stakeholders to provide comprehensive, wrap-around supports to families and individuals.

Jobs Plus: Brownsville

We've heard from residents about the importance of improving access to job training and career opportunities in the local community.

The Brownsville Jobs-Plus program, through our provider DB Grant Associates, provides comprehensive employment services and wraparound support to residents of NYCHA's Van

Dyke and Brownsville Houses. Since launching in November 2014, 770 residents have joined the program and 175 have attained employment. Now in its second year of operation, the program continues to expand upon initial success through integration with the City's Career Pathways approach, ensuring residents steadily advance into stable job opportunities with good pay, benefits, and career growth.

Employment services at Jobs-Plus include job-readiness assessments, career exploration, job preparation workshops, referral to education and training opportunities, job placement/retention, and career advancement. Jobs-Plus also offers one-on-one financial counseling to help residents to improve credit scores, reduce debt, open safe and affordable bank accounts, increase savings, and access work supports such as SNAP and health insurance. Eligible residents who attain employment may also receive a NYCHA rent incentive known as the Earned Income Disallowance (EID). Additionally, through targeted community engagement efforts, Brownsville Jobs-Plus has partnered with tenant association leaders, local health organizations, education providers, and employers to garner support for Jobs-Plus efforts and bring additional supportive services into the community.

The Brownsville Jobs-Plus program is not only aimed at breaking the cycle of poverty, but at alleviating crime and violence. A recent success story featured by Brownsville Jobs-Plus details the journey of a 32-year-old, married man residing in Van Dyke houses. He joined the Jobs-Plus program in July 2015 and, upon being assessed, revealed that he had been formerly incarcerated. Building upon the experience he gained as a laborer post-release, Jobs-Plus provided him with the assistance needed to complete welding training. Upon completion, he was connected to a Section 3 construction job opportunity through NYCHA where he presently earns \$55.75 per hour. Once employed, he began meeting regularly with the on-site financial counselor. Thus far, he has increased his credit score and is working on establishing regular savings. He represents one of many residents who have made meaningful connections to the Jobs-Plus program and who are continuing to work towards long-term self-sufficiency.

Jobs-Plus is a joint effort between several City agencies (the Human Resources Administration, Center for Economic Opportunity, New York City Housing Authority, and Department of Consumer Affairs' Office of Financial Empowerment) and community-based organizations to provide place-based services to residents. For more information on Jobs-Plus, including locations and target developments, you can visit <http://opportunitynycha.org/workforce-development/jobs-plus>.

HRA's programs and services address many of the concerns that community members have raised in response to the rezoning proposal of East New York. HRA looks forward to continue to work with the community to improve the programs and services we deliver. I thank you for the opportunity to testify today and look forward to any questions you may have.