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DISTRICT ATTORNEY

DISTRICT ATTORNEY – NEW YORK COUNTY

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**DA VANCE AND DOI COMMISSIONER PETERS ANNOUNCE
INDICTMENT OF TENANT ASSOCIATION TREASURER FOR STEALING
MORE THAN \$50,000 THROUGH CITY HOUSING PROGRAM**

*Rita Copeland Accused of Misdirecting Tenant Rent Payments and Money Orders into Personal Accounts
and Forging Board Member Signatures and Official Reports*

Manhattan District Attorney Cyrus R. Vance, Jr., and Department of Investigation (“DOI”) Commissioner Mark G. Peters today announced the indictment of RITA COPELAND, 65, for a fraudulent scheme that enabled the defendant to steal more than \$50,000 from her tenant association through a City housing program. COPELAND is charged in a 29-count indictment in New York State Supreme Court with Grand Larceny in the Second Degree, Falsifying Business Records in the First Degree, and Forgery in the Second Degree.¹

“As the treasurer of her building, Rita Copeland is accused of stealing from hard-working individuals and families living under the very same roof,” said District Attorney Vance. “It is alleged that she not only stole from her neighbors, but from the City of New York, pocketing tens of thousands of dollars in the process. Thanks to our joint investigation with DOI, these alleged acts of fraud, forgery and theft were uncovered, ensuring critical funds will be returned and directed towards their intended use of improving housing in New York City.”

DOI Commissioner Mark G. Peters said: “This investigation exposed fraud and systemic problems with a City housing program that is supposed to empower tenants, not provide opportunities for theft. DOI and the Manhattan District Attorney's Office worked together

¹ The charges contained in the indictment are merely allegations, and the defendant is presumed innocent unless and until proven guilty. All factual recitations are derived from documents filed in court and statements made on the record in court.

to expose and stop these crimes. DOI's report on the investigation documents our work to prevent this wrongdoing from happening again.”

According to documents filed in court, between January 2010 and September 2013, COPELAND used her position as treasurer of the Tenant Association (“TA”) at 51-55 East 129th Street – a residential building enrolled in the NYC Department of Housing Preservation and Development (“HPD”) Tenant Interim Lease (“TIL”) program – to steal more than \$50,000. The program is designed to privatize City-owned residential buildings into tenant-owned and managed cooperative apartments. As part of the process, the buildings are required to form a TA and elect officers for the organization, including a treasurer. The treasurer is responsible for managing the TA finances, such as collecting rent and co-signing checks that pay for the building’s operating and maintenance costs. Each month, the TA financial reports are required to be filed with HPD.

A joint investigation by the DA’s Office and DOI revealed that COPELAND was allegedly able to steal more than \$50,000 by writing checks to herself and forging the signatures of other board members on those checks. The defendant is also accused of falsifying check records submitted to HPD so that they appeared to be payment for legitimate expenses, and directly intercepting money orders and rent payments from other tenants before they ever reached the building’s accounts. In total, COPELAND is accused of stealing approximately \$52,000 from the building and forging more than 50 checks and reports required by HPD through the TIL program.

In response to the case, DOI today presented a comprehensive report on TIL to HPD. DOI’s report details the investigation and documents the corruption and vulnerabilities exposed during the investigation, as well as the adopted DOI recommendations that strengthen the TIL program and HPD’s oversight. The full report can be found on the [DOI website](#).

Assistant District Attorney Adam Maltz is handling the prosecution of the case, under the supervision of Luke Rettler, Chief of the Public Corruption Unit, Charles Linehan, Deputy Chief of the Public Corruption Unit, and Executive Assistant District Attorney David Szuchman, Chief of the Investigation Division. Former Assistant District Attorney Ryan Connors also assisted with the case.

District Attorney Vance thanked Commissioner Peters, Assistant Inspector General Ondie L. Frederick, Associate Commissioner Michael Carroll, Inspector General Greg Cho, and Deputy Inspector General David Jordan, all of the New York City Department of Investigation, for their assistance with the investigation.

Defendant Information:

RITA COPELAND, D.O.B. 8/28/1949
New York, NY

Charges:

- Grand Larceny in the Second Degree, a class C felony, 1 count
- Falsifying Business Records in the First Degree, a class E felony, 14 counts
- Forgery in the Second Degree, a class D felony, 14 counts

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