



**Testimony of Assistant Commissioner Sara Meyers
City Council Hearing Regarding SCRIE
May 1, 2014**

Good afternoon Chairwoman Ferreras, Chairwoman Chin, and members of the Committees on Finance and Aging. I am Sara Meyers, Assistant Commissioner of Tax and Parking Program Operations. Thank you for the opportunity to testify before you today regarding Introduction 243 and administration of the Senior Citizen Rent Increase Exemption Program, which will increase the SCRIE income eligibility threshold from \$29,000 to \$50,000 as of July 1, 2014.

SCRIE is hugely important to this Administration. We support this bill. However, the enabling State legislation sunsets in two years; therefore, we suggest amending the language so that the local law also sunsets at the same time. We are fully committed to continuing SCRIE at the higher income threshold, but we feel it is crucial that the local law mimics what is in State law.

We understand that there are concerns about the SCRIE program, and we are making every effort to continually improve our administration of this valuable benefit. We look forward to your feedback today. Our new Finance Commissioner will be starting in a few weeks, and he has already expressed his commitment to SCRIE, and his desire to work together to reach people who may qualify for the program but are not already taking advantage of this crucial benefit.

Introduction 243 will increase the number of SCRIE applicants and participants due to the increase in the maximum qualifying income. We are gearing up to handle these new enrollees and will be prepared for this change. After we receive an application, our first step is to verify that applicants meet the requirements for the program. In order to qualify for SCRIE, in addition to meeting the maximum income threshold, applicants must also meet the rent to income ratio set out in the law. This ratio requires that the monthly rent for a SCRIE participant must be more than 1/3 of their monthly income.

We determine the monthly income by looking at the annual income submitted with the application. Income includes all household income and takes into account the income of everyone residing in the home, including Social Security, income for taxable and non-taxable sources, and pensions. We require income documentation in order to process an application. In 2014, applicants must submit income documentation from calendar year 2013. When a household member does not file taxes, we accept other documentation that represents earned income such as Social Security statements, pension statements, IRA dividend statements, IRS forms 1099 and/or a W2. If they do not have any of those documents, we will accept a signed letter from the applicant stating they had no income in a certain year and why.

Once we have determined the income, we look at the legal rent on the applicant's lease to see if it is more than 1/3 of their income. For example, if the applicant's household income is \$35,000, we would determine the monthly income to be \$2,916.67. Their legal rent would have to be more than \$972 in order to qualify for the program. The legal rent for an applicant with a household income of \$50,000 would have to be at least \$1,389 for them to qualify for the program. To put this in context, according to the Furman Center Rent Stabilization Report from April 2012, the median rent of rent stabilized apartments outside of the Manhattan core below 96th Street was \$1,132 in 2011. Including the Manhattan core, the median rent in 2011 was \$1,480. Taking into account the monthly legal rent to income ratio, the Mayor's Office of Management and Budget has estimated that an additional 6,000 households may be eligible for SCRIE when the proposed increase goes into effect on July 1st.

The expansion of the SCRIE program will require us to add some new staff to help process the new applications and support the program participants. We expect we will need three new staff for every 4,000 participants that are added to the program. In addition to this number, we anticipate that we will need more staff to help with renewals and program support in the future. It is our priority to make sure we have the staffing capacity to maintain our current customer service and operational standards. It is also crucial to us that we have the team in place that will enable us to continue building upon these standards as we strive to improve the program further. To that end, I would like to highlight the progress we have made

since Finance first took the SCRIE program over from DFTA in 2009. Our last testimony about SCRIE in front of the Council was in March 2012. At that time, we spoke at length about the concerns elected officials, advocates, community groups and SCRIE participants had about the program. We took these concerns seriously, and have implemented a number of changes to SCRIE, which I would like to highlight.

For example, two years ago, it took up to 30 days to process a SCRIE renewal; now, renewal applications are processed in 9 days or less on average, and initial applications are processed in 4 days on average. We have achieved these efficiencies by reorganizing our SCRIE/DRIE unit and by automating parts of the process. We scan and categorize all SCRIE and DRIE files so that we can quickly access them when there is an inquiry or we are working to process them. We established a SCRIE/DRIE Customer Service Group, as well as a SCRIE/DRIE Walk-in Center that is open from 8:30 am to 4:30 pm five days a week. SCRIE program participants, including tenants and landlords, can come to see us anytime they would like to ask us a question in-person. We help potential applicants understand what is needed to apply to the program, and whether they qualify. We accept applications and associated documents, and distribute applications. The Center staff can quickly look up the status of an application. We provide information about services for seniors and locations of senior centers throughout the City.

The three full time employees working in the Center are part of the SCRIE/DRIE Customer Service Group. Their supervisor, who oversees the whole SCRIE/DRIE Customer Service Group, has vast experience with customer service. One of the Center staff members is fluent in Spanish. All of these staff have access to phone interpretation service so that they can communicate with non-English speaking customers. Our interpretation provider gives us access to more than 100 different languages.

In addition to the Center, our Customer Service Group responds to many SCRIE/DRIE emails and 311 service requests. We respond to SCRIE inquiries sent to us by 311 or that we receive via email within 48 hours; in the case of a tenant or applicant inquiring via phone through 311, we contact them back by a phone call. Through March of this fiscal year, this

team has so far responded to more than 10,000 inquiries that we received either from 311 or by email. Two of the staff members charged with these responses used to process SCRIE applications. All of our SCRIE dedicated customer service staff are knowledgeable and care deeply about helping people get the information they need.

We have improved our customer service for SCRIE in the area of Outreach as well. We now have a full time Outreach Coordinator for Seniors who works within our Outreach group. She has personal relationships with groups that work with the aging population, including senior centers, advocacy groups and community groups. She speaks frequently with DFTA to share information and coordinate on outreach efforts. Earlier this week, she attended DFTA's Annual Housing Benefits and Entitlements Training. The coordinator focuses on outreach events that specifically target seniors. All of our Outreach staff can speak expertly about SCRIE and our other housing benefit for seniors, the Senior Citizen Homeowner Exemption. In Calendar Year 2013, our outreach team held 130 events. Of these, 37 were specifically focused on seniors, and 20 were specific to the SCRIE program. We often receive questions about senior programs at all of our outreach events, and we are well equipped to handle these. Apart from Finance's outreach events, DFTA participated in approximately 180 community events, which were attended by more than 14,800 older adults, where they also spoke about SCRIE. DFTA and Finance continue to work collaboratively to distribute SCRIE information. In Calendar Year 2013, we sent SCRIE flyers via email and fax to 335 aging services providers, which reached 17,000 home delivered meal recipients, senior centers, case management agencies, caregiver programs, homecare providers, and legal services providers.

In addition to outreach and customer service, last year we published a comprehensive guide to SCRIE and DRIE. This booklet has everything tenants, landlords, and new applicants need to know about SCRIE. It is also available in English, Spanish, Russian, Chinese and Korean. We distribute these booklets at all of our outreach events. We work closely with elected officials' offices to ensure that you have the materials you need to help your constituents. One of the tools that we provide is a monthly list of SCRIE tenants at risk of losing their benefits

because they have failed to renew. Working together, we are able to reach more people and provide the support that this vulnerable population needs, and we appreciate your feedback.

I would like to end my testimony by emphasizing that the new Administration, including the new Finance and Department for the Aging (DFTA) Commissioners, is totally committed to providing this valuable benefit to all qualified New Yorkers. SCRIE is tremendously important to us, and we take very seriously the need to reach as many people as possible. We are developing new methods of outreach to publicize SCRIE and get additional people signed up for the program. Our new Commissioner is starting soon and is looking forward to leading this initiative. One project we are launching soon is to send letters regarding the income increase to all applicants who were denied for having income above the threshold over the last several years. We will update you on all our plans as they develop over the next few months.

At this time, I would be happy to answer any questions you may have.