



Testimony Of Jordan Dressler, Civil Justice Coordinator
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Before the New York City Council's Courts and Legal Services Committee
HRA's Fiscal Year 2017 Preliminary Budget
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Good afternoon, Chairman Lancman. Thank you for inviting me to appear before you today to discuss the Office of Civil Justice at the New York City Human Resources Administration. My name is Jordan Dressler and I am the newly appointed Civil Justice Coordinator. Joining me today is HRA's Executive Deputy Commissioner for Finance Erin Villari and Executive Director for Legal Services Initiatives Jaclyn Moore.

HRA is the nation's largest social services agency assisting over three million New Yorkers annually through the administration of more than 12 major public assistance programs. HRA also administers one of this Administration's cornerstone programs: IDNYC, the country's most successful municipal identification card program. And as of June 2015, HRA has housed the Office of Civil Justice. I am privileged to be the Office's first Civil Justice Coordinator, and I am honored to be with you today to discuss the work of the Office and the City's extraordinary investment in civil legal assistance for low-income New Yorkers across the City. HRA is at the forefront of this Administration's focus on combating poverty, addressing income inequality and reducing homelessness, and the provision of civil legal services for New Yorkers in need is a critical element in that fight.

Although the Office of Civil Justice was formally created in June of 2015 with the Mayor's signing of Local Law 61 into law and his decision to place the Office at HRA, the work of enhancing and coordinating these services started at the beginning of this Administration. Civil legal services that were previously housed at various other City agencies were consolidated at HRA beginning in 2014, in recognition that bringing all these services together at HRA would enable the City to use existing HRA mechanisms to claim available State and Federal reimbursement for legal services, streamline the contract management process to avoid duplication of effort and maximize resources for the direct provision of legal assistance, and enhance planning to address service gaps, the evaluation of emerging new legal needs, and responsiveness as emergencies arise.

To complement these direct investments in legal services, as part of HRA's overall reform effort, we created the Homelessness Prevention Administration, and within this program area the Early Intervention Outreach Team. The Outreach Team receives early warning referrals from Housing Court Judges, from NYCHA for tenant arrears cases, Adult Protective Services referrals and referrals from New York City marshals. The Outreach Team also works closely with the

Mayor's Tenant Support Unit to refer low-income New Yorkers to legal services providers under contract with HRA to help them avert eviction, displacement and homelessness.

Another key component of HRA's homelessness prevention work is rental assistance. The HRA budget reflects the Administration's continuing comprehensive initiatives to prevent and alleviate homelessness within the City, which has built-up over many years. HRA has always provided some homelessness prevention services, but over the past two years we consolidated all of the HRA homelessness prevention programs into a single unit. During this same time, the Administration restored rental assistance programs that had been eliminated in 2011 in the State budget in order to increase services to prevent and alleviate homelessness.

Over the past two years, the new rental assistance programs and other permanent housing efforts have enabled 30,129 children and adults in 10,242 households to avert entry into or move out of Department of Homeless Services (DHS) and HRA shelters.

We have also helped more people with emergency rent assistance, keeping thousands of New Yorkers in their homes. In FY13, HRA provided rent arrears to 42,000 households at a cost of \$124.1 million. In FY15, HRA provided rent arrears to nearly 53,000 households at a cost of \$180.7 million. The increase in spending of 46 percent resulted from increased monthly rents that families and individuals have to pay, additional households being found eligible due to the increasing gap between rents and income, and enhanced targeting of these services to prevent homelessness through partnerships with community-based organizations.

Investment in Civil Legal Services

The de Blasio Administration's actions regarding civil legal services make New York City a national leader in providing such services for low-income people. In addition to consolidating contracts at HRA, starting in Fiscal Year 2014 the Administration has dramatically expanded these important services, providing access to quality representation that was previously unavailable to thousands of low-income New Yorkers facing eviction, harassment by unscrupulous landlords, immigration legal issues, and a range of other civil legal needs.

The initiatives in the baseline budget represent an unprecedented commitment of resources by the Administration for civil legal assistance. For example, the prior Administration invested up to approximately \$6 million in annual baseline funding for anti-eviction legal services for families, in contrast to the current Administration's investment of over \$60 million for civil legal assistance to prevent homelessness and assist victims of tenant harassment, along with an additional \$11.8 million in funding for immigration and other civil legal services.

Specifically, the January 2017 Plan includes baseline funding as follows:

- **\$36 million** for anti-harassment legal services and \$4.3 million for related tenant support outreach;

- **\$25.5 million** for anti-eviction legal services comprised of \$13.5 million in funding for the Homelessness Prevention Law Project and an additional \$12 million for expanded legal services targeting neighborhoods from which the highest numbers of clients are entering the shelter system;
- **\$5.6 million** for Executive Action legal assistance programs for immigrant New Yorkers, including \$3.6 million for the ActionNYC program operated in partnership with MOIA and CUNY;
- **\$5.3 million** for immigration legal assistance (for which the IOI RFP process will be concluding shortly);
- **\$2.1 million** for civil legal services for seniors;
- **\$196,000** for community schools legal services.

In addition to the Administration's commitment to supporting civil legal services, I want to acknowledge the extraordinary commitment of City Council Speaker Melissa Mark-Viverito and the entire City Council to expanding access to justice by funding legal services. In FY2016, HRA is overseeing \$19.3 million in funding added by the City Council during the Adopted Budget process for legal services for the working poor, family reunification immigration defense, the unaccompanied minors immigration initiative, assistance for domestic violence survivors and veterans, citywide legal services, and anti-eviction and SRO legal services. Together with the Council, this year the City committed over \$69 million for civil legal services for low-income New Yorkers. No other city allocates even a small fraction of what New York City is committing to provide access to civil justice.

Office of Civil Justice

As you know, this year marks the launch of the Office of Civil Justice. Located within HRA, the Office currently includes 34 staff, including central administration, program development staff, our contract management team, and a group of HRA liaisons located in the Housing Courts to assist with identifying service-eligible tenants in need, connecting them with a legal services provider and also interfacing with the court and the attorneys regarding assignments and logistics and linking them with HRA-administered benefits as needed. I am proud to say that in the coming months, the Office of Civil Justice will have an on-site presence in all of the City's housing courts.

And by being located within HRA, the Office of Civil Justice can leverage the substantial resources such a large agency provides. The Office of Civil Justice takes advantage of broader HRA infrastructure in areas ranging from data and budget analysis, to legal counsel, to facilities management, to payroll and human resources. By operating as an office within HRA, the Office of Civil Justice enjoys unparalleled capacity and flexibility.

Legal Services Initiatives

One of the keystones of our civil legal services initiatives is the provision of quality legal representation for thousands of the City's low-income tenants who are facing evictions, unacceptable housing conditions and harassment and pressure tactics by landlords seeking to push them out of their homes. The vast majority of landlords 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.

Affordable housing, a precious resource, is permanently lost to the City when tenants are evicted from rent-regulated apartments and rent is increased above affordable levels. Protecting these affordable units throughout the City, especially for families and seniors, and protecting tenants in small buildings are 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 who 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 tenant legal services programs are aimed at keeping these New Yorkers in their homes, preventing displacement and preserving and protecting the City's stock of affordable housing.

HRA's program is by far the largest initiative of its kind in the nation. Once fully implemented in FY 2018, our \$62 million investment will allow us to provide more than 33,000 households – or 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.

Our anti-eviction legal services program is funded at \$25.5 million, comprised of \$13.5 million in funding for the Homelessness Prevention Law Project and an additional \$12 million for expanded legal services targeting high-need neighborhoods that include the most at-risk households facing eviction and homelessness. Our providers range from large legal services organizations such as the Legal Aid Society, Legal Services NYC, and New York Legal Assistance Group, to smaller providers including Boom! Health, Bronx Defenders, CAMBA, Housing Conservation Coordinators, NAICA, NMIC, RBSCC, Brooklyn Legal Services Corporation A, and the Urban Justice Center.

Our anti-harassment tenant protection legal services program is a new initiative established by the de Blasio Administration in Fiscal Year 2015, and it is focused on ensuring that more than 13,000 of our city's low-income households can stay in their neighborhoods by providing access to legal representation that is both proactive – working with buildings and tenant associations to identify patterns of harassment by unscrupulous landlords, as well as with the City's Tenant

Support Unit which reaches out directly to tenants who need help – and responsive to evictions and other cases these tenants may face in the courts. Similar to our anti-eviction work, we know that most landlords follow the law. Our legal services initiatives are focused on the few that do not.

This program, launched with a \$5 million initial startup allocation in Fiscal Year 2015, is funded at \$20.5 million in FY2016 and will grow to \$36 million in FY2017, focusing on 14 zip codes throughout the five boroughs and including neighborhoods such as East New York, East Harlem, Flushing, the Bay Street area and Highbridge. Following an RFP which enabled large providers as well as consortia of smaller organizations to apply, legal services providers for this program include Legal Services NYC, the Legal Aid Society and the LEAP Coalition, comprised of over a dozen legal services providers working in neighborhoods throughout the City and led by the Urban Justice Center.

These tenant legal services represent this Administration's commitment to protecting tenants from displacement, preserving affordable housing, stabilizing neighborhoods and averting homelessness.

And we are already seeing the results from all of our programs to protect tenants. In New York City, residential evictions by city marshals are down 24% since 2013, which shows that our significant investment in legal services for tenants in need, coupled with early intervention work and tenant support programs such as access to assistance with rental arrears, is making a widespread and palpably positive difference in the lives of New Yorkers.

We expect other neighborhood impacts too: 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.

Another key focus is immigration legal services. The Office of Civil Justice oversees a variety of programs in this area. Through Community Service Block Grants funded at approximately \$2.1 million, citywide and community-based legal services providers including Ansoh Center for Refugees, BronxWorks, CAMBA, Catholic Charities Community Services, The Door, Gay Men's Health Crisis, HANAC, the Legal Aid Society, Make the Road New York, New York Asian Women's Center, New York Legal Assistance Group, Northern Manhattan Improvement Corporation, Sanctuary For Families, and Shorefront Jewish Community Council provide a range of services for immigrant New Yorkers, such as: legal assistance to help immigrant adults and youth attain citizenship and lawful immigration status; legal and social services for immigrant survivors of domestic violence and human trafficking; and services designed to provide information, education, advocacy and legal services to protect low-wage immigrants from exploitation and violations of their employment rights.

Reporting

Pursuant to the Local Law, our Office will issue annual reports on the need for, and impact of, civil legal assistance in our City. We will issue our first report in June of this year focusing on one of the critical questions faced by providers, policymakers, other stakeholders and of course litigants themselves – the availability of legal assistance for low-income tenants in the City’s housing courts, and the unmet needs for legal services that remain. Previous research on this issue from the 1990s is unfortunately outdated and does not take into account the substantial increase in funding and services this Administration, the State Office of Court Administration and others have invested in this area over the last several years. We are committed to undertaking a rigorous and reliable analysis of this question, and we look forward to sharing our findings with the Council. And in 2018 we will present our first five-year plan to the Mayor and the Council which we hope will assist in charting a course for a future for civil legal services in New York City that is based in sensible policy, that makes services widely available, and that ensures a fair and level system of civil justice.

Thank you again for including us in this hearing and we are happy to take your questions.