



**Testimony of Erin Drinkwater, Deputy Commissioner of Intergovernmental and Legislative Affairs**  
**Department of Social Services**

**New York City Council's Committees on Justice and - General Welfare**

**October 2, 2019**

Good morning Chair Levin and members of the General Welfare and Justice Committees. My name is Erin Drinkwater and I am the Deputy Commissioner of Intergovernmental and Legislative Affairs at the Department of Social Services.

The Department of Social Services/Human Resources Administration and Department of Homeless Services are committed to providing services that fight poverty and income inequality, prevent homelessness and promote employment ensuring New Yorkers are able to live healthy, safe, and self-determined lives.

We do our work each day in a city where prior Administrations criminalized poverty, access to benefits was littered with hurdles and clients' needs were met with the back of the hand not the helping hand they so deserved. Today we've come a long way but each day do our work recognizing that brown and black communities are over represented in our case load as well the justice and legal system.

We recognize that time spent on Rikers Island can have devastating consequences including disruption of work and loss of jobs, disruption of child care, inability to pay rent and loss of housing, and further increasing debt.

As we work collectively towards the goal of decreasing the prison population and ensuring robust reentry programs for those with justice and legal system involvement, I'd like to summarize key programs and supports administered by HRA.

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 including cash assistance, employment programs, food stamps and other supports helping New Yorkers remain in the workforce and in their homes. HRA also plays a role in the administration of housing programs and services, including for individuals with HIV, survivors of domestic violence, tenants facing eviction and New Yorkers who need supportive housing. And much of our work plays a key role in advancing one of this Administration's chief priorities: reducing income inequality and leveling the playing field for all New Yorkers.

As my colleague mentioned, this Administration has made a commitment to decreasing the number of persons incarcerated and more effectively meeting the needs of New Yorkers who in the past were unnecessarily entangled in the criminal justice system. At the Department of Homeless Services, using a variety of tools from robust prevention services to the reinstatement of rental assistance and aftercare programs, we have held the overall DHS shelter census flat for the first time in a decade and we have begun to move the census downward – and we have actually achieved a decrease of 2,500 people in the families with children census.

Our plan to address homelessness has four core pillars: preventing homelessness whenever we can; addressing street homelessness; rehousing families and individuals so they can move out of shelter or avoid homelessness altogether; and transforming the haphazard approach to providing shelter and services that has built up over the last four decades by shrinking the Department of Homeless Services' footprint by 45 percent and ending the use of 360 "cluster" shelter and commercial hotel locations while opening a smaller number of 90 borough-based shelters in all five boroughs. So far we have achieved the following results:

- Evictions by City Marshals are down by more than a third as we have begun to implement the first-in-the nation universal access to counsel in eviction cases and provide increased access to rent arrears grants.
- 120,000 children and adults have moved out of shelter or avoided shelter entry in the first place through our rental assistance and rehousing programs.
- We have gotten out of more than 200 shelter sites that did not meet our standards, thereby already shrinking the DHS shelter footprint by more than 30 percent – and we have sited 50 new borough-based shelters to give families and individuals an opportunity to be sheltered as close as possible to the anchors of their lives, with 26 already operating.
- Helped more than 2,200 people come in off the streets, who have remained off the streets, including more than 600 people from the subways.

Homeless New Yorkers come from every community across the five boroughs, so we need every community to come together to address homelessness. As we implement our borough-based approach, we are working to meet the needs of those experiencing homelessness by implementing human-centered approaches to our work delivering services grounded in dignity.

### **Responding to Proposed Legislation**

In response to Councilman Levin's bill in relation to the establishment of a task force to make recommendations on investments in communities impacted by the overuse of incarceration, we support this bill.

The Department of Social Services would chair a task force focused on community investment upon the closure of Rikers Island. The task force will be required to provide an annual report on its work on addressing, among other things, the root causes of crime and preventing crime, and alternative responses to persons with mental health crisis, substance use disorder, homelessness, or other situations, that avoid contact with the criminal justice system.

DSS believes that the proposed task force can have a positive impact in directing resources as it relates to the impacts of over policing and mass incarceration.

On Intro 1190, which would require drug treatment services, at HASA facilities (defined as single room occupancy hotels or congregate facilities managed by a provider under contract with the Department of Social Services (DSS)) and shelters (defined as temporary emergency housing provided to homeless individuals by the Department of Homeless Services (DSS) or by a provider under contract with it).

Protecting health and safety of New Yorkers in need as they get back on their feet is our number one priority. That's why we worked with Councilmember Torres on legislation to codify training for staff and clients and we've distributed more than 31,000 naloxone kits and counting across DSS while equipping every shelter with staff trained to prevent overdose deaths and save lives and offering training for clients. Thanks to these efforts, last year, staff reversed more than 500 overdoses—nearly double the number of overdoses reversed in the previous year. As national opioid misuse reaches epidemic proportions, we remain undeterred in our efforts to combat this challenge, promote positive health outcomes, and ultimately address root causes as we continue transforming a shelter system that was built up in a haphazard way over decades.

We look forward to working with the sponsor on this proposed legislation as we believe extending medical assisted treatment is key to further addressing the opioid epidemic.