



**Testimony of Gary P. Jenkins, Commissioner
New York City Department of Social Services**

**Before the New York City Council, Committee on General Welfare
Department of Social Services Fiscal Year 2023 Preliminary Budget Hearing
March 9, 2022**

Good morning, I want to thank the General Welfare Committee and Chair Ayala for holding today's hearing and for the opportunity to testify about the Department of Social Services' (DSS) Fiscal Year (FY) 2023 Preliminary Budget.

My name is Gary P. Jenkins, and since January 1, I have been the Commissioner of the New York City Department of Social Services, which is made up of the Human Resources Administration (HRA) and the Department of Homeless Services (DHS). I am also joined by DSS First Deputy Commissioner Jill Berry, HRA Administrator Lisa Fitzpatrick, DHS Administrator Joslyn Carter, and DSS Chief Program Performance and Financial Management Officer Ellen Levine.

I am deeply honored that Mayor Eric Adams has presented me with the opportunity to lead DSS/HRA/DHS and to implement his vision to improve the lives of our most vulnerable neighbors by making social services more effective and accessible. I am not new to this work – I've had the opportunity to previously lead HRA as its Administrator, and I've had an over 30-year career working at HRA, where I started working as a front line-staff member serving New Yorkers in need and rose up through various leadership positions within the agency. But this isn't simply work for me; as someone raised by a single mom in Brooklyn, whose family received direct support from HRA and spent time in the shelter system, I understand the importance of our agencies' missions in our communities of greatest need from my own lived experience.

The work we do has an impact on millions of individuals each day as we ensure our most vulnerable New Yorkers have access to supports such as cash assistance and SNAP, and other essential benefits and critical support services including shelter. Moreover, we are still confronting the unprecedented challenges brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic, which has highlighted existing inequities and their disproportionate impact on families and individuals in need. The work of DSS/HRA/DHS is not easy, but it is vital and necessary to our city, particularly during these difficult circumstances. We will continue our work toward the shared goal of fighting poverty, income inequality, and addressing homelessness in our city with care and compassion for our clients, staff, and provider partners.

Since my appointment as DSS Commissioner earlier this year, I have been traveling across the city and meeting with our agencies' front-line staff, clients and community advocates and our government partners to introduce myself in my new role as Commissioner and, importantly, gather their feedback so we can improve our services and programs. In the past 8 weeks, I've taken action to reorganize our leadership

and reporting structure to improve our operations and to deliver the best and most effective services to New Yorkers in need, and this work continues.

Now, turning to the budget, I will walk the committee today through our FY23 Preliminary Budget and our priorities, which reflect our commitment to uplift New Yorkers in need. This budget aims to address the long-standing structural barriers facing our clients and implement Mayor Adams' vision to increase access to social service benefits for our most vulnerable neighbors across the five boroughs.

HRA – overview and preliminary budget

The New York City Department of Social Services/Human Resources Administration is the nation's largest social services agency. Each year we assist more than three million New Yorkers through the administration of fourteen public benefit programs. Every day, in all five boroughs, HRA provides essential programs and supports to low-income New Yorkers. In administering these programs, HRA is at the forefront of this Administration's efforts to combat poverty and address homelessness.

With a FY23 Preliminary Budget of \$10.8 billion, consisting of \$8.5 billion in City funds, and a staff headcount of 12,931 positions, 10,079 of which are City funded, HRA serves millions of low-income New Yorkers annually through a broad range of programs to address poverty and income inequality.

The FY23 January Plan includes HRA savings reductions in line with the Mayor's pledge to reduce headcount, as well as savings initiatives, focused on accruals, re-estimates and revenue maximization.

The January Plan includes a reduction of 695 total positions; 633 Medicaid vacancies were eliminated as the result of the multi-year New York State Medicaid takeover and 62 City-funded vacancies were eliminated in non-front-line areas.

The FY22 budget declined by \$26.3 million in City funds and increased in FY23 and out years by \$66.5 million in the January Plan, compared to November. Savings initiatives of \$41.8 million in FY22 and \$8.6 million in FY23 and beyond were offset by new funding for Fair Fares of \$15.5 million in 2022 and \$75 million in 2023. Savings include:

- Accruals in carfare and subsidized employment programs as a result of the pandemic;
- AOTPS savings based on historical spending in IDNYC, HPA and PEU;
- Additional SNAP administration and DV/Title XX revenue; and
- Substance Abuse case management program re-estimate based on caseload levels.

This Preliminary Budget will allow HRA to continue to improve the lives and conditions of New Yorkers in need, through programs and services such as:

- Federal Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) benefits to fight hunger
 - SNAP (formerly known as "food stamps") provides food assistance for over 1.68 million low-income New Yorkers including families, people who are aging and people with disabilities. The program helps families and individuals supplement the cost of their diet with nutritious foods.
- Cash Assistance (CA) to meet basic human needs

- Eligible families may receive up to 60 months of federally funded cash assistance under the Family Assistance program. Single individuals without children and families who have already received Family Assistance for 60 months may receive benefits under the New York State Safety Net Program. As of January 2022, there were 392,968 unduplicated recipients of recurring Cash Assistance.
- Rental assistance, repayment of arrears, and eviction prevention to improve housing stability and prevent homelessness
 - Rental assistance programs help New Yorkers experiencing homelessness move out of shelter and into stable housing by providing monthly rent supplements. Since 2014, DSS/HRA and DHS have helped more than 185,000 New Yorkers secure housing or remain in their homes using City rental assistance and federally funded vouchers and public housing units.
 - Homeless prevention services and aftercare services to families and individuals exiting shelter and transferring to permanent housing are provided through HRA-administered Homebase offices. Low-income New Yorkers at imminent risk of entering the New York City shelter system may be eligible for Homebase services. The agency supported nearly 60,000 rent-burdened households annually pay back rent or utilities during the prior Administration.
 - Since 2014 through 2021, over 574,000 New Yorkers had received free legal representation or assistance in eviction and other housing-related matters through legal services programs administered by DSS/HRA.
- Home energy assistance
 - The Home Energy Assistance Program (HEAP) is a federally funded program that helps low-income homeowners and renters pay for utility repairs and heating and cooling costs.
- Education, training and job placement services to assist low-income New Yorkers obtain employment
 - HRA's Career Services offer Cash Assistance clients opportunities to help them increase their job skills and build a career that will lead to success and financial security. HRA's Career Services works closely with clients to find opportunities that match their skills, needs, and career goals, and help them work toward opportunities to grow and build a successful career.
- Access to public health insurance through the Medicaid Program
 - HRA's Medical Assistance Program helps New Yorkers who qualify enroll in Medicaid public health insurance programs. HRA accepts applications from residents who are age 65 or over, persons of any age who are living with a disability or blindness, persons who are in receipt of Medicare and are not a parent or caretaker relative of minor children, and former foster young adults under age 26. Other New Yorkers can apply for Medicaid and other public health insurance through the New York State Department of Health portal.
- Support for survivors of domestic violence
 - Survivors of domestic violence may receive temporary housing, emergency shelter, and supportive services for themselves and their children. All programs provide a safe environment as well as counseling, advocacy, and referral services.
- Services for individuals living with HIV/AIDS
 - HIV/AIDS Services Administration (HASA) assists individuals with AIDS or HIV illness to live healthier, more independent lives. HASA clients receive ongoing case management

and are assigned to a caseworker at one of our HASA centers, located in all 5 boroughs. As of January 2022, the HASA caseload was 33,227.

- Childcare for Cash Assistance employed families and those in work activities to assist low-income families in achieving self-sufficiency by guaranteeing the childcare subsidies needed to maintain employment
 - Parents and guardians who are employed or engage in work-related activities (required or voluntary), including those in school, are eligible for childcare. If eligible for childcare, parents and guardians have the right to appropriate, affordable, accessible, and suitable childcare.
- Child Support Services (OCSS)
 - HRA's Office of Child Support Services (OCSS) serves parents (both mothers and fathers) and guardians, regardless of income or immigration status, lifting tens of thousands of New York City children out of poverty every year.
- Adult protective services for adults unable to care for themselves
 - The Adult Protective Services Program (APS) provides services for physically and/or mentally impaired adults. APS works to help at-risk clients live safely in their homes. APS clients can be referred by anyone.
- Burial assistance services for New Yorkers in need
 - HRA's Office of Burial Services (OBS) can provide financial assistance to help individuals meet funeral expenses for a deceased low-income New York City resident. This assistance can apply to either funeral expenses that have already been paid, or pre-approval for the cost of a planned funeral.
- Home care for seniors and individuals with disabilities
 - Home Care programs are Medicaid-funded long-term-care programs designed to help eligible elderly or disabled individuals remain safely at home, rather than in a nursing home. As of December 2021, there were 230,411 total homecare cases, the majority of whose care is managed by New York State Department of Health
- Emergency Food Assistance Program (EFAP)
 - EFAP provides funding to more than 500 soup kitchens and food pantries citywide. In Fiscal Year 2021, EFAP distributed a total of 13,767,104 lbs. of food. The breakdown is as follows: 12,922,338 lbs. of shelf-stable food and 844,716 lbs. of frozen food.
- Fair Fares to provide low-income New Yorkers with assistance for their transportation costs
 - With the Fair Fares NYC discount, participating New York City residents can receive a 50% discount on either subway and eligible bus fares, or Access-A-Ride. There are currently approximately 271,000 individuals enrolled in the program.
- IDNYC for all New Yorkers, regardless of immigration status
 - IDNYC is a free municipal identification card for those who may have difficulty obtaining government-issued photo identification. Cardholders also enjoy benefits and discounts offered by businesses and cultural institutions across the five boroughs. There are currently 1.45 million IDNYC cardholders.

HRA employs a diverse workforce dedicated to fighting poverty and improving clients' lives. For background purposes for the Committee, some key facts about HRA's workforce are as follows:

- More than two-thirds of HRA staff work in front-line roles serving clients in all five boroughs;

- HRA’s workforce is diverse: 51% African American; 17% Hispanic; 13% White; 10% Asian; and lastly
- 70% are women.

DHS – overview and preliminary budget

Shifting to homelessness services, with New York City’s unique right to shelter mandate, the Department of Homeless Services is committed to preventing and addressing homelessness. As we perform our work, our staff and providers employ many innovative strategies to help families and individuals who are in temporary shelter or are experiencing street homelessness and to help them exit shelter or the streets and to successfully get back on their feet, which we will be summarizing today.

With a FY23 Preliminary Budget of \$2.15 billion, consisting of \$1.33 billion in City funds, and a staff headcount of 1,992 positions, 1,971 of which are City funded, DHS and our providers administer the City’s shelters and supports for New Yorkers experiencing homelessness.

In the January Plan, the DHS budget increased from the November Plan by a net of \$86.7 million in FY22 and by \$69.3 million in FY23 and beyond. Savings initiatives of \$45.8 million and \$62.7 million respectively were offset by \$132 million in additional ongoing funding for adult shelter. Savings include \$33 million in FY22 and \$49.4 million in FY23 and beyond due to the successful elimination of hotel-based shelter for families with children, \$2 million in FY22 and \$5 million in the baseline from the elimination of 131 vacant positions and other re-estimates.

In partnership with our nonprofit providers, the mission of DHS is to prevent homelessness when possible, address street homelessness, provide safe temporary shelter and connect New Yorkers experiencing homelessness to suitable housing. We carry out this mission with care and compassion for each client and their circumstances, each and every day across the five boroughs.

DHS works to prevent homelessness before it occurs, reduce street homelessness and assist New Yorkers in transitioning from shelter into permanent housing. We also remain committed to meeting our legal mandates to provide temporary emergency shelter to New Yorkers experiencing homelessness in a caring and compassionate environment. DHS helps New Yorkers experiencing homelessness do more than find a temporary roof over their head – our teams at DHS, in partnership with our nonprofit service network of approximately 75 providers, help these families and individuals access a variety of social services, employment opportunities, work supports and other public benefits, increasing their financial literacy and search for housing, to ensure a seamless transition back to independent living and stability.

As we continue our discussion today, it is important to contextualize the environment in which we do this work.

First, the universe of unstably housed New Yorkers is much larger than the shelter population. The Furman Center’s most recent data on housing insecurity presents a universe of almost 500,000 households in NYC that have an income under \$15,000 a year. More than 70% of these households – or about 350,000 households – are severely rent burdened, paying more than 50% of income in rent. Another approximately 450,000 earn less than \$30,000 a year, with more than 50% of these households – about 225,000 - are severely rent burdened. Together, that’s approximately 575,000 extremely low-income households paying

more than 50% of income in rent in New York City. Said more simply, approximately half a million households are one unforeseen emergency away from homelessness.

Furthermore, in addition to increases in housing instability our city has seen significant decreases in affordable housing. In the decade between 2005 and 2015, household rents in the city increased by 18.4%, while at the same time incomes failed to keep pace by only increasing by 4.8%. Looking at affordable housing supply, between 1994 and 2012, the city suffered a net loss of about 150,000 rent-stabilized units. As a result, by 2015, the city had only half the housing needed for about three million low-income New Yorkers

These trends, along with factors such as economic inequality, domestic violence, overcrowding, housing evictions, untreated mental health challenges and inadequate discharge planning from mental health institutions have resulted in homelessness and displacement across the five boroughs over the past decades.

Second, the vast majority of people experiencing homelessness in New York City are sheltered indoors across our shelter system because we have a right to shelter. This is a major contrast when we consider other jurisdictions across the nation, especially on the West Coast, where the proportion of unsheltered individuals experiencing homelessness on the streets is exponentially higher than in New York City. New York City's unique right to shelter is codified in State and local law and the scope of services has developed over many years as a result of legal and legislative action as well as City policy.

Over the years, efforts have been undertaken to transform and improve the shelter system to help New Yorkers get back on their feet. These contributions have accumulated over time, resulting in the transformed and reformed shelter system that we see today. For example, after much effort and consultation, the framework for siting shelters has improved over time, with a focus on each community playing a role, and it is my goal that over the course of my tenure we will see a more equitable distribution of shelters across the city, community engagement, and maintain New Yorkers experiencing homelessness as close as possible to their network of supports, whether it be their schools, healthcare and place of work. Moreover, our DHS staff and providers have worked to change the practice and culture of continuously working under emergency, to an agency that responds to emergencies efficiently and compassionately.

Under the Adams Administration, we look forward to advancing these reforms as we work to shelter vulnerable New Yorkers and help them transition into stable housing. As the Mayor stated, we understand the challenges of bringing shelters to communities, particularly the challenges that arise when we try to shelter black and brown single adults in our city. We also have to acknowledge, and act upon, the fact that many communities across the city haven't shouldered the responsibility of having local shelters to support their neighbors who may be experiencing homelessness. This needs to change as we all must take on the responsibility of supporting and lending a hand to our fellow New Yorkers in need. We look forward to working with Chair Ayala, General Welfare Committee members, the Council at-large and stakeholders across the city to ensure we maintain a shelter system across the city in all communities and helps our neighbors experiencing homelessness recover and get on a path towards stability.

Much like HRA, the DHS workforce is made up of diverse employees dedicated to serving New Yorkers in need:

- 78% of DHS staff work in front-line roles serving clients in all five boroughs;
- With an average tenure of 10 years, many of our DHS staff dedicate much of their careers to public service;
- DHS's workforce is diverse: 55% African American; 18% Hispanic; 9% White; 4% Asian; and
- 50% are women.

Recovering from COVID-19

Two years into this unprecedented crisis, the COVID-19 pandemic continues to be a part of our everyday work, and we continue to ensure our clients and families have the resources to recover and succeed. I would also like to take a moment to thank and acknowledge the work of our dedicated staff and providers, particularly our front-line staff, who have worked throughout the height of the pandemic serving New Yorkers and continue to this day. I am so proud to work with such devoted and compassionate public servants and to represent them here today.

HRA took several steps to ensure program continuity during and throughout the pandemic. These program reforms and pivots were meant to ensure that no vulnerable New Yorker was turned away from the public benefits they needed to get through the health emergency and economic downturn.

It is our goal to improve client access by transitioning from using only in person interviews as part of the Cash Assistance application requirement, and shift to allow for these interviews to occur by telephone at the client's choice, just as we are permitted to offer SNAP clients pursuant to federal and State waivers that we previously received. At the start of the pandemic, DSS/HRA was granted a state waiver, and in a week's time, the agency was able to promptly set up a system for New Yorkers to apply for Cash Assistance online and conduct their interview by phone. This was possible by following the effective blueprint developed in pioneering remote access for SNAP via Access HRA. We are happy to report that, following the passage of a new state law we advocated for, this remote Cash Assistance option has been made permanent, meaning that clients can conduct all business online and by telephone, which consequently helps free up resources at HRA centers which can be focused on New Yorkers with the highest need.

As you well know, the pandemic also brought further strains to New Yorkers' housing stability and ability to pay rent. DSS/HRA had developed a multi-pronged approach to support at-risk tenants through programs providing legal services, rental support, homeless prevention assistance and several other supports. These existing programs allowed us to quickly mobilize and respond to the quickly evolving needs of tenants during the pandemic.

A critical service worth highlighting is the City's groundbreaking Right to Counsel program, operated by DSS's Office of Civil Justice (OCJ). In partnership with the Council, New York City made history by becoming the first city in the nation to enact a law ensuring that all tenants facing eviction in housing court or in administrative termination of tenancy proceedings in public housing have access to free legal services. This program has dramatically changed the landscape of housing justice and helped tip the scales to benefit tenants at risk of eviction and further displacement.

As we reported to the Council earlier in the year, we are making real and substantial progress in increasing access to housing justice through the Right to Counsel program, which is now implemented citywide in

every zip code, and is available regardless of a tenant's immigration status. OCJ has been working closely with our colleagues in government and community-based organizations to promote the Right to Counsel program across the city and have carried out several outreach campaigns to reach at-risk tenants during the pandemic. We encourage you to help us increase awareness about the many tools available to help tenants during the pandemic, many of which can be accessed by calling 311 and asking for "Right to Counsel," which will prompt a connection to a housing specialist to connect tenants to free legal services and resources.

For the last two years of the public health emergency, DHS has responded to the needs of unhoused New Yorkers to safeguard lives. At the pandemic's outset, we worked to closely follow the science and advice of health experts to protect our clients, both sheltered and unsheltered, and the data shows that our decisive strategies worked, saving countless lives and stopping the spread of the virus.

Among the strategies to contain the virus and protect the lives of our clients and staff, DHS worked with shelter providers to relocate clients in congregate shelter who tested positive or showed symptoms to isolation beds. These steps, along with our testing, tracing and vaccination efforts, have helped protect the health and safety of our clients.

As New York City continues to recover from the pandemic, we look forward to implementing Mayor Adams' vision to support New Yorkers experiencing homelessness. Part of this vision includes the recently announced Subway Safety Plan, a City and State partnership to expand joint response teams throughout the city, which will add trained clinicians to connect individuals with resources, and add additional Safe Havens, Drop-in Centers and Stabilization Beds to ensure unhoused New Yorkers have destinations of care, support and housing. We look forward to working with our state and agency partners and providers to continue providing and expanding services to New Yorkers experiencing homelessness in our subways.

Closing

In closing, I want to emphasize several key takeaways from our testimony today:

- DSS/HRA/DHS remains committed to addressing poverty and homelessness across the five boroughs with care and compassion;
- Our FY23 Preliminary Budget places us in a position to continue supporting New Yorkers in need through our multiple programs, and to begin implementing Mayor Adams' social services vision;
- Homelessness is a multifaceted challenge facing New Yorkers, and we need everyone's support and share of the responsibility to properly shelter our unhoused neighbors; and
- COVID-19 is still with us, and we encourage you to help us connect New Yorkers in need to our critical services as we work towards an equitable recovery for all.

We appreciate the opportunity to testify today, and we welcome any questions that you may have today. Thank you.