



Testimony submitted to the NYC Council Committee on General Welfare
Oversight Hearing: Administration of CityFHEPS Rental Assistance Program
January 27th, 2025

Introduction and Thanks: My name is Eric Lee, and I am the Director of Public Policy for Volunteers of America- Greater New York (VOA-GNY). We are a local affiliate of the national organization, Volunteers of America, Inc (VOA). I would like to thank Deputy Speaker Ayala and members of the General Welfare Committee for the opportunity to testify today.

About Us: VOA-GNY is an anti-poverty organization that aims to end homelessness in Greater New York through housing, health and wealth building services. We are one of the region's largest human service providers, impacting more than 12,000 adults and children annually through 70+ programs in New York City, Northern New Jersey, and Westchester. We are also an active nonprofit developer of supportive and affordable housing, with a robust portfolio permanent supportive housing, affordable and senior housing properties—with more in the pipeline.

Background:

VOA-GNY has been providing shelter services to homeless families since 1991 when DHS first began contracting with nonprofits to do so. We operate five transitional housing programs for families in the New York metropolitan area which serve more than 430 families, three “emergency” shelters designed for newly arrived families seeking asylum, also under contract with DHS, serving an additional 244 families, a DHS woman’s employment shelter, and a DHS Street to Home Pilot program which places individuals experiencing unsheltered street homelessness directly into supportive housing within 1 to 2 weeks of first meeting them.

DHS’ CityFHEPS rental assistance voucher is the primary tool New York City has for moving people experiencing homelessness into permanent housing. Through key investments and process improvements, even more households can attain and stabilize their permanent housing throughout the City. Through VOA-GNY’s Street to Home pilot program, the city and DHS creatively utilized CityFHEPS vouchers to quickly place people experiencing unsheltered homelessness into permanent supportive housing. While a core component of this pilot program is enhanced clinical support services to help rehoused individuals stabilize and begin to recover, DHS’ flexibility in processing the CityFHEPS paperwork after the person moved into housing enabled us to drastically shorten their time spent homeless. Given this success, we



have the following recommendations to streamline the CityFHEPS application and lease up process:

Reduce Documentation requirements for lease signings whenever possible

Rules for local subsidies like CityFHEPS are entirely in the City's Department of Social Services' control, yet our team often struggled to meet strict documentation requirements to get leases executed. An active or single-issue Public Assistance (PA) case is a CityFHEPS requirement, and our staff report that the largest obstacle to timely submission is satisfying Public Assistance requirements to have birth certificates and photo identification for each applicant. These requirements are particularly challenging for persons born outside of New York, as other jurisdictions make obtaining new copies of documents challenging, especially for foreign born persons. Specifically, we recommend:

- Expedite Public Assistance case openings by waiving birth certificate requirements for persons born outside of New York State but who can otherwise prove their identity (this may require a waiver from OTDA)
- Allow VOA-GNY and other DHS contracted providers to create photo identification for persons without drivers' licenses or passports and/or provide expedited access to IDNYC appointments so applicants can satisfy photo id requirements for Public Assistance
- Assign HRA expeditors to quickly open Public Assistance cases, particularly single-issue cases for persons with income

Increase flexibility in the inspection and lease up process to streamline access to housing

VOA-GNY's family shelter staff report that households have missed out on identified housing opportunities if they are required to undergo an HRA rebudget upon submission of a housing packet, to recalculate their client contribution for rent. While our shelter case managers proactively collect and submit our client paystubs to keep household income records up to date in DHS' system, hourly employees can see their monthly income fluctuate more than the \$100 limit which requires a Public Assistance rebudget.

- Do Public Assistance rebudgets post move-in for households well within CityFHEPS income limits, to expedite the lease-up process.
 - While a household's monthly contribution towards rent changes due to a PA rebudget, the total rent amount set in a lease is the same regardless of who pays, whether the voucher or the tenant.
- Allow inspections for units that are already occupied.
 - Upon the launch of Street to Home VOA-GNY had all of the units pre-inspected and cleared for lease-up to save time in the process. However, as time went on, those inspections expired and needed to be redone. While HRA worked with the



Street to Home team to waive the reinspection requirement on some units, in other cases, they deemed the new inspections necessary. For those units, inspectors insisted that to pass, the units had to be vacant even though per the program design, all of the units had a resident in occupancy. While we understand that this is not supposed to be the rule, it was our experience. Tenants should never be forced to pack their belongings post move in to get through an inspection process. Other rental assistance programs perform routine inspections with residents in place, CityFHEPS should be able to do so as well.

Expand staffing at HRA to more quickly process Public Benefits and Rental Assistance

Payments

We urge the city to prioritize funding to expand HRA headcount to meet growing demands for public assistance and rental assistance. As the Administration previously testified before the General Welfare Committee, New York City has seen a marked increase in the number of households applying for Public Assistance. Likewise, HRA's Rental Assistance Processing (RAP) unit has issued thousands more monthly checks over the years, a testament to the successful efforts of DHS and HRA to help households access and maintain stable housing. Through sufficient headcount and sustainable caseloads, HRA can ensure timely access to public benefits and rental assistance for those who need it.

Fully Implement Local Laws 99 to 102 of 2023 immediately to expand access to CityFHEPS.

VOA-GNY urges the administration to fully implement Local Laws 99 – 102 of 2023, passed by the City Council to strengthen the effectiveness of the CityFHEPS rental assistance program. This bill package will help more households abbreviate their time spent homeless as well as enable more tenants at risk of losing their housing to remain stably housed. In addition to fiscal savings which would be generated by fewer and shorter shelter stays, it cannot be overstated the personal and societal benefits of helping more people avoid and abbreviate the destabilizing and traumatizing experience of homelessness in New York City.

Closing:

We are grateful for the opportunity to testify and look forward to working with the Council and the Administration to continue to strengthen and improve CityFHEPS, a proven effective tool to prevent housing instability and address homelessness.



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