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CONTACT:

Michael Saucier / Mercedes Padilla (718) 595-6600

MORE INFORMATION

NYC Department of Environmental Protection Communications & Intergovernmental Affairs

59-17 Junction Boulevard
19th Floor
Flushing, NY 11373

(718) 595 - 6600

DEP's Bureau of Customer Services Announces Opening of New Office of Ombuds

Newly Created Unit Will Hear Dispute Cases for Water and Sewer Account Holders Facing Lien Sale

The New York City Department of Environmental Protection today announced the opening of the Office of Ombuds, a newly-established unit within the Bureau of Customer Services (BCS) that will be responsible for hearing dispute cases as part of DEP's expanded dispute resolution process and for providing special assistance to all water and sewer account holders facing lien sale and undergoing the lien sale process. DEP also announced that Patrick Giagnacova will serve as Director of the new unit.

Under the system now being rolled out, call center representatives will be able to resolve many billing disputes, with others referred to the dispute resolution form. More complex disputes will be resolved by a Dispute Resolution Group, including the Ombuds. This process will allow for more prompt settlement of customer complaints and avoidance of large arrearages in the future. The email address for the Office of Ombuds is ombuds@dep.nyc.gov. The call center number is 718-595-7000; the Ombuds number is 718-595-OMBU.

The Ombuds Unit will oversee the work of the Safety Net Referral Program, using the existing network of City agency and not-for-profit programs that offer financial counseling, low cost loans, and legal services through programs including HEAP, Senior Citizen Homeowners' Exemption, Weatherization Assistance Program, and the Housing Preservation and Development's Center for New York City Neighborhoods (CNYCN).

In December, Mayor Bloomberg and City Council Speaker Christine Quinn announced an agreement with the City Council which authorized the City to conduct stand-alone lien sales on delinquent water and sewer accounts, putting New York City on par with other American cities that use this enforcement method, as well as other methods such as service shut-offs, to achieve revenue collection rates between 95 and 99 percent. The current collection rate is approximately 85 percent. Independent lien sale authorization comes at the same time that DEP has expanded its use of service shut-offs to compel payment from overdue customers.

The agreement on water liens reflects more than 18 months of cooperative effort between DEP and the City Council. During that time, DEP overhauled its customer service, billing, and collection operations, including a major reorganization of the staff of BCS. Many of these changes are based on an extensive analysis conducted by the consulting firm Booz Allen Hamilton and completed in August.

In conjunction with the recent passage of lien sale legislation allowing for

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the sale of standalone water and sewer liens, DEP is expanding the Payment Incentive Program (PIP) to make it available on a one-time basis to all classes of residential account holders. This is in addition to PIP currently being offered prior to service termination to approximately 8,200 single-family homeowners with overdue accounts. Under this program, which began in November, DEP is eliminating the late payment charges of eligible customers who agree to immediately pay their water bill in full. DEP is in the process of reminding residential account holders about the one-time opportunity the agency is offering to cancel late payment charges if customers settle their delinquent accounts.

The PIP program offers a financial incentive for customers with long-standing disputes to settle their outstanding water bills. This payment program focuses on customers with balances of a \$1,000 or more with outstanding charges for over a year. For eligible customers, the principal payment owed will be adjusted down to a settlement of \$2 per-day charge per dwelling unit.

The 8,200 eligible single-family homeowners will have until February 21 to make payments under the Payment Incentive Program, and those who do not will then be scheduled for service termination. DEP has notified customers of their eligibility by mailing an initial notice letter informing them that their late-payment charges have been reduced. A timeline for those eligible for the expanded PIP will be announced soon.

DEP sent out letters in November with basic customer information which includes: delinquent status information, PIP availability, deadline for customer response, and a call center phone number to call for questions. DEP also sent multiple follow-up notices reminding customers that they should submit payments. The agency has also sent out post cards with information about the PIP, the locations, date and time of community outreach events scheduled in the five boroughs in partnership with City Council members to explain the advantages of this program. The next outreach event is Saturday, January 26 from 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. at the College of Staten Island, Center for the Arts, 2800 Victory Blvd., Staten Island. The event is being hosted by Council Members James Oddo, Michael McMahon and Vincent Ignizio. On Tuesday, January 29, from 2 to 7 p.m., Council Member Albert Vann will host an outreach event at 613-19 Throop Ave. in Brooklyn. On Wednesday, January 30, Council Member Lew Fidler will host an outreach event from 6 to 9 p.m. at Kings Bay Y, 3495 Nostrand Ave. at Avenue V, Brooklyn.

For other upcoming events, go to:

http://www.nyc.gov/html/dep/html/water_and_sewer_bills/pip_events.shtml