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**Testimony of Louisa Chafee, IBO Director  
To The New York City Council  
Committee on Oversight & Investigations  
Wednesday, November 1, 2023**

Good afternoon, Chair Brewer and members of the New York City Council Committees on Oversight & Investigations, I am Louisa Chafee, Director of the New York City Independent Budget Office. Thank you for the opportunity to testify on agency performance, vis-à-vis the 2023 Mayor’s Management Report (MMR), in delivering housing and services. IBO identified many indicators across various city agencies that demonstrate the City’s struggles to adequately maintain its buildings and infrastructure, and deliver services to New York City residents. In this testimony, I will focus on a few key areas within the New York City Housing Authority, Department of Social Services, and Department of Education where we are also able to use data on staffing levels through the City’s Payroll Management System to analyze the level of staff turnover over the last year.

***Delays in Timeliness of Repairs and Turn Over of Vacant Apartments at New York City Housing***

**Authority.** The New York City Housing Authority (NYCHA) reported substantial timing increases in several of its critical indicators, attributing the delays to an increase in demand with no comparable increase in staffing to address specialized areas. Most notably, the average times to prepare vacant apartments and to turn them around more than doubled from 2022, with both metrics reaching over 365 days. (All years refer to fiscal years, unless otherwise noted.) In 2019, the average times were both less than 90 days, marking a significant upward trend over the past five years. The MMR attributes this to aging conditions in NYCHA buildings, which require time-consuming repairs and remodeling.

The other metrics of note relate to service requests in NYCHA’s capacity as landlord. The average time to resolve emergency requests exceeded the 24-hour target, increasing by 26 percent since 2022, and more than doubling since 2019. The MMR states that most emergency requests relate to heat and hot water, which took longer to resolve in 2023 due to a lack of adequate specialized staff. The average time to resolve non-emergency service requests has increased by a larger percentage than for emergency requests—reaching 65 hours in 2023, a 33 percent increase from 2022, and more than tripling since 2019. The MMR attributes this to a backlog of work orders from the pandemic, during which non-emergency work was put on hold.

IBO found that although headcount at NYCHA has increased compared with June 2022, the average experience level of staff has declined due to high turnover rates, with more experienced staff leaving at relatively higher rates than in past years. This leaves less-experienced staff to prepare vacant units and respond to service requests. According to the City’s Payroll Management System, headcount has increased by 1.5 percent since June 30, 2022. However, NYCHA’s staff turnover rate was nearly 20 percent in that time.

***Timeliness of Cash and Food Assistance Declines Despite Increased Hiring of Eligibility Specialists.*** For the Department of Social Services' Human Resources Administration (HRA), IBO continues to focus on the timeliness of benefit processing indicators. IBO observed the starkest declines in timeliness for processing cash assistance applications within 30 days—down to 29 percent of all applications from 82 percent one year ago (though the definition of timeliness was 45 days at that time). Regardless, the decline has real-world impacts on how quickly applicants receive cash assistance and is also the subject of a Legal Aid and New York Legal Assistance Group lawsuit in progress against the City. There were also sizable changes in processing supplemental food assistance (SNAP) benefits within 30 days: the metric has declined to just under 40 percent of all applications from 60 percent one year ago and 92 percent two years ago. The delays in cash assistance and SNAP processing stand in contrast to Medicaid application processing, which remained at 94 percent in 2023, below the target rate of 99 percent, but an improvement in timeliness over the 81 percent rate in 2020.

In 2023, the MMR reported that the timeliness rate for cash assistance applications was 29 percent, more than a 67-percentage point decrease from the fiscal 2019 level and target 2023 level. This means that 81 percent of all applications for cash assistance take longer than 30 days to process. The timeliness rate had historically been above 90 percent until fiscal year 2022, when it dropped to 82 percent, before declining much further this past year. The definition of 'timeliness' did change in October 2022 from 45 days to 30 days, which partially accounts for this decrease, but DSS's stated goal for timely processing is still 95 percent in both 2023 and 2024.

The MMR also reports a similar, though less severe, decline in the SNAP application timeliness rate: the timeliness rate for 2023 is just under 40 percent, more than a 50-percentage point decrease from the target rate of 91 percent, and from the 2019 rate of about 93 percent. Though this increase in delays is relatively smaller than the increase for cash assistance processing, it is concerning that 6 out of 10 SNAP applications take longer than 30 days to process, when the individuals and families that are applying for SNAP need food immediately.

At HRA, total headcount has increased by about 1.5 percent since the end of 2022, but turnover in that same period was approximately 16 percent, signaling retention issues and a less experienced workforce on average. The number of Eligibility Specialists, one of the critical positions that work to approve benefit applications declined 11 percent (about 225 employees) between June 30, 2020 and 2023. While there has been a recent rebound in the first few months of 2024—an increase of four percentage points (70 employees)—it may not be sufficient to meet the increase in caseloads given that timeliness indicators continue to lag. The number of cash assistance recipients has grown almost 13 percent over the last year, increasing from more than 585,000 recipients to more than 660,000. The number of SNAP recipients has held relatively steady at around 1.7 million.

***Fewer Families Exiting the City's Shelter System and Fewer Entering Subsidized Permanent Housing.*** In Department of Social Services' Department of Homeless Services, IBO is tracking exits from the shelter system, paying particular attention to exits to stable, permanent housing, especially in light of the recent influx of families and individuals seeking asylum in the City. The MMR reports that the number of families with children exiting the shelter system has declined from over 9,000 in 2019 to 6,175 in 2023—though that is a small increase over the 5,207 families that existed shelter in 2022. Furthermore, the number of subsidized exits—either to a program like supportive housing or NYCHA/Section 8, or with a CityFHEPS voucher that can be used to pay for permanent housing—has declined from over 6,800 in 2019 to just over 5,000 in 2023. IBO has obtained placement data for the CityFHEPS program and has a more in-depth study of the program underway.

***Student and Teacher Absence Rates at Department of Education Remain Higher than Pre-Pandemic Levels.*** In 2023, the MMR reported that about 64 percent of students had attendance rates of 90 percent or higher. In other words, roughly 36 percent of students were absent at least 10 percent of the

school year, a threshold that the Department of Education (DOE) and state education department use as a measure of chronic absenteeism. While 2023 marks a decrease in chronic absenteeism from the previous year—during which nearly 40 percent of students were chronically absent—the indicator is still 10 percentage points higher than the pre-pandemic rate of 26 percent in 2019.

IBO's recently updated [Education Indicators](#) for school year 2021-2022 provided some warning signs for higher levels of chronic absentee rates, particularly for some student subgroups. For traditional public school students in School Districts 1 through 32, we found chronic absenteeism rates highest for students with disabilities, students from low-income neighborhoods, and students in temporary housing. Chronic absentee rates were largest for students in high school. Among high school students, while 40 percent of general education students were chronically absent that year, the rate for students with disabilities was 57 percent. There were similar 17 percentage point differences by neighborhood income and housing status.

The MMR also reported an increase in teacher absences: in 2023, nearly 19 percent of teachers were absent 11 days or more. Before the pandemic, in 2019, only 13 percent of teachers were absent that many days. These absences, coupled with new hiring needs following the State class size reduction law, represent an area of concern. IBO has [estimated](#) the city will need to hire more than 17,000 additional teachers to meet the fully phased in requirements of the new class size law. And in a [recent report](#), IBO found that while teacher hiring has returned to pre-Covid levels, the 2022-2023 school year saw a decrease in teacher retention. As the rate of returning teachers has declined, the overall number of teachers also decreased by 2,500 teachers compared with the workforce in 2018-2019. IBO will be monitoring further changes in teacher headcount especially after the recent announcement by the Adams administration to reduce school budgets this year due to lower-than-expected enrollment.

Finally, the MMR identified several underperforming critical indicators related to the DOE's EarlyLearn programs in 2023—including lower contract enrollment, lower center-based utilization rates, and lower average family childcare enrollment. This is an active area of interest for IBO, and IBO's education team is working with the DOE to gain additional data on enrollment and capacity at center-based programs.

Thank you again, and I am happy to answer your questions.