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**FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE:** January 28, 2016

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**MAYOR BILL DE BLASIO AND CITY COUNCIL SPEAKER MELISSA MARK-VIVERITO ANNOUNCE CREATION OF OFFICE OF CIVIL JUSTICE TO PROVIDE LEGAL ASSISTANCE TO NEW YORKERS IN NEED**

*New office housed at the Human Resources Administration will be responsible for managing \$70 million in legal assistance programs throughout New York City.*

**New York**—Mayor de Blasio and Council Speaker Melissa Mark-Viverito announced today the creation of the Office of Civil Justice. Established at the New York City Human Resources Administration (HRA), the Office of Civil Justice will oversee the provision of free or low-cost legal services to low-income New Yorkers. Furthermore, the Office of Civil Justice will make sure that these programs are working effectively, and will regularly evaluate and report on the legal assistance needed among vulnerable New Yorkers. The office was created by the bill Intro. 736-A, and was signed into law earlier this year by Mayor de Blasio. Jordan Dressler, previously the Senior Advisor for Strategic Initiatives at HRA, will lead the Office as New York City’s first Civil Justice Coordinator.

“Equal justice in the courts is one of the cornerstones of a free and democratic society,” said **Mayor Bill de Blasio**. “Too often, vulnerable New Yorkers cannot afford legal representation and do not receive the justice they deserve. Providing legal assistance through the Office of Civil Justice is not just effective and efficient, it’s the right thing to do to ensure equal justice for all New Yorkers.”

“Expanding access to legal services is paramount in making New York more fair and just for all those who call our city home,” said **Council Speaker Mark-Viverito**. “The Office of Civil Justice will work to ensure that legal assistance is within reach for all New Yorkers and is part of the City Council’s continued efforts to better serve and protect our most vulnerable populations. I thank the de Blasio Administration for their shared commitment to standing up for New Yorkers in need.”

The creation of the Office of Civil Justice is the latest part of an unprecedented investment the de Blasio Administration and the City Council have made in free legal services for New Yorkers in need. The Office of Civil Justice consolidates the City’s various legal services contracts at HRA, and will work to increase the availability of free and low-cost legal services and alternatives to court like mediation citywide. Funding for legal services for at risk tenants will be over \$60

million in the City's baseline budget by fiscal year 2017, more than ten times the \$6 million spent on these services in fiscal 2013. These programs have already made an impact in the lives of low-income New Yorkers facing eviction. Legal service providers have served nearly 17,000 New Yorkers so far through recently expanded contracts. When fully implemented they will serve over 113,000 New Yorkers per year.

“Civil legal services are a vital part of the fight against poverty and income inequality,” said **Human Resources Administration Commissioner Steven Banks**. “Not only are they effective at preventing homelessness and helping those in need, they provide a voice to those whose voices are all too often ignored, and a chance for New Yorkers to have their day in court.”

“Having a fair justice system means that people facing eviction, deportation or other life-changing consequences receive high-quality legal assistance when they need it, regardless of their resources,” said **Civil Justice Coordinator Jordan Dressler**. “I am honored to lead the Office of Civil Justice and to help ensure that these important services are widely available in courts across the City to New Yorkers in need.”

The Office of Civil Justice will issue a yearly report to the Mayor and the City Council on the legal service needs of low-income New Yorkers, and what the City is doing to meet those needs, as well as what areas might still need more access to legal assistance.

Administering legal services for tenants at risk of eviction or facing harassment from landlords will be a large part of the work of the Office. Often, a medical emergency, loss of income or other unfortunate event will cause low-income tenants to fall behind on rent, and many do not have the resources to recover. They end up facing eviction, lose their affordable housing and can end up in the City's shelter system. Sometimes, unscrupulous landlords pursue inappropriate evictions against vulnerable tenants, or attempt to harass them into moving out in hopes of re-renting the apartment at a higher rate.

The legal professionals funded by HRA's Office of Civil Justice will help protect clients from unlawful eviction and harassment, and resolve disputes over rent arrears and other situations. These services will target neighborhoods that see the highest number of children and adults lose their housing, but they are available to any low-income New Yorkers who qualify.

**The two legal services programs for at-risk tenants are:**

- **Anti-Eviction Legal Services:** When fully implemented during FY17 with \$25.8 million in annual funding, these services will serve over 20,000 households each year. This program is aimed at communities in which the highest numbers of children and adults are losing their homes and entering shelter.
- **The Anti-Harassment Tenant Protection Program:** When fully implemented in FY17 with \$36 million in annual funding, the program will serve more than 13,700 households each year. This program is aimed at preventing tenant harassment in communities that will be designated for rezoning and was announced by the Mayor in the 2015 State of the City.

In the next two years, HRA will also be expanding legal services to immigrants, who can face not only legal difficulties but also unscrupulous immigration lawyers that prey on their vulnerable state. The Office of Civil Justice will also offer services to seniors, and to qualifying New Yorkers attempting to enroll in federal disability benefits.

**Additional legal services include:**

- \$4.3 million for Executive Action legal assistance programs for immigrants.
- \$3.2 million for comprehensive immigration legal assistance.
- \$2.1 million for civil legal services for seniors.
- \$2.5 million for legal services to secure federal disability benefits.

Once all of these initiatives are in place, New York City will be allocating over \$70 million a year to civil legal services, an unprecedented commitment both historically and compared to other cities across the nation to helping low-income New Yorkers stay in their homes and receive justice in the court system. The Office of Civil Justice will ensure that these funds are spent effectively to the benefit of New Yorkers in need.

Prior to leading the Office of Civil Justice, Mr. Dressler most recently served as a Senior Advisor for Strategic Initiatives at HRA, where he helped to launch and manage operations for IDNYC, the City's municipal identification card program, and helped to oversee interagency and external affairs for HRA. Before joining HRA in 2014, Mr. Dressler served as General Counsel at the Mayor's Office of Criminal Justice where he managed New York City's indigent criminal and family defense system. Prior to entering government service, Mr. Dressler spent more than a decade as a criminal defense attorney and as a public defender with the Legal Aid Society in the Bronx.

“No New Yorker should face eviction, deportation or any other life altering judgment without access to a lawyer. This new office will help level the playing field for low-income New Yorkers in civil court, where the status quo too often fails any reasonable standard of justice,” **said Council Member Mark Levine, and co-sponsor of the bill.** “The Office of Civil Justice will be a vital tool in combatting the eviction epidemic, reducing homelessness and ensuring the voices of vulnerable New Yorkers are heard in court. I’m excited to partner with this office and continue our fight to expand access to justice throughout the five boroughs.”

"As a former prosecutor, I know that access to legal counsel is a fundamental right that should be available to all," said **Congressman Charles Rangel.** "I applaud Mayor De Blasio and Speaker Mark-Viverito for taking action to ensure equality in our justice system. I am confident that the new Office of Civil Justice will succeed in providing all New Yorkers the opportunity to have a fair trial."

“We’ve seen time and again that dishonest landlords will use illegal harassment as a way to displace working families from affordable housing just to make a quick profit,” said **Congresswoman Nydia M. Velázquez.** “One of our best defenses against these unscrupulous techniques is ensuring tenants know their rights under the law and have access to quality legal

services. The Office of Civil Justice will provide important steps in that regard, and I look forward to further bolstering services like these.”

“For many families, legal representation can mean the difference between staying in their home and ending up in the shelter system or on the street,” said **Council Member Steve Levin, Chair of the Committee on General Welfare**. “The establishment of the Office of Civil Justice will expand access to civil legal services for those who need them most – tenants who are being harassed by their landlords or are facing eviction. I commend Mayor de Blasio and Speaker Mark-Viverito for their leadership on this issue and I look forward to working with Commissioner Banks to protect low-income New Yorkers.”

“The Legal Aid Society appreciates the leadership of Mayor De Blasio and the City Council in expanding free legal services for low income New Yorkers, a vital component to prevent homelessness and inequality,” said **Seymour James, Attorney in Chief at the Legal Aid Society**. “The establishment of the Office of Civil Justice by the City Council and the Mayor demonstrates a deep commitment to ensuring access to justice, the reason the Legal Aid Society was founded 140 years ago. We look forward to continuing to work with the Mayor and the City Council on these important issues.”

“This announcement shows that Mayor De Blasio, the City Council and his Administration know that legal services are a vital part of preventing homelessness, curbing abuse and keeping New Yorkers safe,” said **Amy Barasch, Executive Director of Her Justice**. “The private bar has a strong commitment to representing low income New Yorkers in the civil courts, so an investment in legal services further leverages the vast talent of New York City’s legal community.”

“LEAP commends the Mayor and City Council for taking the next step in formalizing the Office of Civil Justice by appointing a Coordinator,” **Marti Weithman, Supervising Attorney at MFY Legal Services, Inc.** “We look forward to working closely with the new Coordinator on issues important to the low-income communities we serve.”

“We are so pleased that Mayor de Blasio and Speaker Mark-Viverito have announced the creation of the Office of Civil Justice,” said **Raun Rasmussen, Executive Director of Legal Services NYC**. “Civil legal services make New York City fairer and more just for all. Along with the significant increase in city funding for civil legal services, the Office of Civil Justice will make permanent New York City’s commitment to delivering justice to low income New Yorkers.”

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