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**MAYOR DE BLASIO DELIVERS TESTIMONY AT CHIEF JUDGE'S HEARING ON CIVIL LEGAL SERVICES**

*Remarks as Prepared for Delivery*

Good morning Chief Judge Lippman, Chief Administrative Judge Marks, First Department Presiding Justice Gonzalez, and State Bar President Miranda. Thank you for inviting us to appear before you today to discuss the role that civil legal services play in providing access to justice, and to update you on our commitment to expanding those services in New York City. At this time, I'd also like to acknowledge Helaine Barnett, Chair of the Permanent Commission on Access to Justice, and all the Commission members in attendance today.

Chief Judge Lippman, we greatly appreciate your ongoing leadership and dedication to giving all New Yorkers fair and equal access to our civil justice system. The Task Force to Expand Access to Civil Legal Services that you established in 2010, and your annual allocation of civil legal services funding in the Judiciary's budget, have supported thousands of New York state residents each year who would otherwise navigate the State's legal system without representation, including thousands in civil cases in New York City.

It's difficult to overstate the importance of civil legal services. By providing representation to New Yorkers who would otherwise appear alone in court when other parties like landlords are represented, we give New Yorkers fair and equal access to our civil justice system, and fight poverty and inequality. These services help low-income New Yorkers keep a roof over their heads, they help keep a family together, and they help keep food in the cupboard. They help children stay in school and continue an education that could otherwise be disrupted by the loss of a home and a community. In short, we are helping those who need it most gain, and maintain, the basic building blocks of a life lived with dignity and security.

Investing in access to justice is also smart economics. Proof of this can be found in Judge Lippman's Task Force's finding that for every dollar invested in providing civil legal services, taxpayers see a return of more than six dollars in federal benefits, such as federal disability benefits. These benefits not only improve the living standards of the people who receive them, but help lift up local communities as more resources are put into neighborhood economies.

Further, the City sees tremendous savings in averted shelter costs by investing in legal services that help prevent evictions, homelessness, and domestic violence. Providing civil legal services also reduces the costs of litigation and increases court efficiency, which benefits all litigants, regardless of income level.

Our commitment to expanding civil legal services to more New Yorkers, and making those services more effective, can be seen in the actions and investments of my Administration over the past 21 months.

One year ago, my Human Resources Administration (HRA) Commissioner testified before you regarding my Administration's consolidation of multiple civil legal assistance programs, previously spread out across several agencies, into a single streamlined operation at HRA. Bringing all services together in this way has enabled the

City to utilize existing HRA mechanisms to claim available state and federal reimbursement for legal services, avoid duplication of effort, maximize resources, better address service gaps, evaluate emerging legal needs, and be as responsive as possible as emergencies arise.

My first budget as Mayor of the City of New York, for July 2014 through June 2015, allocated an unprecedented level of funding to civil legal services for low-income New Yorkers. That year we projected to spend a total of \$18.5 million to protect tenants facing eviction and harassment by unscrupulous landlords, which is a major cause of homelessness. (At this moment I must note that the vast majority of landlords do follow the law, and treat their tenants with respect. We are focused on the unscrupulous few.)

In Fiscal Year 2015, we vastly expanded the anti-eviction tenant protection program, and made a \$5 million down payment on the creation of our new anti-harassment program for rezoning areas, which next year will grow to \$36 million. This program is focused on ensuring that almost 14,000 of our city's low-income residents can stay in the neighborhoods they built as those areas grow denser, and see considerable investment, in the coming years.

In my second budget – the current year's adopted budget – I again increased our commitment to fund tenant protection legal services for low-income New Yorkers, helping prevent homelessness and disruption in the lives of thousands. This year's budget already included over \$33 million to help New Yorkers before they are forced to turn to shelter. Yesterday, I announced that we are further deepening this commitment, allocating an additional \$12.3 million to the anti-eviction legal services program, to be divided among the providers already hard at work so we can reach more New Yorkers as quickly as possible. This brings the total investment in tenant protection legal services in my second budget to nearly \$46 million.

Next year, in my third budget, that number will grow to more than \$60 million annually. By way of comparison, that is more than ten times the \$6 million spent in Fiscal Year 2013. It is by far the largest initiative of its kind in the nation, enough to give more than 113,000 New Yorkers each year legal services to protect against harassment and unnecessary eviction—which also has the benefit of protecting our affordable housing stock.

It's important to note that these commitments to provide access to justice for low-income tenants are complemented by other major initiatives to prevent homelessness. Among them is HRA's new Homelessness Prevention Administration, which includes an Early Intervention Outreach Team that seeks out families and individuals on the verge of losing their home, and who can be helped by legal assistance or emergency rental assistance.

Tenant protection is the cornerstone of our initiatives to provide access to justice for low-income New Yorkers, but we are also working on many additional fronts, by investing:

- \$4.3 million for Executive Action legal assistance programs for immigrants, operated by HRA in conjunction with the Mayor's Office of Immigrant Affairs and CUNY;
- \$3.2 million for comprehensive immigration legal assistance (that will begin to be implemented through a new RFP process during FY16);
- \$2.1 million for civil legal services for seniors; and
- \$2.6 million for legal services to secure federal disability benefits.

When all of these programs are fully implemented in FY17, New York City will be allocating \$74 million annually in our baseline budget to provide access to justice for low-income New Yorkers.

No other municipality allocates even a small fraction of what New York City is committing to provide access to justice. But given the widespread need, we certainly welcome and support increased Judiciary resources to complement, and further leverage, our expanded services. This is one of the best investments we can make – because it can so clearly change lives for the better, as we are already seeing across the city.

For example, Legal Services New York City and Legal Aid have already received \$5 million through our anti-harassment program, and, working together, have supported more than 1,100 households in all five boroughs – a number that will dramatically increase in the coming months when the program is fully implemented.

In the Bronx, these legal providers went to court on behalf of 121 tenants at 111 Gerard Avenue. The landlord raised the rents in violation of the Rent Stabilization law, while also providing leases and letters to the tenants stating the apartments were no longer subject to Rent Stabilization. After Legal Services and Legal Aid represented the tenants, the landlord admitted to the overcharges, and a settlement is underway which will return tenants to their legal rent.

In Brooklyn, Legal Aid is representing residents of 702 Rockaway Avenue, where the management company divided 18 residential units into 55 units—while also pressuring the tenants to sign a waiver of their rights under the Rent Stabilization law, and neglecting the building until it reached nearly unlivable conditions. When the management company stopped paying the landlord, the landlord attempted to evict all of the tenants. Legal Aid is working to stop these evictions, enforce the tenants' rights under Rent Stabilization, and return the building to an acceptable state of repair for the approximately 40 people, including 10 children, who live there.

At this moment, I'd also like to acknowledge the deep commitment of City Council Speaker Melissa Mark-Viverito, and the entire City Council, to expanding access to justice. In FY16, HRA is overseeing \$19.1 million in discretionary funding added by the City Council during the budget process for a diverse slate of civil legal services, including family reunification immigration defense, assistance for domestic violence survivors and veterans, and anti-eviction and SRO legal services, and more.

I also recently signed Council legislation establishing the Office of Civil Justice at HRA to further advance our efforts to provide access to justice in civil legal matters. Through this Office, annual reports on the need for civil legal assistance will be issued, allowing us to evaluate the quantity and quality of the services that are currently available, and the volume of need we must still meet.

We recognize that the challenges low-income and vulnerable New Yorkers are facing are complex and deep-rooted. But we know, too, that we have powerful tools at hand to address those challenges, and lift up our neighbors who need it most. Every family or individual who can keep their home with the help of legal assistance is spared the trauma of homelessness, including the disruption of education, employment and medical care. The City is spared the expense of emergency shelter services. And together, we become a stronger and more just city.

And, on a personal note as your retirement approaches at the end of this year, I want to acknowledge your tremendous leadership as our Chief Judge, Judge Lippman. Your commitment to access to justice has been extraordinary, as has been your ability to turn that commitment into action. Thousands of our City's low-income families and individuals have you to thank for helping them stay in their home, receive unemployment and disability benefits assistance, or escape from domestic violence. On their behalf, I offer my humblest thanks for all that you have done.

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