



TESTIMONY REGARDING

The Special One-Time Assistance Program

PRESENTED BEFORE:
THE NEW YORK CITY DEPARTMENT OF HOMELESS SERVICES

PRESENTED BY:

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I. Introduction

Mobilization for Justice, Inc. (“MFJ”) envisions a society in which there is equal justice for all. Our mission is to achieve social justice, prioritizing the needs of people who are low-income, disenfranchised, or have disabilities. We do this through providing the highest quality direct civil legal assistance, providing community education, entering into partnerships, engaging in policy advocacy, and bringing impact litigation. MFJ assists more than 25,000 New Yorkers each year.

MFJ’s Housing Project works to prevent homelessness by defending tenants in eviction proceedings and improving living conditions for tenants, while also fighting harassment and discrimination to keep people in their homes and their communities intact. In the two years prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, we provided robust full legal representation to approximately 2,600 tenants facing eviction, 85% of whom were able to remain in their homes.

MFJ appreciates the opportunity to share with the New York City Department of Homeless Services (“DHS”) its support for the proposed rule and its recommendations for strengthening the Special One Time Assistance (“SOTA”) program.

II. Support for SOTA

We support DHS’s proposed rule to amend Title 31 of the Rules of the City of New York to codify the SOTA program.

New York City is in the midst of a homelessness crisis. On June 9, 2021, a total of 47,798¹ persons resided in New York City shelters, not counting the estimated tens of thousands of other homeless individuals living outside of shelters in NYC. The SOTA program, in its less than five years of existence, has helped thousands of people move out of the shelter system and into residences in and around New York City.

For these reasons, MFJ supports the program because it helps people move out of the shelter system and into secure, affordable housing. While it is MFJ’s experience that programs that are more expansive and provide more long-term support, such as CITYFHEPS, are most beneficial, MFJ recognizes that SOTA is also uniquely beneficial for New Yorkers coming out of the shelter system with a source of income, who just need a boost to get their footing. For these tenants, SOTA can be instrumental in bettering their lives.

III. Recommended Improvements to the SOTA Program

MFJ believes that the proposed rule would better support New Yorkers if DHS made the following changes to the SOTA program:

- The SOTA program provides tremendous opportunities for tenants in their first year out of the shelter system by covering rent for one year. However, it does nothing for tenants at the end of the 12-month period. As such, MFJ has had numerous legal

¹ See New York City Department of Homeless Services Daily Report for 6/10/21, available online at <https://www1.nyc.gov/assets/dhs/downloads/pdf/dailyreport.pdf>

referrals from tenants who entered their apartments through the SOTA program, only to be saddled with large monetary judgments for rent arrears that accumulated after the end of the first year. At a minimum, participants in the SOTA program should be connected with caseworkers at the end of their first year to determine if the tenants are eligible for the CITYFHEPS program and other New York City and State programs that provide long-term affordability. Moreover, DHS should provide more opportunities for people to secure a second year of SOTA funding, to receive additional partial funding through the SOTA program, and to transition into other New York City and State programs.

- SOTA, as currently written, permits DHS to transfer people in the shelter to all “50 states of the United States of America, the District of Columbia or one of the territories of the United States.” The proposed rule should explicitly state that, absent extraordinary circumstances, DHS should make every possible effort to keep people in the shelter in New York State, if not NYC. Steering former New Yorkers to New Jersey is displacement in action. It also further underscores the urgent need for NYC to create vastly more affordable housing. Like with other NYC housing programs, DHS’s top priority should be for New Yorkers to be able to remain New Yorkers.

Thank you, again, for affording MFJ the opportunity to speak about SOTA, which is one of many important programs desperately needed to address the chronic plague of homelessness in NYC.