



**TESTIMONY OF VOLUNTEERS OF LEGAL SERVICE
New York City Council Committee on Aging
November 28, 2023**

Good morning. My name is Stephanie Taylor and I am a project director at Volunteers of Legal Service (VOLS). VOLS was established in 1984 and our purpose is to leverage private attorneys to provide free legal services to low-income New Yorkers to help fill the justice gap. I oversee both our Benefits Law Project and our Incarcerated Mothers Law Project.

For over three decades, VOLS has assisted NYC older adults with high-quality free legal services through our dedicated staff and our network of pro bono attorneys. In just the past year, we worked on over 2000 cases for older adults living in New York City. We provide legal assistance on a wide range of civil legal issues including end of life and incapacity planning, landlord tenant matters, access to benefits, consumer matters, and other civil legal needs. We work closely with dozens of community-based organizations working with older adults, many of the City's Older Adult Centers (OACs) and naturally occurring retirement communities (NORCs).

As part of our Benefits Law Project, we help older adults with their Senior Citizen Rent Increase Exemption (SCRIE) applications, and we conduct legal workshops to educate the public about these life-saving benefits. Most older adults live on fixed incomes and the ability to freeze their shelter costs can often mean the difference between being able to age in place in the community with dignity or being at risk of experiencing homelessness. Over the past few months, we've conducted several SCRIE legal clinics, including at Mitchell-Lama buildings. At some of these events, we've worked alongside New York City's Department of Finance and Department of Housing Preservation and Development (HPD). Through all of this work, we've spoken with many older adults about the SCRIE application and recertification process. As such, we are well-positioned to weigh in on Introduction 0985-2023 as it pertains to this vulnerable population.

We have found that many older adults are confused by the SCRIE application and recertification process. They have questions on eligibility, requisite documentation, their pending applications and, of course, application denials. Many of these older adults report to us that their applications haven't been processed in 1-2 years. These individuals don't know whether their application or documentation was incomplete or whether there is any way to cure their deficient application.

Many low-income older adults living in Mitchell-Lama housing are unaware that they are eligible for SCRIE and do not know where or how to apply for benefits. We have teamed up with social services staff who work tirelessly to help as many older adults as possible apply for SCRIE benefits, but inevitably there are many who are left behind. Providing eligible residents with pre-filled applications could ensure that more older adults will be able to access SCRIE benefits.

VOLS recognizes New York City's efforts to better assist older adults with their SCRIE applications, but there is much that can be done to increase access to SCRIE benefits and make the application process easier. The provisions contained in Introduction 0985-2023 would have a positive impact on ensuring that more older adults are aware of the program and will help with the ease of filling out the application. Providing pre-populating SCRIE applications to eligible residents would certainly help many older adults ultimately obtain these critical benefits. We would be happy to work with Councilmembers' offices to screen people and to help them with their applications.

Our City's older adults lifetime experiences and achievements are woven into the fabric of our city; we should strive to provide them with all the support they need to remain in their communities, stay socially connected and remain active and healthy as they age. Thank you for allowing us to submit this testimony and for supporting the needs of New York City's older adults.

Stephanie Taylor, Esq.

VOLS Project Director, Benefits Law Project & Incarcerated Mothers Law Project