



Good morning. My name is James Fenton and I am a senior staff attorney 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.

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).

Additionally our Benefits Law Project, helps 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 the proposed legislation 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. These individuals don't know whether their application or documentation was incomplete or whether there is any way to cure their deficient application.

Moreover, 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. Our clients often do not have access to the technology which would allow help them understand and engage with the SCRIE application process, and are therefore reliant on assistance from others. Providing eligible residents with pre-filled applications could ensure that more older adults will be able to access SCRIE benefits and will, at a minimum, make more older adults aware that they are eligible.

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 the proposed legislation 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. We also believe that any administrative burden created by the bill would likely be offset by the time pre-populating the forms would save later on in the application process. We would be happy to work with Councilmembers' offices and the administration 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.

James Fenton, Esq.

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