



**New York City Council
Committee on Aging, Committee on Disabilities, and Committee on Finance
Hearing
11 a.m. Sept. 18, 2026**

Good afternoon, Council Members. My name is Jean Stevens and I am the Director of the Benefits Law Project at Volunteers of Legal Service (VOLS), based in lower Manhattan. Thank you for the opportunity to testify. VOLS strongly supports Intros 0307, 2458, and 0978A, and Resolutions 0470, 0055, and 0512 because we know firsthand that all this legislation is desperately needed by our clients and the populations we serve.

Since 1984, VOLS has provided free, civil legal services to low-income New Yorkers, including unemployed workers, seniors and older veterans, immigrant young people, small business owners, and children and families. Our programs reach underserved communities across all five boroughs of New York City, inclusive of racial, gender and LGBTQ identity, ability, uniformed service, and immigration status. To do this work, we recruit, train, and mentor 1,000+ volunteer attorneys from 70 law firms and companies, and we collaborate with 150+ CBOs to ensure our services accessibly meet local legal needs. The Benefits Law Project assists New Yorkers who rely on public assistance programs, including SCRIE and DRIE, to survive – our clients live at or below 200% of the federal poverty level. We are one of the few legal services providers who focus specifically on SCRIE and DRIE.

In the Benefits Law Project, our goal is to reach the estimated 57.6% of New Yorkers who are eligible for SCRIE and DRIE but remain unenrolled. We seek to help them apply and maintain their benefit over time so they can remain in their homes and communities with dignity and security, avoiding eviction and displacement. To do this work, we host Rent Freeze Clinics citywide where volunteer attorneys meet with older adults and those with disabilities to advise them on their eligibility, help them apply or renew, and troubleshoot any issues with existing SCRIE and DRIE benefits. Our volunteers also assist clients who contact us through our hotline, and advocate to DOF and HPD on their behalf to address various challenges.

We know why so many New Yorkers are unenrolled. Anyone who regularly assists New Yorkers in seeking SCRIE and DRIE benefits would observe that it can be extremely challenging for anyone – attorneys included – to discover and navigate the applications, renew annually as required, and troubleshoot other administrative program procedures, *let alone* older adults and those with disabilities. These groups, the *exact* intended beneficiaries of these programs, often struggle the most. They are not easily plugged in to discover city programs. They cannot quickly research online to assess the correct application from the right agency for their type of apartment. They cannot gather the specific, required documents without help, access a portal or email, follow-up on deadlines, or financially absorb a temporary loss in the program due to a brief income boost.

We speak with Latina grandmothers in East Harlem and the Bronx, veterans in Coney Island, single parents in East Williamsburg, and daughters of elderly mothers in Chinatown, in

Spanish, Russian, Mandarin, Cantonese, and French, about their SCRIE and DRIE issues constantly. In each call, in every clinic, we hear these common refrains:

- I would've been eligible to apply years ago and benefit when my rent was lower, but I never knew about the program, and even with the program now, my frozen rent will be too high to afford.
- I'm shut out of SCRIE and DRIE because my income is above \$50,000.00. But I'm still paying more than a third of my income on rent.
- I had no idea until now that I applied to the wrong agency – HPD instead of DOF, or DOF instead of HPD – and I lost valuable time by not being enrolled.
- I had SCRIE or DRIE before, but when my income went up just temporarily, I lost it. I'll have to start over at a much higher rent.

The proposed introductions and resolutions before us today will address these issues head-on. They will have an immediate, dramatic impact. An automatic enrollment system would create an opt-out mechanism, rather than an opt-in, and provide overnight relief for eligible tenants. It would also save thousands of hours of stress and frustration for tenants and administrative headache and cost for the city. Similarly, a universal application and recertification would mean applicants would not need to consult with an attorney to understand whether their apartment is subject to DOF or HPD supervision before applying, or risk applying for the “wrong” agency, resulting in many months of lost benefits if they're wrong. They could do so in one smooth process, regardless of whether their apartment would be subject to DOF or HPD supervision. Those with minor children with disabilities could apply in their name and preserve housing stability for their whole family. Those who have lost their SCRIE or DRIE after a temporary income boost would be able to get it back, at the same prior frozen level, so as not to punish them for this brief period but to reflect that real lives fluctuate. Finally, the increasing number of New Yorkers with incomes between \$50,000 and \$75,000 who live on that razor-thin line of affordability and precarity, paying more than a third of their income on rent, would have a chance at preserving their home.

Property owners would also benefit from these changes, as it would ensure consistent tax credits and avoid more frequent tenant turnover. The city would likely see overall reduced costs due far less administrative work and fewer older adults and those with disabilities seeking shelter and other emergency services after being evicted or displaced.

If the city is serious about ensuring the most enrollment and the greatest access and ensuring actual stability and dignity for the most vulnerable to remain in their homes and communities, then the Council should pass these legislative efforts to expand SCRIE and DRIE eligibility and streamline these processes. Thank you for your time.



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