



**New York City Council
Committee on General Welfare
1 pm, September 22, 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 Int No. 101-2026 because we know that a rapid decision on a CityFHEPS application would assist in shielding our clients from eviction. We also urge the Council to explore other legislation to expedite and streamline the CityFHEPS process for applicants applying through Homebase providers.

Since 1984, VOLS has sought to ensure that every New Yorker has access to justice by mobilizing pro bono and community partnerships to provide free civil legal services that protect rights and expand opportunities. Our goal is to ensure New Yorkers can overcome barriers to access legal support for their civil legal challenges. To that end, VOLS provides high-quality, free legal advice, representation, and legal education to older adults and veterans, incarcerated mothers, immigrant young people, small business owners, and individuals seeking public benefits that help meet basic needs. Our programs reach communities across all five boroughs of New York City, inclusive of racial, gender and LGBTQIA+ identity, ability, immigration and veteran status. To do this work, we recruit, train, and mentor an active network of 1,800 pro bono volunteer attorneys from 83 law firms and companies. We have historical partnerships with 150 community-based organizations to ensure our services are accessible and meet local legal needs.

The Benefits Law Project assists New Yorkers who rely on public assistance programs, including CityFHEPS, to survive – our clients live at or below 200% of the federal poverty level. With regard to CityFHEPS, we work with *pro se* tenants facing eviction in Manhattan Housing Court to help them obtain the program in order to cover their arrears, stay in their homes, and afford their future rent.

Generally, there are two different types of CityFHEPS applicants – those obtaining CityFHEPS to help them move out of shelter or their current apartment, and those obtaining CityFHEPS to help them stay in their current apartments and avoid eviction. We assist with the latter group. They are veterans, former city shelter residents, or APS recipients. In other words, they

are very vulnerable people. They need this benefit quickly or else they'll be evicted and forced to go into shelter. Thus, time is particularly short.

Unfortunately, our clients must apply through CityFHEPS through Homebase, the agency contracted by DHS to process those applications and submit to HRA for approval. We “tag team” with our clients through the process, advocating on their behalf. We send our clients to Homebase with very specific instructions to ask about applying for CityFHEPS, or else they may be steered in another direction. We follow up with Homebase workers to shepherd our clients through intake, assessment, and the application process. From there, we check in weekly for updates and ask what documents they need for the application. We work with landlord attorneys to obtain required landlord documents and assist our clients in providing any required documents. Once Homebase completes the application, Homebase submits it to HRA for review, and we follow up with HRA. Throughout this process, our clients run against the very loud clock in their eviction case.

While the proposed introduction 101-2026 will ensure that HRA will evaluate the application quickly, we see that the major bottleneck and frustrating delay lies in the Homebase stage of the process. Homebase commonly takes up to 10 months to put together an application. It loses documents, makes patchwork requests, and fails to communicate exactly what's needed. Caseworkers ask us for the same documents several times, or fail to tell us about a specific required document weeks or months into the process. They do not seem to have a clear, universal checklist for application requirements. If there's a problem with a document, such as a lease without a signature or a landlord rent ledger with a legal fee, they cannot help address this faulty document. It does not keep tenants – or advocates – sufficiently updated on the application status; there is no portal or other mechanism to review. Homebase workers do not understand the rent review process, leading to unnecessary rejections. They do not assist clients in applying for a cash assistance case, also required for the case. Often times, Homebase does not even begin the CityFHEPS process but instead pivots our clients toward a much straightforward, one-time rent grant. We often need to intervene, escalating to directors of the program, to ensure that our clients begin the CityFHEPS application process. It seems impossible to obtain a CityFHEPS voucher *with* an attorney, let alone without one.

We believe Homebase must be funded to increase staff to put together these applications, and staff need additional training and support. We also believe Homebase staff should be trained to treat these applications with urgency given the extremely tight timelines tenants face in court.

Alternatively, we support Homebase be eliminated from this role altogether. HRA could create a new internal process for individuals to apply. It could also allow more advocates, like those through VOLS, to apply through the CurRENT portal.

To ensure that eligible applicants are approved for CityFHEPS at a time when it would actually prevent their eviction, and avoid going into shelter, then the Council should pass 101 and implement any other legislative efforts to streamline the process at the Homebase stage. Thank you for your time.



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