

**Testimony of Urban Resource Institute (URI) before the New York City Council Committee on Finance
Executive Budget Hearing**

June 21, 2023

The Urban Resource Institute (URI) would like to express their gratitude for convening this important hearing and for your dedicated leadership in advocating for the welfare and well-being of unhoused individuals in New York. Today, we would like to reiterate the need for a 6.5% COLA for Human Service Workers, the need to fully fund the ENDGBV microgrants program, the need to increase funding for the Domestic Violence and Empowerment Initiative (DoVE) funding, and bring your attention to the significant consequences resulting from the mayor's recent decision to implement a 2.5% "Provider Flexible Funding" budget cut affecting all the Department of Homeless Services (DHS) and the Human Resources Administration (HRA) contracted non-profit programs, including shelters, street outreach, safe havens, drop-in centers, and Homebase eviction prevention programs. URI has been in operation for over 40 years and is now the largest provider of domestic violence shelter services in the country. URI currently provides temporary housing and services to more than 2,200 people each night who have been impacted by domestic violence, intimate partner violence, and families experiencing homelessness and will continue to increase capacity over the next several years. URI is committed to developing and delivering innovative client-centered and trauma-informed services to individuals affected by domestic and gender-based violence and intimate partner violence and families experiencing homelessness.

Reverse the 2.5% "Provider Flexible Funding" budget cut

This budget cut, imposed by the mayor's office, will undoubtedly have a detrimental impact on the services we provide. DHS has already informed non-profit providers, such as our organization, to prepare for the elimination of vacancies and non-core services, such as on-site mental health services and clinical services. Additionally, the directive includes the consolidation of multiple job roles into a single position in order to achieve the necessary cost-savings for the city.

It is crucial to recognize that a 2.5% reduction in funding translates to the reduction of essential services offered to our clients. When individuals are fleeing from domestic and intimate partner violence, every service we provide becomes essential. Similarly, for families experiencing homelessness, access to comprehensive services is crucial. We cannot allow the city's budgetary constraints to disproportionately burden the most vulnerable members of our community.

We commend the Council for its unwavering commitment to safeguarding the well-being of all New Yorkers who are experiencing the profound hardships of homelessness. Furthermore, we are immensely grateful for the groundbreaking legislation recently passed, which promises to revolutionize access to rental assistance. We implore you to maintain your resolute stance against the mayor's 2.5% cut, as it directly undermines the progress we have made together.

We, as an organization, stand ready to join you in the critical work that lies ahead, particularly in our shared mission of rehousing our neighbors. Together, we can ensure that the necessary resources and support are in place to address homelessness effectively and provide a path towards stability and self-sufficiency.

The need for a 6.5% COLA for Human Services Workers

As a crucial part of the human services sector, URI's employees strive to connect individuals and families with lifesaving resources and support systems. However, the current proposed budget cuts critical services and continues the practice of providing wages for human services providers that fall significantly short of covering the cost of living in a city like New York. Despite the vital role we play in the city's economy and safety, it is disheartening to be asked to cut our spending while being asked to provide increasingly higher levels of service and simultaneously find that our compensation barely meets basic needs.

The city's cuts to homeless services and social service programs are detrimental to the well-being of struggling New Yorkers and must be halted. With fewer human services staff to do the work, these cuts will only prolong homelessness for individuals and families struggling to find it and diminish the chances of our clients finding permanent housing. The cuts also threaten our agency's ability to provide vital client-centered, trauma-informed

supportive services to our clients; these services are often the difference between someone being placed in permanent housing or languishing in shelter.

The failure to adequately support providers doing the work results in overwhelmed and understaffed systems, leaving families staying in homeless shelters for extended periods. To combat discrimination and supply essential services, it is imperative to fully fund providers and invest in critical social service agencies. We need to reject a narrative of scarcity and shortsighted cuts, and instead explore common sense plans to generate the revenue needed for a more equitable New York. Cutting corners by reducing social service programs will not solve the problem but rather exacerbate homelessness, hinder permanent housing solutions, and impose greater financial burdens on the city. Our leaders must prioritize housing, offer competitive salaries, and hold accountable those who unlawfully deny housing to voucher holders.

The salaries of our staff are determined by City contracts, which govern the funding for nonprofits like ours. URI urges the City of New York to include a 6.5% COLA in the upcoming budget for city-contracted human services workers. This increase would help align our wages with the inflation rate, enabling us to better support ourselves while continuing to serve the people of your district and the entire city.

The absence of a COLA has far-reaching consequences that affect both human services workers and the communities we serve. A disproportionate number of human services workers – at URI and across the spectrum – are women of color, highlighting the systemic issues that perpetuate inequality and contribute to a significant gender- and race-based pay gap. Despite the vital role that human services workers play in supporting and uplifting communities, they are often undervalued and underpaid.

Studies have consistently shown that women, on average, earn less than men for performing similar jobs, and this wage gap is even more pronounced for women of color. The reasons for this wage disparity are multifaceted, encompassing factors like occupational segregation, discriminatory practices in hiring and promotion, and limited access to educational and career advancement opportunities.

In addition, lack of appropriate wages leads to adverse workplace conditions, resulting in high staff turnover and vacancy rates. These challenges inevitably impact service delivery and our clients. We need a sustainable work environment that promotes continuity, stability, and effective service delivery to our clients.

The long-term implications of low wages cannot be understated: human services workers are disproportionately burdened with high debt loads and as a result, many are forced to consider leaving to seek higher-paid opportunities elsewhere. Without the work of our dedicated human services staff, many vulnerable New Yorkers would be left without essential services such as hot meals, afterschool programs, and domestic violence shelters. URI urges the New York City Council to ensure that a 6.5% COLA for human services workers is included in the final budget. The estimated cost of this inclusion, approximately \$200 million, is a necessary investment to address the prevailing wage disparities within the sector. By prioritizing the fair compensation of government-contracted human services workers, we can foster a workforce that is motivated, engaged, and able to provide the highest quality of care to our fellow New Yorkers.

Fully Fund the ENDGBV Microgrants Program

URI is grateful to the New York City Council for its advocacy in ensuring that microgrants program for survivors of gender-based violence is funded. The preliminary budget proposed a mere \$1.2 million for this program, an amount that is far below what the projected needs are for this program. The Council's response increased baseline funding for this program by an additional \$3 million, for a total of \$4.2 million. URI is grateful for the increased funding; however, it falls short of the necessary \$6 million needed to fully fund this program.

The ENDGBV microgrants program was established by Local Law 112 of 2022 (formerly Int. 153-A of 2022), which established a housing stability program that provides survivors of domestic and gender-based violence with low-barrier grants and supportive services to help them maintain housing. The grants may be used to cover a wide range of expenses, such as moving costs, furniture, transportation, and childcare, to name a few. For many survivors, these funds could mean the difference between staying in an abusive situation or being able to leave and start a new life in safety.

The need for the ENDGBV microgrants program has only increased in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic. Domestic violence rates have soared during the pandemic, with many survivors experiencing financial insecurity and struggling to find safe housing. According to a report by the New York State Office for the Prevention of Domestic Violence, domestic violence homicides increased by 33% in New York State from 2019 to 2020, with many of these deaths occurring during the pandemic.

The microgrants program is a crucial tool in the fight against domestic and gender-based violence. By providing survivors with financial assistance, we can empower them to interrupt the cycle of abuse and rebuild their lives. Additionally, providing this assistance can help to reduce the burden on other crime victim services programs, such as emergency shelters and legal services.

While domestic violence survivors are indeed victims of crimes, it is important to note that they are also, and perhaps primarily, resilient, strong, and capable. The microgrant program is designed to help them take control of their lives, recognizing that they have a range of needs that go beyond the immediate aftermath of the violence they experienced. Many survivors need access to safe housing, counseling, healthcare, legal assistance, and financial resources. It is crucial that programs and policies are designed to support survivors holistically, recognizing that their needs are complex and multidimensional.

The impact of the microgrants program is clear. In 2020, ENDGBV conducted a pilot of this program, which was administered by Sanctuary for Families, and distributed over \$1.3 million in microgrants to over 1,600 survivors of domestic and gender-based violence. These funds helped survivors to secure housing, access medical care, and cover other essential expenses. Without the microgrants program, many of these survivors may have been unable to leave abusive situations or may have ended up homeless.

In 2021, ENDGBV reported that their Family Justice Centers (FJC) served 13,272 individual clients who needed help and services. Assuming that only about 20% of these clients require microgrants, the city would need to fund the program with \$6 million per year. If we use this amount and assume that each survivor can receive a maximum grant of \$2000 and the same 15% administrative set aside, we can calculate that the program would be able to provide grants to roughly 20% of the survivors visiting FJCs or 2,550 survivors with this budget. Therefore, if the city were to allocate \$6 million to the micro grant program instead of the proposed \$4.2 million, an additional 765 survivors would be able to receive grants.

The ENDGBV microgrants program is a crucial tool in the fight against domestic and gender-based violence. Survivors of domestic and gender-based violence need comprehensive support that goes beyond emergency shelter and legal services, and the microgrants program is designed to help survivors rebuild their lives by providing critical financial assistance. The impact of the pilot program is clear, and the need for this program has only increased during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The need to allocate \$6 million to fully fund this vital program.

Increase funding for the Domestic Violence and Empowerment Initiative (DoVE) Funding

The New York City Council's Domestic Violence and Empowerment Initiative (DoVE) Funding is a critical program designed to support survivors of domestic and gender-based violence in the city. The initiative aims to provide funding to domestic violence service providers to help them provide comprehensive services to survivors, including emergency shelter, counseling, legal assistance, and job training. DoVE funding also supports initiatives that work toward preventing domestic violence by educating the public and raising awareness about the issue. This funding is crucial for domestic violence service providers to continue to provide support to survivors, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic, which has led to a surge in domestic violence cases. DoVE Funding initiative serves as an important step in the fight against domestic violence in New York City, and it is essential for the safety and well-being of survivors in the city.

As the New York City Council negotiates this year's budget, URI and other domestic violence services providers urge the Council to increase the amounts available for this initiative as it provides Council Members the ability to directly impact survivors in their respective districts.

In conclusion, URI urges the City Council to resist the proposed 2.5% “Provider Flexible Funding” cut to DHS and HRA contracted programs, prioritize a 6.5% cost of living increase (COLA) for human service workers, , fully fund the ENDGBV Microgrants program at \$6 million, and increase DoVE funding. The services and programs provided by these agencies are vital to the health and safety of New Yorkers experiencing homelessness and other vulnerable populations. We cannot afford to make cuts that will have such a devastating impact on our communities.

Thank you once again for your dedication to this pressing issue. We sincerely hope that you will continue to champion the cause of unhoused individuals, empowering us to uphold our commitment to the most vulnerable members of our community.