

**Public Hearing—Oversight
Human Resources Administration
Back to Work Program**

New York City Council Committee on General Welfare and
New York City Council Committee on Contracts

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Good morning, my name is Lori McNeil, Director of Research and Policy with the Homelessness Outreach and Prevention Project, (HOPP) at the Urban Justice Center. I appreciate this opportunity to testify. Since its inception in 1984, HOPP has continuously been involved in serving vulnerable populations in New York City. We serve low and no income residents through direct legal services, systematic advocacy and outreach but also through an application of policy research thereby not only serving our clients but also impacting all low income New Yorkers. It is in this capacity that I wish to address the findings of our latest research report, released in March 2009, *We Want to Work: Challenges to Self-Sufficiency in New York City's Workforce-Development Program*.

Our research data was drawn from intensive, in-depth interviews of 66 food stamp and/or cash assistance recipients—all of whom were Human Resource Administration (HRA) clients. The study documents barriers faced by low-income New Yorkers in pursuit of work or a better job. While most respondents reported a desire to work, fifty percent of interviewees faced at least one employment barrier such as childcare issues, English language proficiency or job training access. Moreover, interviewees reported earning wages that kept them in poverty and working in jobs that produced undependable wages. Overwhelming respondents reported that they needed more than a job. Instead, they needed career choices where they could realistically expect to earn wages above federal poverty levels.

Most respondents aspired to work in specific career sectors, the majority of which are characterized by high growth. Almost half of the interviewees reported skills and/or education that could serve as a foundation for career development but acknowledged the need for additional training in order to realize their aspirations. Still, many interviewees weren't aware of existing job training or educational opportunities that would place them on appropriate career paths. Those who participated in training programs reported mixed results ranging from experiences that were positive to issues surrounding training programs that did not provide skills useful in the job market. It is based on these findings that the following recommendations are proposed to address the persistent nature of inadequate workforce development programs for low income New Yorkers.

1) **Career Counseling Initiative.** Our workforce development program is nearly impossible to navigate because so many programs exist that operate in an independent and unconnected fashion. HRA clients often don't know what opportunities exist or how to access different job related resources. Many potential opportunities are not utilized due to this issue. To address this problem, a career counseling initiative can be written into the HRA June vendor contracts. A career counselor would guide clients through the entire work process, working along with clients toward career acquisition and providing on-going and continual support especially in the following areas:

- Assist and direct clients with obtaining appropriate training and education offerings
- Assist clients in securing free English as a Second Language instruction
- Assist clients in accessing quality and stable childcare arrangements
- Assist clients with locating mentorship offerings
- Assist clients in identifying relevant work experience, education and strengths or skills that can contribute to a solid career foundation

Such initiatives have been highly effective especially when recipients have specific career aspirations.¹

2) **Career Ladder Programs.** Since many research respondents were working but almost all of them were still impoverished, the opportunity for all HRA clients to participate in career ladder programs is necessary. Such programs are designed to ultimately produce employment opportunities so that clients can realistically attain jobs yielding wages above poverty level. Career ladder programs have a proven track record of success in New York City.²

¹See *NYC Workforce Weekly*, September 12, 2008. EarnMore Program. Also see MDRC report, *Moving from jobs to careers engaging low-wage workers in career advancement*. December, 2008.

² See Center for Economic Opportunity, *Nursing Career Ladders*, http://www.nyc.gov/html/ceo/downloads/pdf/appendixb_nurse.pdf.

3) Individual Training Grants (ITG—formerly ITA) Expand the ITG voucher program so that they are widely available and easily accessible to all HRA clients. Currently, ITG approved training/educational programs are needlessly narrow. Additional approved programs are necessary in order to offer a full range of career options.

Providing low income New Yorkers with opportunities for economic success not only assists those families by providing viable avenues to self-sufficiency, but also produces stronger communities by reducing poverty. Additionally, a concerted commitment to the initiatives outlined above, will allow all residents to fully contribute their skills and expertise to New York City thereby expanding and strengthening the City's resource base.