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Written Testimony
New York State Joint Legislative Hearing
Human Services
February 2, 2022

Honorable Senators and Members of the Assembly:

My name is Sonal Jessel, and I'm the Director of Policy at WE ACT for Environmental Justice. WE ACT is a community-based organization in Harlem and a nationally recognized leader in the environmental justice movement. Established in 1988 in Harlem, NYC, WE ACT's mission is to build healthy communities by ensuring that people of color and/or low-income residents participate meaningfully in the creation of sound and fair environmental health and protection policies and practices. I have received my Master of Public Health from Columbia University Mailman School of Public Health. Today, WE ACT is calling for increased staffing in Office of Temporary and Disability Assistance (OTDA)'s Home Energy Assistance Program (HEAP) Bureau.

New Yorkers are facing insurmountable utility bill debt due to unmanageably high utility prices coupled with a COVID-19 pandemic that hurt the economic wellbeing of thousands of families. On top of this, we are facing a climate crisis that is leading to more severe, more frequent, and longer-lasting heatwaves that is leading to the death and hospitalization of hundreds of New Yorkers every year. Extreme heat is a rising threat particularly in New York City due to a combination of the urban heat island effect and the racist history of redlining that left communities of color without a green built environment and without well-maintained housing.

The number one solution for keeping people safe from the health hazards of extreme heat is adequate home cooling. However, low-income New Yorkers are unable to adequately cool their homes because of expensive utility bills. Low-income households pay a significantly higher proportion of their income to their utility bills, despite that the State committed to a maximum of a 6% energy burden for all households. We are nowhere near that target. Moreover, high utility bills not only prevent people from getting the cooling they need, but it has a ripple effect. Studies have found that when utility bills are unaffordable, households forego other needs such as healthy food or medication. The HEAP Cooling Assistance Program is the only assistance program in the State that supports



cooling needs for households. Yet, it only allocates funding to purchase an air-conditioner or a fan, instead of subsidizing utility bills.

Over the past few years, the Federal Government has added funding to HEAP in response to the COVID-19 pandemic and rising utility debt. For fiscal year (FY) 2022, New York State so far has an allocation of over \$340 million. With such a large program, it is imperative that OTDA is equipped to carry out the program effectively. Currently, OTDA has between one and two staff hired in the HEAP bureau to carry out the program. Even though there is an increase of approximately \$1.4 billion from the FY 2021 budget for the FY 2022 budget, there are no current projected FTE increases across OTDA.

We are asking for an allocation of \$270,000 in funding for an additional three staff members from OTDA assigned to the HEAP Bureau. With additional staffing, OTDA can pursue a programmatic change to HEAP where the Cooling Assistance Program subsidizes utility bills.

Thank you,

Sonal Jessel