
Testimony of Urban Resource Institute (URI) on the 2023 Joint Legislative Budget Hearing for Human Services

February 13, 2023

Good afternoon and thank you for the opportunity to present testimony before the Joint Budget Committee on Human Services. My name is Wilfredo Lopez, and I am the Director of Government Affairs for Urban Resource Institute (URI). In its 40 years of operation, URI has grown to become the largest provider of domestic violence shelter services in New York. We provide temporary shelter to approximately 2,200 survivors of domestic violence and families experiencing homelessness each night in one of our 22 shelters in four of the five boroughs. In addition to temporary housing, URI also provides prevention services to students in high and middle school through our Relationship Abuse Prevention Program (RAPP) and Early RAPP, along with violence interruption services to people who cause harm via our Abusive Partner Intervention Program (APIP).

Over the years, URI has worked closely with the New York State Office for the Prevention of Domestic Violence, the Office for Children and Family Services, Office of Temporary and Disability Services and we value our partnerships with these agencies and members of both Houses of the Legislature.

There is no question that New York is facing a housing and homelessness crisis. Until recently, domestic violence was the single largest driver of homelessness, followed by evictions. More than 70,000 New Yorkers are unhoused, including 104,000 children, and more than 40% of unhoused New Yorkers have experienced domestic or gender-based violence.

Sadly, homelessness and domestic and gender-based violence are inextricably linked. If we want to end homelessness, it is vital that we invest in domestic and gender-based violence prevention and intervention services and temporary housing supports.

URI supports the appropriation in support of the creation of a Statewide Model Domestic and Gender-Based Violence Policy. The State's current domestic and gender-based policy is more than 30 years old, and in desperate need of an update to reflect all the learning in the sector over the last three decades. Creating a diverse and inclusive taskforce to develop a uniform statewide policy on domestic and gender-based violence will ensure that no matter where a survivor is in the state or where they go for help, they can be sure that they will receive survivor-centered, trauma informed and culturally sensitive supportive services. For someone fleeing a dangerous and abusive situation, the predictability of the type of services they will receive can be comforting and help them along their healing journey.

URI is also pleased that the Governor included \$11 billion to support the operation of shelters and supportive housing units and to provide rental subsidies. The pace of construction of new units of supportive housing must keep up with the ever-growing need.

We are also pleased that the proposed Executive budget includes a one-time income disregard for recipients of public assistance who are enrolled in educational or vocational programs. The current income and resource limits imposed on public assistance recipients discourage saving and keep people in a perpetual state of poverty and reliance on public dollars. URI supports efforts to expand this income disregard and increase the income and resource limits to empower individuals to create and maintain savings.

URI is also pleased to see that public assistance recipients who have their benefits stolen as a result of fraud will no longer be penalized. Survivors of domestic and gender-based violence are among the most vulnerable to economic abuse and coerced debt. Coerced debt is a debt that was incurred because of fraud, duress, intimidation, coercion, threat, manipulation, undue influence, and the non-consensual use of the debtor's personal information.

More than 98% of survivors have reported that they have experienced some level of economic abuse. The majority report that economic abuse is among the primary reasons that they stay in or return to an abusive situation.

URI supports legislation (A.1309/S.2278) to provide victims of coerced debt, including survivors of domestic and gender-based violence and victims of elder abuse, with a means to discharge a debt that is proven to be coerced. This legislation would remove a substantial barrier to safety and healing to survivors of domestic violence and their families.

URI is also advocating for the inclusion of a total of \$300,00 in funding (\$150,000 from each house of the Legislature) to support the work of our Economic Empowerment Center (EE). URI's EE program serves those with the greatest barrier to accessing services. All our clients are homeless at intake and nearly all are experiencing poverty. URI's work supports these individuals in creating pathways to economic security through a variety of innovative programs, including individualized support, resume writing and interview skills workshops, internship and externships to provide survivors with marketable skills employers want. URI's Economic Empowerment Program (EEP) has a proven track record of providing job training, financial literacy education, and access to capital to those in need, helping them to achieve economic stability and independence. This program is more than just a lifeline for the survivors it serves, it is a pathway to a better future.

We cannot stress enough the importance of this funding. The EE program has been a game-changer for so many participants, resulting in increased earnings, improved credit scores, and valuable job skills. By investing in the EEP, you will be helping to create a more equitable and prosperous New York State, one in which all families can build a better future for themselves and their communities.

As the shelter system is stretched beyond its limits, it is vital that New York City and State work with providers to identify additional temporary capacity, as we work to create new units of permanent supportive and affordable housing. Bill A.2583/S.15 would ensure providers of temporary housing for survivors of domestic violence the flexibility to accommodate more single adults in shelter.

More than 70% of all callers to the New York Hotline are single adult survivors of domestic who are not connected with shelter because there are not enough single units to accommodate them. Because the shelter system was originally built to accommodate families with children, there is a dearth of units for single adult survivors of domestic a gender-based violence, including members of the LGBTQIA+ community, people with pets and more. The reimbursement rate is currently based on a per person per night basis, which creates a significant financial disincentive for providing a double occupancy room to a single adult. Ensuring that providers can accommodate single adult survivors is revenue neutral and has the potential will help relieve the inordinate strain on the homeless system.

URI is pleased that the Governor is proposing indexing the New York State minimum wage to inflation. This policy is important because it helps ensure that low-wage workers can keep pace with the rising cost of living. Without indexing, the value of the minimum wage decreases over time as inflation erodes its purchasing power. This can lead to increased financial strain for low-wage workers, who may struggle to pay for necessities such as housing, food, and healthcare. By linking the minimum wage to inflation, workers can maintain their standard of living and have a more stable financial foundation. This, in turn, can help the economy by increasing consumer spending and reducing poverty. Indexing the minimum wage also helps address income inequality, as low-wage workers are more likely to be people of color, women, and those without a college degree. By ensuring that these workers can earn a livable wage, indexing can help reduce disparities in income and wealth and promote a more equitable society.

URI supports increasing the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) set aside for non-residential DV services to \$6 million. Every year, there is an increase in the number of requests for non-residential supportive services from survivors of domestic violence. On a single day in 2022, a total of 3,500 victims, both adult and child, made such requests. These requests represented 38% of all requests received that day and marked a 1,000 increase from the previous year. However, the Executive Budget has proposed a decrease in the allocation for these services, reducing it from \$3.2 million to \$3 million, which is the same amount it was first allocated more than two decades ago. Adjusting for inflation, it is estimated that the current allocation of \$3 million would need to be \$5 million to provide adequate support and services to domestic violence victims in New York. As per the data from the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, New York State had accumulated \$897 million in unspent Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) block grant funds as of 2020, equivalent to 37% of its total block grant. A \$3 million increase in

the TANF set-aside for non-residential domestic violence services would only represent 0.67% of these unspent funds.

Therefore, we urge the Joint Legislative Budget Committee on Human Services to prioritize the needs of survivors of domestic violence and families experiencing homelessness by supporting the Statewide Model Domestic and Gender-Based Violence Policy, increasing funding for supportive housing, expanding the income disregard for public assistance recipients, discharging coerced debt for survivors, and investing in the Economic Empowerment Center. The future of New York State depends on our ability to provide a safe and secure environment for all its residents. By working together, we can ensure that every survivor has access to the resources they need to build a better future and break the cycle of homelessness and violence. Thank you for your attention and consideration of our testimony.