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Testimony to the Committee on General Welfare
of the Council of the City of New York
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Issue: Int. No. 648 - In relation to requiring the Human Resources Administration to prominently display all information relating to youths and young adults who apply for public assistance on the agency's website.

Int. No. 649 - In relation to requiring the Human Resources Administration to create a youth and young adult applicant plan.

Int. No. 657 - In relation to collecting and reporting data related to youth and young adult access to public assistance.

Recommendation: Pass these bills and ensure that HRA provides appropriate services to youth and young adults seeking public assistance.

 Thank you for the opportunity to speak with you today on the important role of public assistance for young adults. My name is Lazar Treschan and I am the Director of Youth Policy for The Community Service Society of New York (CSS), an organization that is a strong believer in the role of public benefits to support New Yorkers who are trying to get ahead.

 Exactly three months ago, I testified before this committee about a report that I had recently written about the plight of young people who apply for public assistance in New York City. That report showed how many young people receive inappropriate services that certainly counter the spirit, and in some cases the letter, of the law, and what's worse, was a clear example of poor public policy. Rather than using the system of public assistance as a way to reconnect young adults, especially those with the greatest barriers to success, our City is pushing them away, by wrongly denying them benefits, or

when they do get benefits, wrongly informing them of their options, and for the most part, placing them into services that do not help them get back on a track to a successful livelihood.

I am honored to sit here just three months later to talk about the proposals that the City Council has generated to help solve this issue. It is affirming to know that our City's legislative leaders have taken such a forceful approach, and I am excited in the knowledge that thousands of young people will benefit from the changes that the Council has proposed.

In our report, we made several recommendations. These included providing better information to young people, so that they can receive the benefits for which they are eligible, and upon receiving those, have the full knowledge of the options available to them to complete their work requirement. In particular, we stressed the importance of education, especially for young people, and especially for those without a high school diploma. Attempts to connect individuals to the labor market without a high school diploma or GED are meaningless and cynical in an age where a job at McDonald's now requires a high school or GED diploma.

We must encourage HRA to understand this. In their testimony and communications with us, HRA has claimed that it allows participation in education for individuals under the age of 20 who do not have a high school diploma. Our interviews with young people and the Council's inquiry of HRA processes proved that this is not the case. HRA is not even following its own directives.

But we must go further. HRA must recognize that young people ages 20 through 24 who do not have a diploma deserve the same opportunities. Putting them in a job

placement program and into a dead-end job will lead them nowhere – except back to reliance on public benefits, or worse. Mayor Bloomberg’s Young Men’s Initiative has loudly articulated the importance of the 16-24 year old age group as the key developmental period in which to ensure that young people get the skills they need to transition to adulthood. Indeed, a report released just this month from the Annie E. Casey Foundation entitled “The Adolescent Brain” provides scientific evidence confirming that the brain continues to develop up to age 25, underlining the importance of positive youth development settings for older youth who have yet to develop strong competencies associated with the responsibilities of adulthood. But HRA continues to resist, by treating young adults with the greatest challenges to healthy development – poverty and disconnection – the same way as older adults.

In our report, we found that HRA is missing an important opportunity to reconnect young people without a high school diploma with GED and other programs that could help them advance. Some youth are denied the chance to apply for benefits. A large percentage of youth who do receive benefits are placed in the adult-oriented, one-size-fits-all Back to Work program (BTW). Most youth do not succeed in building skills or finding work through BTW, and the majority drop out of the program, sacrificing their benefits, and becoming further alienated from school and work.

New York City should be doing everything it can to make sure that low-income disconnected youth are given the assistance they need at this critical point in their lives to set them on a track to productive work rather than derailed into a life of joblessness and poverty. This means making it easy for them to obtain temporary cash assistance and other benefits that will keep them afloat. Our public benefits system should be

incentivizing basic skills preparation programs, especially those that lead to the attainment of a credential such as the GED. The US government recognizes this, and counts any activity toward GED attainment as a suitable experience toward fulfilling welfare work requirements. New York State's Office of Temporary and Disability Assistance has issued guidelines that individuals without high school diplomas, especially young people, should be in education programs.

The three bills that have been introduced by the City Council have the potential to right many current wrongs. We need better information about HRA's services to young people. We need HRA to make sure that young people are given proper information about their eligibility and programmatic options. And we need HRA to realize that youth and young adults require plans that are unique to their age and stages of educational and vocational development. But we also need to encourage HRA to let go of its resistance to federal and state guidance and to the well-established consensus that youth and young adults will not succeed without a basic education. A work-first policy that ignores whether or not they have basic skills and certification is doomed to failure. I urge the Council to pass these bills, and to continue working with the agency to disabuse it of its current attitudes and practices that keep so many young people in the cycle of poverty.

CSS looks forward to working with the Council and Administration to reform how New York City serves youth on PA, so we do not miss these clear opportunities to reconnect them to successful livelihoods. Thank you for the opportunity to testify.