

Testimony of Public Advocate Betsy Gotbaum
New York State Assembly Hearing on Public Assistance
September 6, 2007

Thank you, Chairperson Wright for holding this important hearing and giving me the opportunity to testify today.

Imagine you're a single mom with two kids, and you're trying to raise your kids in New York City on \$291 a month, not including rent subsidies or food stamps. That \$291 is the basic non-shelter welfare grant for a family of three and it has not changed since David Dinkins was Mayor and a ride on the subway cost a dollar.

This, despite the fact that the cost of living has gone up by 60 percent since 1990, and despite the fact that we have undergone welfare reform and have had several opportunities to increase this grant.

\$291 breaks down to about \$9 a day, but in fact, families have even less to spend on basic necessities because many must spend part of this grant to help cover the cost of rent.

Furthermore, even with food stamps, there isn't always enough to pay for all the food a family needs -- especially if the family includes teen-agers, so another part of the \$291 must go for food. And then there is the cost of childcare, healthcare, transportation, and clothing -- all which needs to be covered by the remaining grant monies.

Frankly, we don't have to imagine these struggling families. Just last week, the census bureau released the latest poverty numbers. In all 220,000 families live below the federal poverty level -- almost 160,000 of them are headed by a single parent.

Many of these families call my office seeking help because they can not afford the very basic necessities. That's why I am here today. The non-shelter welfare grant is meant to help families. However, a static grant in a city where costs are continually rising is a grant that increasingly fails to offer real help to families.

The bottom line is that no parent should struggle to give their children the very basics. It's time we help them.

The state needs to use a part of the \$1.5 billion surplus from federal welfare reform to increase the non-shelter part of the public assistance grant. We should increase the grant to \$450 -- we have a responsibility to relieve the hardships suffered by many New York parents and children. We should also increase the grant every year, to be indexed to inflation to reflect the true cost of living.

At its most basic level, this increase would help the poorest and most vulnerable New Yorkers cover basic day-to-day needs. Stats and hard numbers don't tell the story. Consider the dignity of the human beings these numbers represent. Let's increase this grant and provide families with a new opportunity to shake off the chains of poverty.

Thank you.