Testimony of

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General Welfare Committee

Oversight Hearing:
Homelessness and the Implementation on the Living in Communities Program

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Good afternoon. My name is Elizabeth Hoffman and I am the Policy Associate for Housing and Homelessness at Citizens’ Committee for Children of New York (CCC). CCC is a 71-year-old independent, multi-issue child advocacy organization dedicated to ensuring every New York child is healthy, housed, educated and safe.

I would first like to thank Chair Levin and the members of the General Welfare Committee for holding this important hearing. We are grateful for the City Council’s interest in helping homeless families and adults, and welcome the opportunity to testify about the new Living in Communities (LINC) Program.

CCC is very pleased that one of the first measures the de Blasio administration took when entering office was to secure state funding for a new rental assistance program and then put the program into place. We believe rental assistance programs are a critical tool in New York City to help families and children exit shelter to permanent and affordable housing. Similarly, we appreciate the Council’s attention to the implementation of the LINC program.

I. Record Number of Children Living in Shelter

Today’s hearing comes at a time when homelessness has reached unprecedented levels in New York City, with more children living in shelters than ever before. As of January 8, 2015, there were 12,122 families living in the DHS shelter system, including 24,951 children.¹ This is compared to January 2014 when there were 22,210 ² children living in shelter and 20,480 ³ in January 2013. This is a 21% increase in just 2 years.

Additionally, families with children are living in shelters for increasingly longer periods of time: the average length of stay for families was 375 days in Fiscal Year 2013, compared to 427 days in Fiscal Year 2014.⁴

Rental assistance programs have proven to be an effective way to enable homeless families to move out of shelter and into affordable housing. With record numbers of families and children living in shelter for longer periods of time it was clear New York City needed a rental assistance program for homeless families. CCC is grateful to the Governor and Mayor for coming to an agreement and providing funding to support the creation of a vital rental assistance program in New York City, now called the Living in Communities Program.

II. Living in Communities (LINC) Program

The Living in Communities (LINC) Rental Assistance Program launched in September 2014 as a collaboration between the Department of Homeless Services (DHS) and the Human Resources

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³ Id.
Administration (HRA). The program is designed to provide rental assistance and supportive services to eligible families in order to help them exit the shelter system and move into affordable housing.

LINC was created to target specific homeless populations including working families, families who have been in shelter multiple times, and victims of domestic violence. More recently, two more categories were created for homeless seniors and working singles and adult families.

LINC I is for working families with a demonstrated work history for at least 90 days. The household must be working a combined total of at least 35 hours per week. There are 1,100 LINC I subsidies available annually.

LINC II is for families with multiple shelter stays. Families must have been in either a DHS or an HRA shelter two or more times and be eligible for public assistance in their community. There are 950 LINC II subsidies available annually.

LINC III is for domestic violence survivors. Families must be in the DHS or HRA shelter system, be certified by HRA as a survivor of domestic violence and be eligible for public assistance in the community. Annually, there are 1,000 LINC III subsidies available through DHS and 900 subsidies available through HRA.

LINC IV is for single or adult families with at least one family member age 60 or above. The family must be in a DHS shelter for single or adult families, or a DHS safe haven or drop in center.

LINC V is for working single adult families. The family must currently be in a DHS shelter, safe haven or drop in center. At least one member of the family must be working for at least 30 days before certification.

Eligibility for LINC is pre-determined and participants receive a certification letter indicating which LINC program they qualify for. There are a limited number of LINC subsidies available annually in each of the five LINC programs. All LINC programs target families based on their length of stay in shelter meaning families and adults who have been in shelter the longest will be found eligible first if they meet all other programmatic criteria as well. Participants also must be in shelter for a minimum of 90 days; in the LINC III program for domestic violence victims, time in an HRA DV shelter counts towards the minimum length of stay.

In all five LINC programs, clients must contribute 30 percent of their income (earned or unearned) toward rent and the remainder is subsidized by the City and paid directly to the landlord. Unearned income can include Supplement Security Income (SSI) and Social Security Disability (SSD). All households also must have an active or single issue public assistance case.

LINC programs are renewable annually for up to five years and are designed to help support families so they remain stably housed. Homebase after care services are provided to all clients, as well as additional services based on the LINC program type.

For example, LINC I clients, who are working families, receive after care services through HRA’s Back to Work program to help them increase their earnings. LINC II clients, who have
been in shelter multiple times, receive supportive services through an evidenced-based model proven to assist vulnerable populations in making successful transitions by providing an array of supportive social services. These supports are put in place to help families remain in their housing and help them on their path to self-sufficiency.

While landlords were initially hesitant, leading to a slow start for the LINC program which launched just four months ago in September 2014, families are now starting to leave shelter to the LINC program. DHS put a number of incentives in place to help interest landlords including increasing rent levels to Section 8 rates and providing $1,000 signing bonuses. Since these incentives have been put in place, more and more clients have been able to successfully move from shelter into apartments. In fact according to DHS, at least 50 families left shelter through LINC in December.

We thank the administration for its efforts to improve landlord participation in LINC and we are optimistic that LINC combined with the NYCHA preference for homeless families will soon lead to a decrease in the homeless shelter census.

### III. Recommendations

With the number of New York City’s homeless children at an all-time high, it is important that we continue to grow LINC and ensure an increasing number of families can leave shelter for affordable housing. In order to achieve our goal of safely reducing the number of children and families in shelter, CCC respectfully submits the following recommendations:

1. **Secure additional funding for annual rent increases**
   In order to ensure that families are able to stay in their apartments after the initial year of the program, it is essential for LINC to be able to keep up with increasing rents. Currently, DHS does not have the money in its budget to account for annual rent increases. If rents increase annually in the apartments rented by LINC clients (as rents typically do), and the LINC budget is unable to meet the increased rental rate, and families are unable to pay the full rent, the families could end up returning to the shelter system. To prevent this, additional funding needs to be secured to meet the needs of increasing rents in the out-years of LINC as landlords in New York City typically increase rent annually and families will not be able to endure this increase on their own.

   CCC stands committed to working with the Administration and the City Council to advocate for additional state funds as they are needed.

2. **Increase program funding to ensure capacity**
   CCC is grateful that the City recognizes the importance of a rental assistance program; however, we believe the program should be increased to be able to serve more families and children annually. Currently, funding allows for 4,000 families to be placed annually through LINC I, II and III. While this is a very good start, we hope that in the future there will not need to be caps on the annual number of families who can take advantage of the program. In addition, there needs to be more funding for the program in the out-years because as thousands of families leave annually with the ability to renew for up to 5 years, there will be significantly more families in the program each
year until the 5th year when costs should leave off (aside for accounting for rent increases as discussed in recommendation #2.)

3. **Create an additional program to help more families**
All LINC programs require a 30 percent contribution of earned or unearned income towards rent, that families are eligible for public assistance, and that the household have an active or single issue public assistance case. Clearly, not all families in shelter will be able to meet these program requirements. Some of these families may qualify for supportive housing. However, those who do not qualify for LINC or supportive housing and do not receive disability benefits need an opportunity to exit the shelter system. In order to ensure that all families with children have a path out of shelter, we believe additional strategies need to be explored for these families.

4. **Ensure access to social services**
Families in the shelter system typically have a myriad of challenges to overcome in addition to housing. These issues often can be what led to housing instability in the first place. With an average stay of 427 days, many families in shelter have had the most housing stability of their lives while in the shelter system. Thus, the move out of shelter can create stress for families as they adjust to being independent. In order to ensure that families in LINC remain safely and stably housed it is essential that families receive supportive services, in addition to their housing assistance. In addition, supportive services should be available to families even when their subsidy ends in order to help families remain permanently housed. Services should include, but not be limited to case management, access to child care, and health and mental health services.

In conclusion, CCC looks forward to working with the administration and the City Council on reducing family homelessness in New York City. Thank you for this opportunity to testify. CCC appreciates the City Council’s interest in this very critical issue.