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JOINT LEGISLATIVE FISCAL COMMITTEES BUDGET HEARING

State Fiscal Year 2012-13 Executive Budget

Human Services

February 13, 2012

**By Elizabeth Berlin, Executive Deputy Commissioner
NYS Office of Temporary and Disability Assistance**

Good afternoon Chairman Farrell and Chairman DeFrancisco, members of the fiscal committees, and the Chairs of the Social Services Committees – Assemblywoman Titus and Senator Gallivan. My name is Beth Berlin, and I am the Executive Deputy Commissioner of New York State’s Office of Temporary and Disability Assistance (OTDA). It is a pleasure to be before you today to testify on the 2012-13 Executive Budget as it relates to OTDA.

Governor Cuomo has presented a detailed budget that is based on the principles of fiscal discipline and reality-based budgeting. This plan furthers the Governor’s commitment to reinventing State government to perform more efficiently, including structural reforms designed to relieve local governments of State mandates. The Executive Budget funds a comprehensive and coordinated blueprint for economic development that is designed to create jobs throughout the State -- sustainable jobs for New Yorkers that will enable them to support their families.

At the same time, the Governor remains committed to protecting the low-income individuals and families in New York. This budget supports OTDA’s core mission while maintaining the safety net for New York’s most vulnerable households.

With the prolonged economic recession, we have seen tremendous growth in the Food Stamp program in recent years, to more than 3 million individuals receiving assistance at the end of 2011. Still, we know that an estimated 30 percent of New Yorkers eligible for this assistance are not receiving it, leaving as much as \$1.1 billion in federal Food Stamp dollars unclaimed every year. With one in six children in New York State living in a home without enough food, Governor Cuomo has called for a series of measures to prevent hunger throughout the State. This includes working to further increase participation in the Food Stamp program by eliminating the stigma often associated with such programs and reducing barriers to participation.

The Executive Budget also recommends increased funding for the Nutrition Outreach and Education Program, which enables community-based organizations across the State to connect low-income New Yorkers with Food Stamp benefits and other ways to stretch their food dollars, which will contribute greatly to these efforts.

As the need for Food Stamps has increased dramatically during the economic downturn, local social service districts have experienced increased demands while facing their own budgetary pressures. That is why we plan to conduct a pilot program to assess the feasibility and

effectiveness of handling certain Food Stamp case processing functions at the State level, rather than at the local level, with the goal being to enable those workers to handle other critical responsibilities.

Last year, OTDA took steps to streamline homeless services programs to achieve the maximum impact with the investment of State and federal dollars. This strategy is modeled on two evidence-based practices – initially preventing homelessness from occurring, and providing supportive housing for those who have already become homeless. We have combined all of our prevention and crisis intervention programs into the Solutions to End Homelessness Program (STEHP), and two of our supportive housing programs into the New York State Supportive Housing Program (NYSSHP). These strategic approaches have helped local providers to better serve their clients and funding for these programs is proposed to be increased by \$1.4 million in 2012-13.

The Executive Budget also includes a \$30 million capital appropriation for the Homeless Housing and Assistance Program (HHAP) to construct new units for homeless individuals and families. This is a continuation of HHAP funding at the current year level.

Another key component of the State's safety net is the child support enforcement program. In 2011, more than \$1.8 billion in child support was collected on behalf of 1.1 million children. The 2.3 percent increase in collections from the prior year is significant, considering the continuing economic uncertainty facing many non-custodial parents.

OTDA also continues to prioritize the use of technology to carry out our mission in a more efficient way. The myBenefits web portal (myBenefits.ny.gov) provides a self-screening tool that allows anyone to determine potential eligibility for a number of economic support programs. The site also features an online Food Stamp application, which offers program access outside of normal business hours. In the upcoming year, we will begin piloting online recertifications for Food Stamps and Temporary Assistance through myBenefits, while enabling myBenefits users to submit documents electronically, to help streamline the process of verifying their eligibility for assistance. This will help relieve some administrative pressures on local social services districts.

The Executive Budget also recommends a takeover of administration of the State Supplemental Security Income (SSI) supplementation program, which is currently administered by the Federal Social Security Administration at significant cost to the State. By making investments in new systems and staff, we can provide the same service currently provided by the Federal Government at a greatly reduced cost to the State, saving \$90 million a year, once fully implemented. We must begin this year to take the steps in SFY 2012-13 to realize those savings in future years.

Governor Cuomo has laid out a bold and responsible plan that will take the next steps in transforming New York State. OTDA remains committed to working with the Governor, and all of you, toward this goal. Thank you for the opportunity to testify today, and I welcome your questions and comments.