



**Office of Temporary
and Disability Assistance**

**Testimony
Commissioner Michael Hein**

**Before the Legislative Fiscal Committees' Joint Budget Hearing
State Fiscal Year 2021-22 Executive Budget
Human Services**

**Tuesday, February 9, 2021
11:00am**

Good morning, Chairs Krueger, Weinstein, Persaud and Rosenthal, and distinguished members of the State Senate and Assembly. I'm Mike Hein, Commissioner of the Office of Temporary and Disability Assistance (OTDA), and I am pleased to have this opportunity to discuss the 2022 Executive Budget and the critical work of our agency.

As we collectively design solutions to the far-reaching impacts of COVID 19, what is clear is that New York's social safety net has never been more important.

OTDA's core mission is to help vulnerable New Yorkers meet their essential needs and advance economically by providing opportunities for stable employment, safe housing and quality nutrition. This pivotal responsibility is accomplished in conjunction with the state's 58 social services districts, and with your support.

While New York State has been at the forefront of combatting this terrible virus, unfortunately we remain in the grasp of the global pandemic, and our fight for economic recovery has just begun.

At the outset of this pandemic, OTDA took extraordinary steps to change the way we do business. Our agency quickly adapted to support a remote workforce, where possible, and adjust the office space for those essential employees who needed to continue to report in person. I'm proud to say that even with these never-before-seen obstacles, OTDA's workforce rose to the challenge in carrying out the agency's core mission, while consistently going above and beyond to help our fellow New Yorkers.

As you know, unprecedented times have called for unprecedented governmental actions.

To that end, we are grateful for both the Governor's and the State Legislature's timely actions to ensure an effective eviction moratorium that clearly avoided a catastrophic homeless crisis across New York State.

And I am happy to share with you that our agency has been tasked with the critical role of overseeing a new, federally-funded \$1.3 billion Emergency Rental Assistance Program this year.

This initiative will provide desperately-needed support for households behind on their rent that have experienced financial hardship as a result of COVID-19 and are at risk of homelessness or housing instability. Those with the lowest incomes will receive priority, including those who are currently unemployed, greatly reducing economic hardships for these families.

It's also important to properly set expectations. While this program will make a huge difference for many families and landlords, more federal funding will likely be required to fully address this pending national crisis.

Additionally, under the Governor's leadership, we continue to make meaningful progress in our ongoing efforts to ensure that all New Yorkers have access to affordable, safe and secure housing over the long term.

This includes the Governor's unprecedented \$20 billion, five-year housing plan, which is creating or preserving 100,000 units of affordable housing and creating 6,000 new units of supportive housing.

I am pleased to report that the supportive housing component of this commitment has already been achieved and exceeded, and we are on track to meet the Governor's goal of creating 20,000 new supportive housing units over 15 years. And we will continue to press forward because we know the need is great.

The Executive budget also continues historic investments in the Homeless Housing and Assistance Program (HHAP). This program provides capital grants and loans to expand and improve the supply of permanent supportive, transitional, and emergency housing for individuals experiencing homelessness. HHAP is unique among capital programs in that its specific mission is to serve the most economically disadvantaged among us.

Thanks to the Governor and the State Legislature, funding for this program was doubled last year to \$128 million. And, I am pleased to report that last week, HHAP awarded over \$90 million for 20 projects that, when complete, will serve thousands of individuals in need for many years to come.

And in addition to addressing housing needs, OTDA also assists vulnerable individuals and families with the resources they need to put food on the table.

Immediately after the onset of the pandemic, New York saw a dramatic increase in households seeking relief from the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP). In a program as large as SNAP, a 2-3 percent increase is significant and reflects a profound need. In 2020 we experienced an increase of over 7 percent.

To help meet this need, OTDA aggressively sought federal waivers to ensure New Yorkers could continue to access SNAP while greatly expanding nutrition assistance for families and individuals suddenly experiencing greater need, some for the first time ever.

OTDA also acted quickly to secure hundreds of millions of dollars in COVID-specific funding to provide additional supports for New Yorkers facing food insecurity. This was accomplished largely through two new programs that provided significant relief for those adversely affected by the pandemic.

The Pandemic Electronic Benefit Transfer (P-EBT) program brought in more than \$1 billion in food assistance for more than 2.5 million children who were unable to access free school meals due to COVID-related school closures throughout New York State.

And since March, the SNAP Emergency Allotment program has brought in more than \$100 million per month in additional federal aid. The \$1.1 billion in supplemental benefits issued through December has ensured that all SNAP households receive their maximum monthly benefit, based on household size. In January, the federal government also temporarily increased benefits for all SNAP households by 15 percent - which will continue through June of this year.

As we look forward, OTDA is continuing to work with the U.S. Department of Agriculture to finalize a plan that will provide a second round of P-EBT to New York's school children for this current school year.

We're also thankful that during such difficult financial times, the Executive Budget continues steady funding to OTDA's core programs that serve as a lifeline for so many in need.

These programs include temporary assistance; the Home Energy Assistance Program, as well as other key areas like child support, shelter inspections, Fair Hearings, Summer Youth Employment and refugee assistance.

OTDA also proudly administers life-altering Disability Determinations that result in roughly \$1 billion being distributed annually to help disabled New Yorkers make ends meet.

Like all of you, we take very seriously our role in helping vulnerable New Yorkers meet their essential needs as they strive to achieve independent financial stability. With the Governor's leadership and the leadership of the State Senate and Assembly, New York has achieved so much in this cause.

Now, after a year-long battle with COVID 19 that's far from over -- and as we face the long road to economic recovery together -- the role of Human Services and your support has never been more important.

At OTDA, we are confident that by offering critical assistance, informed by many lessons learned, and by embracing our collective humanity; we will emerge from this moment a better, stronger and more resilient New York State.

I want to thank you for the opportunity to appear before you today and I welcome any questions or comments you may have.