



**Testimony to the New York City Council's
Committee on General Welfare**

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Good afternoon Chairpersons and committee members, My name is Ashley Sawyer and I am the Director of Policy and Government Relations at Girls for Gender Equity. Thank you to members of the New York City Council for responding swiftly in response to the horrific violence experienced by Jazmine Headley in early December. Special thanks to Council Member Levin for holding this hearing and helping the Council advance the twelve bills and resolutions we are reviewing today.

Girls for Gender Equity (GGE) is a Brooklyn based, national policy and youth development organization which advocates to remove the systemic barriers which prevent cis and trans girls and gender non-conforming youth of color from leading self-determined lives.

We at GGE have been urging this body of government to take the issues that Black women, especially younger Black women, experience seriously. As many of you know, we helped design the New York City Young Women's Initiative - a participatory governance process where cis and trans girls and GNC youth of color developed a set of over 80 recommendations for city government in the areas of anti-violence and criminal justice, education, health, community support and opportunity, and economic and workforce development.



Jazmine Headley's experience was a horrible display of racism, classism, and an overall disregard for basic decency. However, Jazmine's experience was not unique. Many New Yorkers rely on the Human Resources Agency (HRA) for a myriad of public benefits. **Due to their recent office closures, many people have to endure unreasonable wait times and overall poor treatment. What Jazmine experienced could have largely been avoided if she did not have to wait for an unreasonable amount of time to be seen, or if police and security were not involved, or if she had a safe, clean place to leave her child while she was accessing benefits.** Yet at every turn, system failures compounded, and it caused Jazmine and her child immeasurable trauma, took days out of her life, and subjected her to the indignities of incarceration on Rikers Island.

With those memories in mind, we support the proposals that members of City Council have put forth in order to prevent incidents like this from happening again. In particular, we want to emphasize the importance of consistently monitoring the termination of benefits, client complaints, and use of force within these offices. It is imperative that there are measurable tools for holding social service agencies accountable for the ways that they engage with New Yorkers. We know that if it was not for the public outcry, Jazmine Headley could have suffered in silence, and there would have been no consequences for the brute level of force that she endured. It is important that every effort is made to prevent people seeking services from having to interact with law enforcement in order to access those services or public benefits. This is particularly important for immigrant women, non-binary people, and all people of color.

It is also incredibly important that pregnant and parenting young people do not have to spend their entire days in social service offices, **by making every effort to reduce wait times, and improve the customer service within these agencies. Many girls and young women who rely on HRA also are trying to attend school, and make ends meet in addition to providing for their families. For wage workers, spending hours in an office in order to get child care**



vouchers or other necessary assistance, prevents them from attending classes or having enough money to provide for their families.

We strongly support ensuring that trauma informed, culturally competent social-workers are in social service agencies to provide the necessary support for New Yorkers. GGE was founded by a social worker and continues to do all of our youth programming through a culturally responsive, healing, social-work frame. In the same way that we have consistently advocated for school counselors, we know that there other places where women and girls of color are in need of supportive services. The investment in the qualified professionals, within HRA offices could transform the experiences of the many people who rely on social service agencies.

Again we want to thank committee members and councilmembers for your dedication and responsiveness to these critical issues. We look forward to continuing this conversation and offering our expertise as you continue to develop solutions.

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