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**Contact:** Carmen Boon 212-669-3882 (BP STRINGER)  
John DeSio 718-590-3543 (BP DIAZ)

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## **MANHATTAN AND BRONX BOROUGH PRESIDENTS ALERT RESIDENTS OF NORTHERN MANHATTAN AND BRONX TO SECTION 8 VOUCHER SCAM**

*Borough Presidents announce legal action and assistance on behalf of low-income victims swindled out of their life savings*

Manhattan Borough President Scott M. Stringer and Bronx Borough President Ruben Diaz Jr., joined by HPD, NYCHA, other elected officials, and housing advocates today alerted Northern Manhattan and Bronx residents to a housing scam that has defrauded nearly two dozen individuals. The victims each paid thousands of dollars to a woman who promised to help them use Section 8 housing vouchers to rent private apartments that were in fact unavailable.

The Borough Presidents urged residents who have been approached by, or have had dealings with, a woman named Josie Almonte, who claims to be a real estate representative, to immediately notify local officials and the district attorney. Twenty individuals – most of them low-income and with limited facility in English -- have already come forward, charging that they had been defrauded of as much as \$10,000 for supposed rent, security and realtor fees under the guise of assisting with the approval process for housing vouchers through the New York City Housing Authority's Section 8 program.

The case began in early July when the Manhattan Borough President's Office was contacted by sixteen individuals who, as a result of Ms. Almonte's fraud, faced eviction or the expiration of their leases and vouchers, not to mention the loss of thousands of dollars in personal savings and the fear that their personal and financial information has now been compromised. The Borough President's office contacted police and the Manhattan District Attorney and worked collaboratively with the DA's Office and the constituents to launch criminal complaints against Almonte. She has been arrested three times this summer on charges of fraud, has already been indicted and will answer charges before the State Supreme Court on September 24th.

"We cannot allow our housing assistance programs to be turned into a means of defrauding the very people that they are designed to help – our city's most vulnerable individuals and families," Manhattan Borough President Scott M. Stringer said. "The city must take action to ensure swift justice for the victims of this crime, and meaningful changes to the city's fraud relief resources that protect community residents and inform them of these kinds of scams."

"Though we have heard from some of the victims of this scam, we are concerned that more individuals who have been affected by this fraud may be out there, and we urge them to come

forward and seek our help,” said Bronx Borough President Ruben Diaz Jr. “But without stronger protections, it is entirely possible that similar crooked dealings could happen in the future. The city needs to be more responsive to the victims of this and similar scams, and I will work with Borough President Stringer to ensure that those who need housing assistance the most are not being taken advantage of.”

“The nature of the greed motivated scam that is alleged here is particularly unconscionable given the current period of high unemployment, ongoing cutbacks and continuing layoffs. My Office has already filed charges of grand larceny against Josie Almonte involving the hard earned dollars of two victims. Our investigation is continuing and we ask that anyone who has been similarly victimized, whether by this defendant or others, please contact our Economic Fraud Bureau at (718) 838-7200,” said Bronx District Attorney Robert T. Johnson.

“I used my life savings, tax refunds and money from friends and family to pay Josie Almonte for what I thought would be a ‘new start’,” said Hilda Amarante, a single mother who lives in Washington Heights and Inwood. “She said that she’d fix my credit, find me an affordable apartment and get my application for a Section 8 Voucher approved by the Housing Authority. These were all empty promises; in addition to losing all of my money, I received an eviction letter from my landlord and was forced to move almost overnight. My back was against the wall and I had almost given up hope. Thank you to the Manhattan Borough President’s Office and all of the city agencies that helped to give me and my child a second chance.”

Borough President Stringer also reached out to NYCHA and the Department of Housing Preservation and Development (HPD) to discuss mechanisms on how to prevent this matter from happening to other constituents and seeking legal assistance for the scam victims. As a result of these discussions, both housing city agencies have agreed to grant Section 8 voucher extensions for all victims of the Almonte scam. Also, the City’s Human Resources Administration Department has agreed to work with each individual victim and grant monies for rent arrears and one time assistance funds. Constituents may be able to receive financial assistance to get back on their feet- this will cover rent arrears for those who are behind on rent and 1 month rent- security and brokers fees-for those looking for an apartment.

The elected officials and agencies involved also announced today discussions to schedule town hall meetings for community members, and to seek compensation for victims through the New York State Crime Victims Board. Also under discussion is a SCAM alert proposal on section 8 vouchers with members of the Congress and a request to the City’s Human Resources Administration for assistance to victims who have become homeless as a result of this fraud.

The Section 8 Rental Voucher Program is a federal program to increase housing options for eligible low income families by allowing families to choose market rate, privately owned properties. Under the program, the government will cover the additional cost beyond 30% of the tenant’s household income as long as the monthly rent does not exceed federal reasonable rent guidelines.

Individuals who think they have been targeted by this scam or one similar should report the matter to the police department and ask that the Credit Bureau Fraud Department place a “fraud alert” on their file. Anyone interested in further information can also contact their Borough President’s Office for assistance at 212-669-8300 or 212-531-1609 (Manhattan) and 718-590-3500 (Bronx).

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