



Westchester Disabled On The Move's Testimony for the 2019 Housing Budget Hearing

Honorable legislators, thank you for allowing me the opportunity to testify on one of the most crucial issues facing New Yorkers, including those with disabilities. My name is Laura Case, I am the Systems Advocate at Westchester Disabled On The Move. We are an Independent Living Center located in Yonkers that provides advocacy and services to people with disabilities and seniors.

Many of our consumers come to us for help with finding housing. One of the biggest barriers they face is its cost. In New York state the maximum amount of SSI a single person living in the community can qualify for is \$858 a month. In 2017 the national average SSDI payment was \$1,171 dollars a month. According to HUD the current fair market rent of a one bedroom apartment in Westchester is over \$1,400 dollars. In our communities that are undergoing gentrification apartments are renting for much higher than that. Working people with disabilities face similar odds.

One of the only ways that very low income people can afford housing in Westchester is through subsidy programs like Section 8, and state and federally funded supportive housing. But many landlords still refuse to rent to people using these programs. I have seen consumers and friends find housing they could afford after a long struggle only to be told they didn't have the right sort of income to live there.

People with disabilities who can't find housing often become homeless. Westchester has one of the highest percentages of homeless people in New York State, and a number of them have disabilities. We have had consumers who relied on wheelchairs, hospital beds, or home health aides and were living in the shelter system. In my organizing and advocacy work I have also met homeless people who use walkers, oxygen tanks, or have serious mental health diagnoses. Many of Westchester's shelters are not accessible, making the situation worse.

Accessibility is a barrier people face when looking for housing as well. Older apartment buildings often do not have fully accessible entrances, or even working elevators. Many apartments themselves are not created with people with disabilities in mind. Tenants often face barriers like narrow doorways, doorbells they can't answer, showers they can't use, and cabinets too high for them to reach. Single family homes are often not accessible as well.

For some people these problems mean not being able to use parts of their home. For others they mean having to rely on the help of relatives or aides or paying for renovations out of their own pocket. Other people wind up in nursing homes, losing their independence. The state also spends a large amount of money through Medicaid on nursing homes. In many cases it would be far less costly for the person to live in the community.

There are solutions to these problems, and I would like to advocate for several of them today. We join the New York State Association on Independent Living in standing in support of the Governor's proposal to amend the state's Human Right's Law. The law would be changed to include Source of Income as a protected class. Doing this would prohibit landlords from turning away tenants with lawful sources of income including SSI, and subsidies. Secondly, we join NYAIL in calling for an increase to Access to Home funding. Access to Home is a program administered by New York State Homes And Community Renewal. It pays for home modifications for people with disabilities and seniors. The funding for this program was cut 75%

several years ago and is now set at only one million dollars for the entire state. We are calling for Access to Home funding to be increased to \$10 million dollars.

We are also standing with NYAIL to call for a visitability tax credit to be included in this year's budget. Visitability tax credits would allow homeowners to make their homes accessible. This benefits the homeowner as well as their family and friends with disabilities. It also benefits our communities by adding to our state's small stock of accessible homes. Governor Cuomo has vetoed legislation that would create this program three years in a row. The tax credit is not included in his executive budget. We are encouraging a 1 million dollar pilot program to be added to this year's final budget.

One of the most critical needs I touched on today is the need for more housing people can truly afford. We are advocating for the 6,000 units of supportive housing and 100,000 units of affordable housing supported by the budget to be created as soon as possible. Some of this funding should be targeted towards underserved populations. There is a serious lack of housing programs in Westchester for people with physical disabilities. There is also a lack of programs for people who need deeply affordable housing, but may not require supportive services. In terms of making housing affordable, we also support rent reforms including ending vacancy decontrol and expanding rent stabilization.

Finally, the state should require homeless shelters to be in compliance with the Americans With Disabilities Act. This means ensuring that people with disabilities have equal access to their facilities and services, something that is not happening now. By putting these priorities in place we can begin to address our state's serious housing crisis. Everyone deserves an affordable, accessible, place to live.