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Testimony for the Joint Legislative Budget Hearing on Housing

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My name is Felix Guzman. I am a leader of VOCAL-NY, a poet, activist, and former shelter resident. I would like to thank you for the opportunity to speak today.

VOCAL-NY is a part of the Housing Justice for All campaign. Last year we won an expansion of rent protections, but we know there is still more work to do. We are fighting for a “#NYHomesGuarantee” because every New Yorker has the right to a safe, stable, and affordable place to live. Today I’m here to talk to you about our state’s homelessness crisis.

My story is emblematic of how our current housing system fails people, and keeps them trapped in dangerous situations at high cost to the taxpayer. Several years ago, my then landlord started to convert units in my building into a scattered site shelter. He was allowed to make tremendous amounts of money from the city to kick out rent stabilized tenants and replace them with people who had no rights, and therefore couldn’t complain or join tenant associations. The result was a rapid deterioration of the building conditions. This, in combination with complications due to being stuck in an abusive relationship, forced me out of my home and into the very same shelter system that caused my problem in the first place.

The more I have organized with members of my community, the more I have seen that I was caught up in a larger system of displacement and gentrification. I was born and raised in



Brooklyn NY, and I have seen how it has changed. Massive glass skyscrapers have been built all over the borough, representing thousands and thousands of units of new housing. How could it be that thousands of units of housing have been built all around our borough over the last 20 years, and yet tens of thousands of more people have become homeless? The answer is actually quite simple- the private housing market's primary goal is not housing people. It's primary goal is to maximize the profits.

In New York City, 248,000 units of housing are empty, that's 8% of the overall housing stock. Twenty-five percent of new luxury condos that were built since 2013 remain empty, and yet thousands more are in the process of being built. All of this adds up to a system where there are 4 empty apartments for every single New Yorker in the shelter. This criminal greed has gone on long enough, and at the end of the day, the blame lies with a Governor that has not put any meaningful resources toward tackling this problem at its root. The blame lies with a legislature that has not effectively challenged him into addressing this moral crisis.

The solutions to the problems we face are not a mystery. We have been fighting for them for years. First and foremost we need a new housing subsidy program, that can actually cover apartments at the market rate. Rental assistance is the fastest and most effective way to get people out of temporary shelters and into permanent homes. Other states have created programs that actually cover apartments at the market rate. In New York City, we have CityFHEPS which will only cover apartments up to \$1400 for most individuals, which is woefully inadequate if you consider that the average one-bedroom apartment in New York City rents for \$2,860. It is



criminal for the city to give out vouchers when it knows that there are not enough apartments to be covered by them. That said--our friends and neighbors outside in the rest of the state have it worse because they have no rental assistance program to provide for them and their cities are unable to provide this critical resource to them.

We cannot continue on this path. We must fight for a New York where everyone has a home. New York State must make a plan to end homelessness, and it must start by investing in the needs of homeless people. We need our Senate and Assembly to fight for \$500 million for a state-funded rental assistance program to help homeless New Yorkers and those at risk of becoming homeless. Funding rental assistance will help tens-of-thousands of people and will put us on the path to having a #NYHomesGuarantee. Thank you.