

Tuesday February 2, 2021

Official CASA Testimony on Joint Legislative Budget Hearing on Housing Regarding DHCR, or the New York State Division of Homes & Community Renewal

Submitted by Jordan Cooper, Lead Organizer of CASA

My name is Jordan Cooper and I'm a Lead Organizer of CASA, which is a member-led grassroots tenant organizing group in the Southwest Bronx with over 3,000 members, founded in 2005, and currently works on several campaigns including the Historic Right to Counsel Legislation at the city level and the Justice in Housing Court campaign at the State level working towards Housing Courts Must Change including a State-wide Right to Counsel in New York State. In addition, we are a member of the Rent Justice Coalition and advocate for a rent rollback for a million rent stabilized tenants in NYC. We are here today proud members and active supporters of the state-wide coalition Housing Justice for All who, along with the Right to Counsel NYC coalition, are fighting to stop evictions and defend communities during the COVID-19 pandemic by clearing all back rent accrued during the pandemic and providing pathways to permanent housing to unhoused New Yorkers with the Housing Access Voucher Program.

In order to prioritize Housing Justice for the duration of the pandemic and into the recovery, New York legislators in the Assembly and Senate must include the following in the budget for the upcoming fiscal year:

- \$2.2 to clear all back rent accrued during the duration of the COVID-19 pandemic
- \$500 million in funding for a Housing Access Voucher Program (HAVP) to provide rental assistance for homeless New Yorkers or New Yorkers at risk of becoming homeless
- Fully fund 14,000 Units of Supportive Housing
- \$3 billion investment in public housing authorities across New York
- \$500 million for New York State Division of Homes & Community Renewal (DHCR) to implement and enforce new tenant protections
- Invest in Our New York by raising taxes on corporate landlords, full elimination of 421-A and 485-A, taxes on private equity mezzanine debt, and a Pied-a-Terre tax
- Invest in Tenant Opportunity to Purchase (TOPA)

CASA is coordinating the HCR working group in Housing Justice for All that has developed a comprehensive policy platform on how HCR can implement and enforce the historic rent laws. Dating back to 2015, CASA along with other coalition partners has targeted DHCR on changing administrative policies and practices around Major Capital Improvements (MCIs). Since then our movement has grown in strength, power, and unity. The organizations in Housing Justice for All, along with CASA, have identified the critical role DHCR will play in interpreting, implementing, and enforcing the Housing Stability and Tenant Protection Act of 2019 (HSTPA).

Our analysis has found that additional funds are needed for HCR specifically to improve and make more accessible their direct services to New York renters seeking enforcement of their basic Tenants' Rights. The current budget allocations for HCR ORA will not be sufficient to:

- Lower wait times for tenants applying for tenant initiated complaints (Rent Overcharge, Rent Reduction, Lease Complaints, etc.)

- Make the necessary technology upgrades to serve New Yorkers who speak languages other than English as is their right
- Make the necessary technology upgrades to improve data collection and transparency needed to comply with HSTPA 2019
- Better serve the millions of New Yorkers who made historic gains in Tenants' Rights through the passing of HSTPA 2019

This is a critical time where New Yorkers are struggling to maintain safe and adequate housing and the wraparound services that DHCR provides from dealing with rent issues, to repairs, harassment, and more, need to be made accessible to the most vulnerable members of our community. In order for our rent laws victories and the historic HSTPA that many legislators here supported and voted for, DHCR has to make immediate drastic changes, starting with increasing the long overdue resources to the agency and putting its administrators in a position to succeed. **That's why Housing Justice for All is demanding a \$500 million dollar increase to DHCR.** Otherwise, business continues as usual. Landlords will adapt to the new rent laws and continue to exploit DHCR's programs to avoid enforcement and accountability. Municipalities and cities that opt into Rent Stabilization will inherit the same structural issues we are organizing to change for the benefit of people.