

New York State Assembly Executive Budget Hearing on Social Services

Testimony of Gisel Garcia, Leader, Neighbors Together

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My name is Gisel Garcia, and I am a leader in the Community Action Program at Neighbors Together, a community based organization located in central Brooklyn that organizes homeless and formerly homeless New Yorkers.

I would like to thank the Senate Finance Committee and Assembly Ways and Means Committee Chairs Krueger and Weinstein, respectively, as well as the other legislators on the committees for the opportunity to submit testimony regarding the proposed executive budget for social services.

I am here today to discuss the need for the Housing Access Voucher Program (A3701/S2804) to be passed and fully funded in this year's budget.

I currently live in a two family home in Staten Island with my two children and my FHEPS voucher. I moved here from New York City's shelter system after fleeing a domestic violence situation that put me and my children's lives at risk.

My landlords live below me, and our relationship has gotten worse over time. I am constantly the target of their harassment and they have been trying to push me and my kids out onto the street in the middle of a pandemic. I am constantly under stress and it has taken a serious toll on my mental and physical health. I never feel safe – in fact, I feel like I am back in an abusive relationship all over again.

I have been trying desperately to move out of my apartment into a new place with my FHEPS voucher for the last 12 months. Brokers tell me to my face I have the “worst voucher” and they can't help me. They know the limitations of the FHEPS voucher as well as I do. My voucher amount is too low to cover the rent in a safe apartment (my family of 3 has a voucher for \$1580, which is what a studio costs in NYC!).

Not only does my voucher not pay fair market rent but it also limits my family's ability to improve our situation. My daughter and I are on SSI, and our rental assistance voucher comes through my son's public assistance case. He is 18 years old and attends John Jay College. He really wants to get a part time job, but if he does we will lose our voucher and become homeless again.

We need a better, more stable voucher to help families like mine find PERMANENT homes instead of getting stuck in another unsafe apartment. We shouldn't have to choose between a home or a job. Families like mine need the state to pass and fund the Housing Access Voucher Program (HAVP). A voucher like this would change my life and the lives of thousands of other people across New York State. First, it would pay fair market rent which would open up so many more options for safe apartments for me and my family. Second, HAVP would allow my families' income to increase until we are self sufficient and able to pay our rent independently- it wouldn't penalize us for wanting good paying jobs. Third, it covers people who are undocumented and don't have access to any other program. And fourth, people on social security would be eligible for the voucher, not just people on public assistance, so I wouldn't have to limit my son's dreams in order to keep our housing.

So many people in New York State need help like I do and it's going to be so much worse if the government doesn't forgive back rent. So many more people will be homeless, and that's not something I would wish on anyone. We need New York State to do everything it can to raise money to pay for critical programs like HAVP and the COVID-19 Housing Relief and Recovery bill. The federal money won't be enough- we need at least \$2.25 billion to clear rent debt, create a landlord hardship fund, and fund HAVP. Please pass the Invest in Our New York revenue raisers to tax the rich so that I and the millions of other New Yorkers who need help can finally get some stability and move on with our lives.

Thank you for your time.

Gizel Garcia

Community Action Program Leader

Neighbors Together