

February 6th, 2021

Joint Legislative Budget Hearing - Human Services
Written Testimony Submission

My name is Cristina Jeffers, and I represent the Zara Tenant Coalition. I am a rent stabilized tenant in a building owned by Zara at 94-25 57th Avenue in Elmhurst, Queens.

I came to this country from Mexico many years ago and have done nothing but work hard to survive and provide for my family. For the last few years I have been working as a contractor with my own cleaning business, where I am the main employee. I have no full time employer, no guaranteed income or benefits, so as a single mother I have been really struggling to support my youngest child through college while taking care of my elderly mother who is 95 years old.

Being a mother, caregiver and also the only breadwinner for my family is always hard, but it has been especially hard during the pandemic. I have to hustle to get any work and expose myself by commuting and going to different places for different clients any day of the week, day or night.

Like many of my neighbors, there have been many months when I had very little work and many times no work at all. Me and my family were being forced to choose between paying rent or eating and covering basic necessities. Many weeks we struggled to even put food on the table. And I am not the only one.

There are almost 30 families in my building who are behind on rent, and many more who are seriously struggling. I know neighbors who are not buying enough food or medicine or other basic items just to try to pay rent. I know neighbors who are paying rent with their credit cards, others who are borrowing money from anybody they can. We are all working families, mostly immigrants and people of color, like most of the 1.3 million families who are behind on rent in New York. Most of us have always lived month to month, and the cost of housing was already unaffordable even before COVID. The pandemic just made a housing crisis into a much worse emergency.

Everyday I leave my building I see more homeless people in the streets, in the subway. That is in the middle of winter and not counting those in the shelters who are living in horrible conditions and even more at risk of COVID and disease. The housing crisis has everything to do with the health crisis. Without stable housing we cannot have stable healthcare, or stable education, or a stable economy, or stable communities. So the way that the New York State government deals with this emergency will determine the future for millions of New Yorkers.

So far, the government of this state has NOT done even close to enough. My family and my neighbors have been living in anxiety and stress as we get close to each new deadline of the eviction moratorium. I have neighbors who have had anxiety breakdowns, who are getting sick, going to the hospital.

The recent law that is protecting us until May 1st was a good step, but not enough. We keep accumulating thousands of dollars in rent and we don't even know when the pandemic will end and

when things will be close to normal. We don't know when our families will ever have full income again, but we know one thing for sure: there is NO way New Yorkers can ever recover if we have to carry thousands of dollars of debt. There is no way I can prioritize my son's future or my mother's health if I am in a race against time where in the end I could get evicted anyway. New Yorkers owe \$2.2 billion dollars in rent!! You know as well as I know that we cannot pay that money back. *What we need is to Cancel Rent for all tenants, create a Fund for Small Landlords who actually need the help, and provide real housing for all the homeless.*

Let me be clear: Rent Relief Program like the one from DHCR is NOT enough and will NOT be enough. A system that makes tenants have to apply and compete for a few dollars is absolutely the wrong approach and has been a disaster. First of all I know many, many people who applied and are struggling, but I don't know a single person who got approved. Secondly, this kind of application system makes it extremely difficult or impossible for many immigrants and informal workers to apply, which is a lot of the people who need help because many of them do not get stimulus money or other benefits. Not to mention, the way the program has been handled is terrible. There were crashes, poor outreach, language issues, delays, confusing letters and other problems because DHCR doesn't have enough money or staff and their priorities are all wrong.

Let me be clear again: Federal money will also NOT be enough. The Governor knows this and you know this. Governor Cuomo even says federal money won't be enough for our budget and that he will probably have to cut funding from education and healthcare. And there is ZERO additional money in the budget so far to take care of tenants or the thousands of homeless people.

All because Cuomo and Albany prefer to let the billionaires keep their tax cuts instead of making them pay their fair share so that our state can recover. So the rich keep winning more than ever even during a pandemic, and the working class and middle class just keep losing.

So if you really want New York to recover from this emergency, you are going to have to put the needs of millions of people over the profits of a few.

We need 2.2 billion dollars in THIS BUDGET to clear all the back rent and take care of the small landlords who actually need the help. Most New York landlords are rich and own many buildings, like my landlord Zara. Many are greedy and abuse their tenants and don't take care of their apartments. Landlords are the ones who own properties so they should be the ones to apply for help, not the millions of working tenant families who are at risk of displacement. This should be obvious.

We also need 500 Million dollars for the Housing Access Voucher program to take care of all the people who are homeless or at risk and make sure everyone has safe housing, especially during a pandemic.

Legislators, do the right thing. The future of the state depends on it. You must tax the rich and make sure we can clear the rent for millions to keep them in their homes, take care of the small landlords, and give proper housing to the homeless. Thank you.