



New York State Joint Legislative Budget Hearing on Housing

Testimony of Fannie Lou Diane Leader, Neighbors Together and Housing Justice for All

January 31, 2022

My name is Fannie Lou Diane, and I am a member leader at Neighbors Together in Brooklyn and a member of the Housing Justice for All Coalition. Thank you for the opportunity to submit testimony.

I am submitting this testimony to highlight the dire need for the New York State Assembly to address the housing and homelessness crisis by passing critical legislation that will move us out of the cycle of short-term responses and into long term investments in safe, stable, affordable housing for all New Yorkers. It is interesting that many of our members have or are intersected at some point in time with the agencies and organizations that testify today. I would be remiss if I didn't mention the human aspect which is why I am here today.

I myself understand all too well the struggle that many low income and homeless New Yorkers are facing. In 2019 I was illegally evicted by my landlord who refused to remediate toxic black mold, several mice infestations and three bedbug infestations. The constant exposure to toxins and rodents made me severely ill, and after fighting and beating cancer, my health remains severely impacted to this day. Studies show that Black women, as the primary heads of households in communities hosting environmental hazards, bear a disproportionate environmental burden.

Before experiencing housing insecurity, I never thought someone like me would be impacted by homelessness. We have a narrative of what someone who is homeless looks like, but I'm here to tell you that any one of us can be in this position. I was educated with an advanced degree from a prestigious college, I had a full-time job on Madison Ave and served on my community board appointed by the Bronx Borough President, but here I am, just like so many others who have been failed by inadequate tenant protections and short-sighted or non-existent housing policy.

After looking for housing for almost 3 years with my CityFHEPS voucher, I finally found an apartment and a place to finally call my own again but was told it would take months because of the bottleneck between HRA and CAMBA. So now, because of the lack of case manager availability due to CAMBA's staffing shortage I have to wait to get action on my case. I was accepted by the management company in November, but here we are at the end of January, and I'm still waiting for paperwork to be processed so I can move in. I am yet again at the mercy of the system, wondering whether I will lose this thing that I have been praying and waiting for.



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There is a human element to these policies, people's lives hang in the balance as you look at the real checks and balances. I urge you all not to just think about the budget cost but the human cost. How will the policies that I vote on today impact the lives of the people I am called to serve? Will we end up as collateral damage again in this flawed system?

We are at a crossroads: COVID is becoming endemic, we have a new Governor, and we are at the beginning of a new 5-year capital plan for New York State. We cannot repeat the mistakes of the past; COVID reminded us that housing is healthcare, housing justice is racial justice, and stable housing for all is key to a successful functioning society.

We have heard the statistics during COVID: Landlords in NYC are seeking evictions nearly four times as often in neighborhoods hit the hardest by COVID-19, in predominantly Black and Latino communities which have borne the brunt of both the health and housing crisis since the beginning of COVID. We know that more than 225,135 tenants across New York State are on the brink of eviction. Nearly a third of low-income New Yorkers said they or a member of their household has lost their job since the pandemic. Nearly 7 out of 10 of those jobs lost in New York City were jobs held by people of color. Of households facing eviction and loss of wages because of COVID, 68% of those households are people of color. Eviction increased the likelihood of catching COVID, and homeless New Yorkers in congregate shelters had a mortality rate from COVID that was 321 deaths per sheltered homeless people, compared to 200 deaths from the general population, and Black and brown New Yorkers are disproportionately represented among unhoused New Yorkers.

The eviction moratorium ended on January 15th of this month, and now over 200,000 households face eviction. The state's failure to act represents a total abdication of responsibility to protect tenants and address the homelessness crisis, and it is unacceptable. COVID showed us how many households are on the brink of homelessness, and even with ERAP funding, many households will have remaining rent debt. Without better policies in place, severely rent burdened households will continue to struggle, and can easily end up cycling in and out of homelessness. In this year's budget, the state must move from emergency responses to COVID to investing in permanent, forward-looking protections for low-income households and homeless New Yorkers, such as Good Cause Eviction and the Housing Access Voucher Program.*

If Good Cause Eviction were law when I was living in the apartment with toxic mold, I would have been able to fight back against the dangerous living conditions in my building and seen them remediated instead of being illegally evicted in retaliation for asking for repairs. I would have been safely housed for the last 2+ years, been able to work, to finish my PhD, and give back to my community. Instead, I have been struggling to find a place to live, and spend all my energy fighting to keep my head above water. There are 1.5 million unregulated renters in New York State, and nearly 900,000 unregulated renters live in New York City alone; all of them will remain vulnerable to retaliatory evictions, unconscionably high rent increases, and refusal of lease



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renewals, all of which will render them homeless, adding to the already historic homelessness crisis. The state must pass Good Cause Eviction to stop the flow of people into homelessness.

In order to rehouse people who are already homeless, and to address the problem from the other end, the state must pass the Housing Access Voucher Program. If the Housing Access Voucher Program were law when I was illegally evicted, I would have received a voucher that paid fair market rent when I became homeless in 2019. Instead, I spent almost three years looking for housing with a voucher that paid hundreds of dollars below fair market rent, and forced me to compete with thousands of other voucher holders for one or two units within our voucher range that were far flung and always in substandard condition.

In order to address current housing disparities and create an equitable and just housing system statewide, any budget put forward by New York State must include Good Cause Eviction, the Housing Access Voucher Program, and additional money for the Housing Our Neighbors with Dignity Act that can be used statewide. The state budget must also put an end to corporate giveaways to developers who build housing that isn't affordable for the people who need it most; people at or below 50% AMI. Governor Hochul's budget simply rebrands the broken 421a program, which has given away billions of dollars to create housing that displaces longtime community residents and isn't affordable to unhoused New Yorkers and the working poor. Instead of rehashing the same failed policies under a new name, programs like 421a and 485w should be eliminated altogether.

I, and millions of other low-income New Yorkers need New York State to finally start investing in long-term housing solutions that provide equitable and just housing for all. Housing should be a human right, and good, clean, safe and affordable housing should be the standard and not an option.

Thank You

Fannie Lou Diane

* For more information on the bills referenced in my testimony, see Appendix A



Appendix A

Good Cause Eviction (A05573/S03082) (Hunter/Salazar):

- This bill would prohibit evictions without good cause, which will give tenants the ability to contest substandard living conditions and code violations without fear of retaliatory eviction.
- It will also give tenants the ability to challenge unconscionable rent hikes, which often make people homeless.
- Good Cause eviction would cover more than 1.5 million households statewide. There are over 900,000 unregulated apartments in NYC, and there are approximately 750,000 in upstate, Western NY and Long Island.
- For every formal eviction in housing court, there are 5 informal evictions. These illegal evictions contribute to the growing homelessness crisis, and cause people to cycle between unstable, unaffordable housing and homelessness. Once people fall into this cycle, they can struggle to escape it for years.

Housing Access Voucher Program (A3701a/S2804B) (Cymbrowitz/Kavanagh)

- This bill creates a state-wide rental assistance program modeled after Section 8. It would pay fair market rent, and allow voucher recipients to increase their income until their rent is 30% of their income and they are stable, self-sufficient, and able to roll off the voucher.
- The Housing Access Voucher Program provides rent subsidy vouchers to people who are homeless and to tenants who are facing eviction. It would help rehouse the more than 92,000 homeless New Yorkers, and would prevent thousands of rent-burdened households from falling into homelessness each year. Over one million low-income New Yorkers pay more than 30% of their income toward their rent, and this voucher will help stabilize them in the event of a job loss, health crisis, or a large-scale crisis like COVID.
- The Housing Access Voucher also covers people who aren't eligible for Section 8, such as immigrants without status.
- For New Yorkers outside of New York City, the Housing Access Voucher program would be the first of its kind available to single adults and households at risk of eviction, and would be a true lifeline for those facing housing instability or experiencing homelessness.

Housing Our Neighbors with Dignity Act (HONDA) (Budget item- there is no stand-alone bill):

- Last year the legislature passed the Housing Our Neighbors with Dignity Act, which allows nonprofits to purchase distressed hotels and convert them to affordable housing for homeless New Yorkers.
- The Legislature put 100 million dollars in the budget for New York City conversions only- this is an important start but we know that homeless is a crisis across New York State. The Legislature must include a budget item that would increase the funds for these conversions and would provide funds for outside NYC.