

**CASA – New Settlement Testimony for Joint Legislative Budget Hearing on Housing
January 31, 2:00PM**

Hello. Thank you for the opportunity to testify. My name is Pablo Estupinan and I'm the Director of CASA, or Community Action for Safe Apartments. We are a member-led, grassroots tenant organizing project in the Southwest Bronx and represent over 3,000 tenants. Our mission is to preserve and maintain safe and affordable housing through collective action. The heart of our work is organizing Tenant Associations and building tenant power. **I'm here today to testify in support of a fully funded statewide Right to Counsel and for New York State to allocate an additional \$2 billion in rent relief for the ERAP program.**

The proposed \$35 million in increased funding for legal services providers throughout Upstate New York does not go far enough to address the housing and eviction crisis facing New York tenants. Every tenant facing eviction across New York State needs a lawyer and the support of a community organizer to fight their case. The current proposal will not come close to doing that. We need a TRUE Right to Counsel for tenants facing eviction. That means:

- A legal right to representation at every stage of any legal action that can lead to someone losing their home, AND the funding to realistically pay for it:
 - While we are working on a more official cost study, our conservative estimate indicates that providing a Right to Counsel for all tenants across New York State would cost at least \$500 million.
 - Between 70,000 and 85,000 tenants outside New York City are expected to face eviction each year and we estimate that between 45,000 and 50,000 would be served annually through an eviction right to counsel.
 - Research around the country has repeatedly demonstrated that investing in an eviction UK right to counsel is a good fiscal investment – creating more positive economic impact and cost savings than the cost of providing legal representation.

In addition, I am here to strongly urge that New York State allocate an additional \$2 billion towards the Emergency Rental Assistance Program. As many of you know, nearly all funds have been used or are accounted for. However, we all know there is still a huge need for rent relief assistance. It was estimated recently that over 400,000 households in New York City owe \$1.4 billion in rent alone.

At CASA, our organizers and volunteers door knocked over 75 buildings over in the summer after ERAP's launch. The majority of tenants we talked to were unaware that they could apply for rent relief and utilities assistance. Although we helped connect hundreds of tenants to a case manager or legal service provider for direct 1-on-1 assistance for the rent relief program, many of our CASA members are worse off than when the pandemic first started.

The pandemic is far from over. The economic recovery for the Bronx will take years, if not decades. We have members who lost their life savings or took out credit loans to pay rent only. We have members returning to part-time work, not full-time, at wages less than what they used to make that have now again accumulated rent arrears anywhere from 2-6 months. Our members feel that ERAP and the State has failed them and there is nothing to protect them from eviction. That is why I'm here today to testify in strong support of a fully funded statewide Right to Counsel with at least \$500 million and to fund ERAP at an additional \$2 billion.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify.