

Joint Legislative Budget Hearing on Housing
March 1, 2023

City-Wide Tenant Union of Rochester Testimony on Funding for a Statewide Right to Counsel (S2721/A1493)

City-Wide Tenant Union of Rochester is a proud member of the movement for Statewide Right to Counsel. The City-Wide Tenant Union (CWTU) of Rochester is a grassroots housing justice movement to elevate housing to a human right and secure community control over land and housing by building tenant power and expanding the rights of all tenants.

In 2017, the [Right to Counsel NYC Coalition](#) won the campaign to establish a Right to Counsel for tenants facing eviction in New York City. The coalition is now working with over 100 statewide partners to pass a Right to Counsel for ALL New Yorkers and transform housing court from an “eviction machine” to a place that holds landlords accountable, upholds tenants’ rights, and enables tenants to remain in their homes.

We and other members of the Housing Courts Must Change! campaign collectively represent tens of thousands of tenants across New York State and are honored to be working on permanent and transformative solutions to New York’s eviction crisis. Our statewide Right to Counsel legislation (S2721/A1493), introduced by Assembly Member Latoya Joyner and Senator Rachel May, would ensure that every tenant in New York State has the right to a lawyer when facing an eviction and:

- Covers every tenant across the state, regardless of income.
- Covers any legal proceeding that could result in a tenant losing their home.
- Requires that tenants be represented throughout their entire case, not just when they show up in court. This includes legal advice, advocacy, and assistance.
- Requires the State to contract with non-profit legal services organizations to provide Right to Counsel and with non-profit community based organizations to provide tenants’ rights education and tenant organizing.

New York State’s eviction crisis will only get worse if we don’t enact solutions that strengthen tenants’ rights and empower tenants to fight for their homes. Passing and funding statewide Right to Counsel would do just that. Right to Counsel is proven to prevent displacement – 84 percent of tenants in New York City who had a Right to Counsel lawyer won their case and the seven U.S. cities that passed Right to Counsel as of 2021 have seen up to a 77 percent reduction in evictions. Right to Counsel is critical to upholding ALL tenants’ rights: without an attorney, it’s much harder for tenants to raise available defenses, and ensure all their rights are respected in their homes and in the courts. Finally, we know that keeping people in their homes is vastly less expensive than the state having to pick up care for people who become homeless. In fact, Statewide Right to Counsel will save our state an estimated \$3-6 for every dollar invested!

To comprehensively transform our court system and keep New York tenants in their homes and in New York, we need a fully funded Statewide Right to Counsel. Our [budget proposal](#) lays out the need, in the FY 2024 budget, for \$172 million that will enable the first year of Statewide Right to Counsel’s implementation.

- **~\$152 million for New York’s civil legal services.** The bulk of this funding would cover a significant expansion of representation both within and outside of NYC, as well as a critical expansion of resources to support affirmative, or tenant-initiated cases, outside of NYC. We have also highlighted, in our proposal, funding that should be dedicated to building out NYS’s “attorney pipeline”: the strategies and resources needed to hire, train and retain the next generation of New York’s civil attorneys. New York critically needs this funding because:
 - There are many places in the state where tenants are still largely unrepresented. For example, in the third quarter of 2022, only about 1.3% of tenants in Albany eviction court had an attorney, compared to 92-94% of landlords.
 - Even in localities where tenants have greater access to representation, we are seeing multiple and overlapping significant issues. Attorney caseloads are so high as to be unmanageable, and are contributing to retention challenges. These caseloads, which could be addressed through greater funding and resources, also mean that providers are not always able to use best practices to represent tenants. We need to fund robust and effective representation, as part of eviction defense, but also beyond formal eviction defense. We know that landlords displace tenants through a variety of legal and extralegal means, and yet, in most places in the state, tenants are completely unable to take their landlords to court, to defend against these tactics.
- **~\$14M for community organizing in and outside of NYC, to support Right to Counsel’s implementation.** Community organizing is an essential component of ensuring tenants KNOW about their rights, can use their rights effectively to protect against eviction, and are enabled to fight to protect those rights, something that tenants unfortunately must continuously do as they cannot rely on courts or landlords to uphold their rights. We need funding for community organizing because:

- Right to Counsel has been proven to stop evictions in NYC, but many tenants who are eligible for Right to Counsel don't know about it or are too afraid to use it. When tenants don't know or use their rights, they are more easily harassed in their homes, disenfranchised in the court system, and evicted and displaced. Tenants might decide not to appear in court, decline representation, sign agreements with their landlord's lawyer prior, decide not to ask for repairs in fear of being evicted, or face a variety of other serious consequences.
- The funding we're asking for in areas outside of NYC will enable the hiring of an estimated 42 organizers and 14 supervisors. This funding would have a transformative effect on areas outside of NYC, which often have little to no tenant organizing. Consider the success of funding for NYC organizers: In 1 year, just 4 tenant organizers who were supported by the Right to Counsel NYC Coalition - 1 in the Bronx, Brooklyn, Queens, and Manhattan:
 - Distributed information about RTC to nearly 8,000 people.
 - Conducted outreach to approximately 200 buildings.
 - Conducted 75 Know Your Rights Workshops reaching more than 1,100 tenants.
 - Formed 26 new tenants associations, in which over 700 tenants are active.
 - Stopped harassment in more than 500 households.
 - Helped more than 400 households get repairs.
 - Helped more than 350 tenants apply for a rent reduction
 - Developed approximately 150 tenant leaders
- **~\$6.4M for the Office of Civil Representation.** This new state agency, which the Statewide Right to Counsel bill would create, is critically needed to oversee New York's civil legal services, and implement a Right to Counsel. The agency would collect and publicize data that we don't currently have but that we need, in order to understand the breadth of the housing crisis and respond effectively—such as representation and eviction rates in Town and Village Courts.

We need this funding because when the CWTU-R goes to court with tenants, there are not enough lawyers for everyone to be represented. Lawyers are only there part of the day and when they are not, tenants have to have their case adjourned, call the hotline and come back to court. For people that are facing eviction due to non-payment, often the need to take off work for court again puts an undue burden on the tenant. Tenants win cases and are more likely to bring up habitability issues when they are represented. It's unconscionable that people can lose their home without fully understanding their rights. But Right To Counsel goes beyond just the court cases, it looks to community organizing to transform our ability to prepare and win big for tenants in Rochester and across New York State. Just recently, a tenant in the suburb of Rochester was evicted from her home and Legal Aid and LawNY were unable to provide counsel due to caseload and budget concerns about supporting surrounding areas. If we had the community organizing in addition to lawyers prepared to work with tenants on retaliation and habitability hearings, we would be able to keep people in their homes, create stable and healthy neighborhoods and ensure housing as a human right.

We urge you to support the full funding and passage of Right to Counsel in the budget this year. As a society, we cannot stand by any longer while New Yorkers are forced into a confusing, overwhelming and traumatizing court system without counsel by their side. No one should have to face something as devastating as eviction without even the most basic right to representation. We know that establishing this right will keep New Yorkers in their homes, prevent an array of long-lasting harms to our families and communities, and save our state money. Our state has every reason to pass and fund S2721/A1493 in the budget this year, and we count on your leadership to ensure this happens.

City-Wide Tenant Union of Rochester

