



Safety
Net
Project

Joint Legislative Budget Hearing on Housing
March 1, 2023

**Safety Net Project-Urban Justice Center Testimony on Funding for a Statewide
Right to Counsel (S2721/A1493)**

The Urban Justice Center's Safety Net Project (SNP) is a proud member of the movement for Statewide Right to Counsel.

SNP, an independent project at the Urban Justice Center, advocates for safe and secure housing and fundamental resources like food and cash assistance for exploited and marginalized communities in New York City. For decades, we have combined legal and advocacy services, policy work, and community organizing to advance social and economic justice. SNP believes that safe, affordable housing is a human right and that no human being should lack food, health care, heat, and other necessities for living a dignified life. SNP delivers direct services to address the worst effects of structural inequality - homelessness, lack of income to meet basic needs, housing unaffordability and instability - while also fighting for systemic transformation. We fight evictions as a "right to counsel" legal provider, we ensure tenants obtain critical repairs, and we advocate to ensure access to public benefits. We also provide rapid rehousing services and other advocacy and support services to homeless individuals, including through impact litigation.

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. As NYC right to counsel lawyers and providers of homeless services, at SNP we know the devastating impact evictions have on tenants who are most vulnerable to displacement, in particular low and no-income tenants of color. We are fighting for a statewide Right to Counsel to prevent homelessness and to ensure that all New Yorkers remain housed in their communities, so they can both survive and thrive. Our budget proposal will ensure a meaningful and robust right to counsel initiative that will truly protect tenants and preserve affordable housing, by ensuring high quality legal representation and holistic wrap-around services, as well as attorney retention.

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.

Marika Dias
Managing Director
Safety Net Project – Urban Justice Center