

# LEGAL SERVICES NYC

February 27, 2024

New York State Legislature  
2025 Joint Budget Hearing  
Housing  
[wamchair@nyassembly.gov](mailto:wamchair@nyassembly.gov)  
[financechair@nysenate.gov](mailto:financechair@nysenate.gov)

## TESTIMONY OF LEGAL SERVICES NYC IN SUPPORT OF FUNDING FOR LEGAL SERVICES FOR REPRESENTATION FOR EVICTION

My name is Rosalind Black. I am the Citywide Housing Director at Legal Services NYC. I submit this testimony on behalf of Legal Services NYC in support of funding for Legal Services for Representation for Eviction for New York City, a critical program that supplements NYC's otherwise severely limited eviction defense funding. This funding allows us to provide holistic services that not only avoid evictions but also assist tenants by increasing access to crucial benefits, allowing them to pay arrears and radically improve rent affordability. ***The Governor's proposed budget omits funding for these services in NYC. This program was previously funded at \$10 million for NYC. We are seeking a restoration and increase to \$30 million, which is necessary to sustain and build this important and money-saving program.***

Legal Services NYC ("LSNYC") is the nation's largest provider of free civil legal services to the poor. For more than 50 years, LSNYC has provided expert legal assistance and advocacy to low-income residents of New York City. Each year, LSNYC's neighborhood offices across New York City serve tens of thousands of New Yorkers, including tenants, homeowners, the disabled, immigrants, the elderly, and children.

Since being awarded this funding in October 2023, LSNYC created a revolutionary Housing-Public Benefits Initiative that has been crucial in preserving long-term housing stability for our clients. The funding has allowed LSNYC to expand our eviction prevention work by assisting clients facing eviction with critical public benefits and rent subsidies that prevent eviction, preserve homes, and allow them to afford basic necessities. Under this new program, LSNYC housing and public benefits advocates work together on eviction cases to assess clients for public benefits and rent subsidies that can resolve the eviction and provide the client with financial help. While LSNYC originally received \$10 million in the first year and built our program around that amount, in 2024, LSNYC's

## Demand Justice.

Legal Services NYC | 40 Worth Street, Suite 606, New York, NY 10013  
Phone: 646-442-3600 | Fax: 646-442-3601 | [www.LegalServicesNYC.org](http://www.LegalServicesNYC.org)  
Shervon M. Small, Executive Director | Liza M. Velazquez, Board Chair

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funding was reduced to \$4M when other NYC providers received funding. To restore LSNYC's full program and assist more people in need, we **seek \$10 million for LSNYC and another \$20 million to fund other NYC providers** doing this important work.

Since the program's inception in October 2023 through the end of 2024, LSNYC has handled **7,156 cases**, including **3,406 public benefits assessments**. We handled **1,301 rental arrears assistance cases** (One Shot Deals and charity assistance) and **697 rental subsidy cases** (FHEPS, CityFHEPS, SCRIE/DRIE). In addition, we handled **371 other benefits cases related to housing stability** (e.g. Food Stamps, cash assistance, Medicare Savings Program) which increased household income and thus rent affordability. We went from handling 690 benefits cases in all of 2023 to opening **over a thousand cases every quarter** in 2024 (over a **480% increase**). LSNYC built a **team of over 40 advocates** citywide concentrating their efforts on this initiative. The success of this program is undeniable, both for LSNYC and the thousands of clients we serve. By integrating housing attorneys and public benefits advocates, we approach cases holistically, ensuring that tenants receive the financial and social supports necessary to remain in their homes.

Assessing clients for public benefits is a comprehensive process that requires a careful review of the housing court case, income, household composition, immigration status, and residence type. This critical evaluation enables us to determine the full range of public benefits and rent subsidies for which a client may be eligible. Without legal help, people cannot figure out what benefits they are entitled to, let alone how to successfully secure those benefits. This is money that the legislature has appropriated for people to obtain, but without the assistance that this vital funding provides, people are unable to apply for the benefits that elected representatives like yourselves fought so hard to secure. Hence, these assessments serve as a vital gateway for LSNYC advocates to assist clients with obtaining, retaining, and maintaining public benefits such as Cash Assistance, SNAP, and the Medicare Savings Program and as well as with rental subsidies such as FHEPS, CityFHEPS, SCRIE/DRIE, and emergency assistance grants for arrears.

Prior to this funding, our rent assistance efforts were often limited to securing emergency grants to pay off the arrears and resolve immediate threats of eviction. While these grants were vital, they did not offer clients lasting rent affordability. The current funding has been transformative, enabling us to go beyond crisis intervention. We now proactively assess and secure long-term rent subsidies that ensure housing stability and prevent clients from cycling back into housing court. Additionally, we can ensure clients have public benefits that help them cover basic necessities and alleviate ongoing financial hardship.

Additionally, with this funding we have been able to provide rental assistance directly to tenants through a collaboration with Met Council on Jewish Poverty. Through this partnership, LSNYC allocated \$395,000 for direct rental assistance to our clients, creating a streamlined application and processing system for these funds. Our staff have described this partnership as a game changer, allowing them to resolve cases more efficiently without unnecessary bureaucratic hurdles. This funding has been particularly vital for clients ineligible for other rental assistance due to immigration status, helping them avoid imminent homelessness. The ability to provide these emergency funds has been transformative for our clients.

The life-changing impact of this funding is illustrated in the case of an elderly and disabled client, Ms. H, who was sued in a nonpayment case and faced eviction from her long-time rent-stabilized home. After a stroke led to her hospitalization and incorrect budgeting of her Supplemental Security Income (SSI), Ms. H was unable to afford her rent. When Ms. H was discharged from the hospital, her SSI had been reduced from \$900 to \$35 per month. Ms. H was unrepresented in housing court and stipulated to a judgment against her leading to her owing over \$10,000 by the time she received a warrant of eviction. Ms. H has been navigating this crisis alone, hopelessly advocating with the Social Security Administration to correct her benefits and trying to understand the complex housing court system. In August 2024, after Ms. H filed a motion in a desperate attempt to avoid eviction, she was connected with LSNYC. We swiftly identified that she required the expertise of a public benefits advocate to correct her budget and obtain assistance with the arrears from the Human Resources Administration. As such, our housing attorney and public benefits paralegal worked together to correct the SSI while advocating to secure an emergency One-Shot Deal (OSD). The advocacy paid off and the case was resolved right in late December. As a result, Ms. H's home of 50 years was preserved, and she was able to start the new year without facing the horrors of eviction and homelessness. Further, the advocates will help Ms. H apply for SCRIE to freeze her rent and ensure long-term rent affordability. This case exemplifies the effectiveness of our holistic approach—working together allowed our advocates to navigate various systems and achieve a life-changing resolution that allowed the client to stay in her home and community.

This funding is not just an investment in individual households; it is an investment in the future stability and security of our communities. It empowers families to remain in their homes, avoid eviction, and achieve lasting financial security. We urge the State to increase funding to sustain and expand this critical work, ensuring that more New Yorkers can access the support they need to thrive. By restoring and increasing the funding for this

initiative from \$10 million to \$30 million and LSNYC's share from \$4 million to \$10 million, we can serve even more clients in this holistic matter and build a stronger, more equitable New York for all.

For more information, please contact Rosalind Black at [rblack@lsnyc.org](mailto:rblack@lsnyc.org) or 646-442-3134.