

**TESTIMONY FOR 2025 JOINT LEGISLATIVE BUDGET HEARING ON HOUSING
FEBRUARY 27, 2025**

**TESTIMONY SUBMITTED BY
EUSTACIA SMITH, DIRECTOR OF ADVOCACY,
WEST SIDE FEDERATION FOR SENIOR AND SUPPORTIVE HOUSING**

Thank you for the opportunity to testify on the State Fiscal Year 2025-26 Budget for the Division of Housing and Community Renewal. My name is Eustacia Smith, and I am from West Side Federation for Senior and Supportive Housing, referred to as WSFSSH. For nearly 50 years, WSFSSH has developed and operated low-income housing for older adults and currently houses over 2,500 residents across 21 buildings in Manhattan and The Bronx, with two more in development. With that experience, I can tell you that it is the services that are key to successfully housing residents over time as they age in place. For this reason, I am asking that you fund the Affordable Independent Senior Housing Resident Assistant Program (A.1948/S956.) This program would fund a staff member, called a Resident Assistant to be available in independent affordable senior housing to assist the residents who live there with getting a broad range of services that will enable them to age in place as their needs change over time.

Affordable Senior Housing is designed to support aging independently in the community, even as a person may require more assistance over time as they age, such as a home health aide. However, we have found that there is a missing link.

A Resident Assistant would be available to assist in the complex navigation process of obtaining and maintaining many of the social supports that are designed to keep older adults housed and healthy, that already exist but can be very difficult to access. The services available from the government or the community are often too difficult, particularly in our tech centric world, for many of our seniors to access. Scheduling basic appointments for a doctor, an entitlement or a community service is so often done online.

We have seen that maintaining services needed to age in place is more complex than getting a quick referral. Without the support of a dedicated staff person, often residents give up, leading to a more rapid decline in health wellness. For example, the process of getting the appropriate home health aide services can be lengthy and trigger difficult emotions regarding loss. When someone has spent their entire life cooking for themselves, their children, their grandchildren, it can be difficult to come to terms with the fact that they now need help cooking. A Resident Assistant is someone who, through a trusting relationship, can support a resident through that process.

There has been a lot of data recently on the connection between loneliness and social isolation leading to poor health outcomes and health decline, while social connections promote better health and contribute to longer independent living. Another function of a Resident Assistant would be to provide or arrange for on-site social and wellness programs that can address issues of social isolation so often faced by older adults.

Now is the time for the state to implement a Resident Assistant program. The older adult population is growing and has not yet peaked. A recent Comptroller report shows that while NYC's total population declined by 6.2%, the population of those 65 and older increased by 6.4%. At the same time, long-term care options are shrinking, and we have a workforce crisis. This bill offers a light touch intervention that works towards keeping older adults housed in the community as they age.

We have evidence that this program works. HUD funds a similar program for independent senior housing called a Service Coordinator. However, there is far too little funding for this program and only a small fraction of the buildings that could qualify for it are able to access it. But we know from this program that it works to reduce hospitalizations and reliance on long-term care options such as nursing facilities, which by far cost the state more money.

The Resident Assistant bill is asking for \$10 million to be invested over 5 years, so just \$2 million for this first year. Estimates from Leading Age New York indicated that this amount would roughly provide Medicaid savings of \$6.5 million per year, or \$4.5 million once you account for the \$2 million invested, and would service approximately 1,600 older adults.

Our goal at WSFSH is to assist our residents to remain living independently in the community as they age in place, avoiding more costly institutional environments. We ask that the state assist us and others throughout the state in obtaining that goal by funding the Affordable Independent Senior Housing Resident Assistant Program.