



## **New York State Joint Legislative Budget Hearing on Housing**

### **Testimony of Amy Blumsack, Director of Organizing & Policy, Neighbors Together February 27, 2025**

I would like to thank the Assembly Housing Committee Chair, Assemblymember Rosenthal, and the Ways and Means Committee Chair, Assemblymember Pretlow, as well as the other assembly members on the committees for the opportunity to submit testimony.

My name is Amy Blumsack, and I am the Director of Organizing & Policy at Neighbors Together, a community based organization located in central Brooklyn. Neighbors Together provides hot meals five days per week in our Community Café, offers a range of one-on-one stabilizing services in our Empowerment Program, and engages members in community organizing, policy advocacy and leadership development in our Community Action Program. We serve approximately 120,000 meals to over 12,000 individuals per year. Over the past year alone, we have seen a 63% increase in the number of meals we are serving, and we see new people on the line every day. Our members come to us from across the five boroughs of New York City, with the majority living in central Brooklyn. Nearly 60% of our members are homeless or unstably housed, with a significant number staying in shelters, doubled-up with relatives or friends, and living on the street.

Over the last five to ten years, our members increasingly report that homelessness and lack of affordable housing options are their primary concern. Our data backs the anecdotal evidence we see and hear from our members daily: an increasing number of our members are either living in shelter with vouchers for years at a time, ineligible for a voucher, or unable to find permanent housing due to rampant source of income discrimination and a vacancy rate of under 1% for affordable housing units in New York City.<sup>1</sup> The intense need for housing that is affordable for low-income and extremely low-income New Yorkers was clearly illustrated by the extremely high number of applications for the Section 8 waitlist. When the waitlist reopened for the first time in nearly fifteen years in 2024, over 633,000 applications were submitted in less than a week.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup><https://www.nyc.gov/site/hpd/news/007-24/new-york-city-s-vacancy-rate-reaches-historic-low-1-4-percent-demandin-g-urgent-action-new#/0>

<sup>2</sup><https://nychajournal.nyc/new-nycha-section-8-waitlist-established/#:~:text=In%20total%2C%20NYCHA%20received%20633%2C808,by%20the%20June%2028%20deadline.>



# Neighbors Together

The housing and homelessness crisis that Neighbors Together members are experiencing is due to a confluence of short-sighted policy and inadequate financial investment by New York State. According to a recent report by the New York State Comptroller, Thomas DiNapoli, in the last two years alone, homelessness in New York has doubled. From January 2023 to January 2024, homelessness increased by 53%, a rate four times higher than the rest of the nation. And while many would like to misconstrue this as a downstate or New York City problem, the fact is that homelessness has risen across New York State. Three out of the top four Continuum of Care regions with the highest increases in homelessness are in areas outside of New York City.<sup>3</sup>

Although inflation and the cost of living has increased significantly over the last few years, the shelter allowance has remained essentially flat over the last few decades, leaving more and more low income New Yorkers with either unsafe or unacceptable options for a roof over their heads. Currently, the vouchers that are available to people living in New York City are not meeting the need for a multitude of reasons. With the extremely low vacancy rate, the majority of voucher holders are concentrated in just a few of New York City's neighborhoods in the Bronx and Brooklyn,<sup>4</sup> forcing people who need rental assistance to move to far flung areas away from their support systems, jobs, healthcare, and schools, while increasing their transportation costs. The few apartments they can access with their vouchers are kept in substandard conditions and are not appropriately maintained.

Time and again we have seen people fall back into homelessness because although they may have been one of the lucky few to find housing with a voucher, their lease wasn't renewed or their rent was raised beyond their voucher payment standards. In some cases, the conditions in their apartments were so bad, or the harassment from their landlord was so intense, that they were forced to self-evict. Some vouchers create an untenable benefits cliff for its recipients: FHEPS vouchers, while a lifeline for families in dangerous situations or at risk of eviction, have such a low income limit that recipients are forced to choose between working and advancing in their career, or keeping their housing voucher and a roof over their head.

One particularly damning statistic from Comptroller Napoli's report is that child homelessness in New York State has more than doubled, up from "20,299 in 2022 to 50,773 in 2024. Almost one in three of New York's homeless are children, one of the highest shares in the nation."<sup>5</sup> Governor Hochul created the Childhood Poverty Reduction Advisory Council (CPRAC) as an acknowledgement of the increasing poverty levels in families with children, and tasked CPRAC

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<sup>3</sup> <https://www.osc.ny.gov/files/reports/pdf/new-yorkers-in-need-homelessness-nys.pdf>

<sup>4</sup> <https://citylimits.org/2025/02/05/nyc-voucher-households-are-concentrated-in-a-handful-of-neighborhoods-data-shows/>

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.osc.ny.gov/press/releases/2025/01/dinapoli-numbers-homeless-population-doubled-new-york>



# Neighbors Together

with finding recommendations for ways to reduce childhood poverty. In each of its proposed packages of policy solutions, CPRAC highlights the need for rental assistance, saying “Data indicates that housing assistance to help renters afford apartments at Fair Market Rent level also plays an important role in alleviating high cost of living and reducing poverty in New York,” and acknowledges that the current level of assistance that is available is “not sufficient to meet the need.”<sup>6</sup>

To meet the need created by the housing crisis across New York State, and existing vouchers with narrow eligibility requirements, the New York State legislature should pass and fully fund the **Housing Access Voucher Program (HAVP) (S72/A1704)**. The Housing Access Voucher Program is a statewide rental subsidy for low-income families and individuals facing eviction, currently homeless, or facing loss of housing due to domestic violence or hazardous living conditions, that would pay 100% of fair market rent. It would be targeted to both people on Social Security and public assistance, and 50% of the program would be dedicated to families experiencing homelessness. Given the current homelessness crisis in New York State, and HAVP’s strong support in the legislature, it is critical that the Housing Access Voucher Program be passed and fully funded at \$250 million in the fiscal year 2026 budget.

**The Tenant Opportunity to Purchase Act (TOPA) (S401)**, would give tenant associations and qualified nonprofits a first opportunity to purchase multifamily buildings when landlords sell. TOPA is modeled on similar policies that have created and preserved thousands of affordable homes in Washington, D.C., San Francisco, and other jurisdictions. Paired with acquisition funding and technical assistance, TOPA creates pathways to truly affordable housing and resident control. TOPA prevents speculation by big real estate and predatory vulture funds, and will help stem the community displacement due to rising rents. The Tenant Opportunity to Purchase Act must be passed this year, and fully funded at \$250 million annually to help support acquisitions and technical assistance.

In the same vein of protecting working class and low-income New Yorkers from predatory real estate speculation, the **Social Housing Development Authority (Cleare/Gallagher)** would allow New York State to build and/or preserve housing that would be permanently affordable for the middle class to those with low or no income. Tenants in SHDA-financed buildings would pay just 25% of their income in rent, transforming a broken affordability system that has kept many low-income New Yorkers in poverty. Governed by tenants, labor unions, and technical assistance providers, the SHDA could also acquire and rehabilitate housing in disrepair, enhancing the code enforcement efforts of cash-strapped municipalities.

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<sup>6</sup> <https://otda.ny.gov/cprac/reports/CPRAC-2024-Recommendations-and-Progress-Report.pdf>



# Neighbors Together

As rents and homelessness continue to increase throughout the state of New York, localities outside of New York City need mechanisms to help preserve affordable housing and protect communities from eviction. To this end, the newly introduced **Rent Emergency Stabilization for Tenants Act (S4659/A4877)** will enable local governments outside of New York City to more easily opt-in to rent stabilization by modernizing the Emergency Tenant Protection Act (ETPA; 1974, 2019). The REST Act has the potential to keep hundreds of thousands of tenants in their homes, and to stabilize communities across New York State. The New York State Legislature should pass this critical piece of legislation this year.

The bills listed above are critical to ensuring that New Yorkers are able to become and/or remain stably housed. However, the State Legislature must remain vigilant against the erosion of the gains won by the **Housing Stability and Tenant Protection Act of 2019**. Renters make up nearly 69% of New York City's population, and approximately half of those are rent-stabilized tenants. In order to meaningfully address the housing affordability and homelessness crisis across the state, the legislature must continue to guard tenant protections as it works to pass further legislation to stabilize communities' housing stock.

Neighbors Together is grateful to the New York State Assembly Housing Committee and the Ways and Means Committee for holding this joint hearing. In order to address the unprecedented housing and homelessness crisis that New York State is facing, the state legislature must take action to both lift people out homelessness and to stop the flow of people into homelessness.

The legislature can do exactly that by:

- Passing and fully funding the Housing Access Voucher Program (S72/A1704)
- Passing and fully funding the Tenant Opportunity to Purchase Act (S401)
- Passing and fully funding the Social Housing Development Authority bill (Gallagher/Cleare)
- Passing and fully funding the Rent Emergency Stabilization for Tenants Act (S4659/A4877)
- Protecting the Home Stability and Tenant Protection Act of 2019

Thank you for your time and consideration. For further questions regarding this testimony, please contact Amy Blumsack, Director of Organizing and Policy at Neighbors Together at [amy@neighborstogether.org](mailto:amy@neighborstogether.org).