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New York State Legislature
2026 Joint Budget Hearing on Housing

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**TESTIMONY OF LEGAL SERVICES NYC
IN SUPPORT OF FUNDING FOR
LEGAL SERVICES FOR NEW YORK CITY EVICTION PREVENTION**

My name is Rita Vega. I am the Citywide Deputy Director of the Housing-Benefits Initiative 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 prevent evictions, but also radically improve tenant stability and rent affordability by increasing access to crucial benefits. ***The Governor's proposed budget omits funding for these services in NYC. LSNYC seeks \$10M in funding; which would restore us to the initial funding we received in 2023 and would be an increase from the \$5.3 million received last year. Increased funding is necessary to maintain and expand the transformative program that we have created. We also support an award of \$20M for the other NYC providers.***

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 novel program, LSNYC housing and public benefits advocates work together on eviction cases, assess clients for public benefits and rent subsidies to provide them with financial assistance and resolve eviction cases, thereby stabilizing the household and decreasing future risks of homelessness. While LSNYC originally received \$10 million in the first year and built our program around that amount, in 2024, LSNYC's funding was reduced to \$4M when other NYC providers also received funding. We received \$5.3 million in 2025, which was greatly appreciated and allowed

us to continue with the program. However, to maintain LSNYC's program and grow the services by other providers, we seek a **restoration of \$10 million for LSNYC and another \$20 million to fund other NYC providers** doing this life changing work.

Since the program's inception in October 2023, LSNYC has handled **more than 15,000 cases** and **served 26,186 clients and their family members**. We have **engaged in nearly 8,000 public benefits assessments**. We have handled **nearly 3,000 rental arrears assistance cases** (One Shot Deals and charity assistance) and **over 1,450 rental subsidy cases** (FHEPS, CityFHEPS, SCRIE/DRIE). In addition, we have handled **over 700 other benefits cases related to housing stability** (e.g. Food Stamps, cash assistance, Medicare Savings Program) which have increased household income and thus rent affordability. We went from opening less than 700 benefits cases in all of 2023, before the program commenced, to opening **more than double that amount every quarter**. LSNYC has built a **team of over 40 advocates** citywide concentrating their efforts on this initiative. For every \$1 spent on legal services work, we returned approximately \$2.00 back to our clients in benefits. Overall, we have obtained **over \$30 million in arrears, subsidies, and other benefits** for clients. The success of this program is clearly 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 which benefits they are entitled to, let alone how to successfully secure those benefits. This is money that the legislature 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. 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 \$840,614 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 who are ineligible for other rental assistance due to immigration status, helping them avoid imminent homelessness. The ability to provide these emergency funds has been revolutionary for our clients.

The life-changing impact of this funding is illustrated in the case of a Staten Island family with young children, who were at serious risk of eviction after being sued for nonpayment of rent. Client RC fell into arrears when her FHEPS subsidy was terminated due to a change in her household composition; as a result, arrears accrued to over \$30,000. Client RC and her family were surviving on only Cash Assistance and \$874 monthly in survivor's benefits for her two youngest children. Without a subsidy, RC's longtime home was entirely unaffordable. Since Client RC's adult child returned to her household along with her own infant child, we identified that the family was again eligible for FHEPS and applied for the subsidy and rental arrears assistance on their behalf. Timing became crucial when the family was scheduled for eviction. We successfully extended the eviction deadline while the FHEPS application was pending. Soon thereafter, our FHEPS application was approved, and Client RC obtained assistance with the arrears. Client RC and her family now remain securely at home with the subsidy that makes their ongoing rent affordable.

This funding is not just an investment in individual households like RC's, 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 \$13.3 million to \$30 million and increasing LSNYC's share from \$5.3 million to \$10 million, we can serve even more clients through this holistic approach and build a stronger, more equitable New York for all.

For more information, please contact Rita Vega at rvega@lsnyc.org or 646-442-3632.