

**Joint Legislative Budget Hearing on Housing**  
**February 25, 2026**



**Right to Counsel Coalition Testimony on the Urgent Need to  
Fund and Pass Statewide Right to Counsel (S6772 / A4669)**

Good afternoon, and thank you for the opportunity to testify today. My name is Malika Conner and I'm the Director of the Right to Counsel Coalition, a statewide coalition of tenants, organizers, advocates, and legal services organizations fighting for an eviction-free New York. After winning the nation's first Right to Counsel law for tenants facing eviction in New York City in 2017, we launched the Housing Courts Must Change! campaign to dismantle the eviction machine, hold landlords accountable, and transform housing courts into places where tenants' rights are upheld and people can stay in their homes.

New Yorkers have endured an eviction crisis for decades – and without state action, it will only worsen. With more than **175,000 active eviction cases** statewide, nearly **160,000 people experiencing homelessness**, and hundreds of thousands more at risk, evictions continue to displace families and destabilize communities every day. Evictions are not a product of individual failure – they are the result of policy choices that prioritize landlord profit over people's right to a home. They are enforced through a court system that primarily functions as a debt collection agency for landlords and that prioritizes removing tenants rather than protecting them.

This crisis disproportionately impacts **Black renters, women, and households with children, who make up nearly 40% of those facing eviction.** From January 1, 2020 through December 31, 2025, landlords sued nearly 850,000 households for eviction. In 2025 alone, landlords sued more than 164,000 households. The scale of this crisis is staggering.

The eviction crisis is not inevitable – it is the result of political choices that have real human consequences. And New York can choose differently. Our Coalition has developed proven solutions to protect tenants and transform the court system. Through organizing and by enacting a statewide Right to Counsel (S6772 Jackson / A4669 Solages), the Clean Hands Act (S4098 Parker / A1621 Rosenthal), and a Winter Eviction Moratorium (S9090 Brisport / A10121 Kelles), we can address this crisis. With these laws in place, New York can dramatically reduce evictions, prevent displacement, ensure habitable homes, and save lives. These bills go hand in hand to address the eviction crisis and change the courts.

In particular, the Clean Hands Act, which has no fiscal impact, would work in tandem with Right to Counsel. The Clean Hands Act would stop landlords from suing tenants for eviction when housing violations exist in the tenant's apartment or building. It makes clear that landlords cannot ignore unsafe conditions and still use the courts to collect rent and displace tenants. Poor housing conditions go hand in hand with eviction. Rather than make repairs, landlords often choose to evict tenants. Our court system enables this: Eviction cases move far faster than code enforcement, making it easier to remove tenants than to make repairs. The system prioritizes displacement over accountability. With Clean Hands and a universal Right to Counsel in place, we will see fewer eviction cases being brought – and therefore make Right to Counsel even less costly over time.

Right to Counsel has already proven its impact. Following passage of New York City's law in 2017, at least 84% of tenants represented by a Right to Counsel lawyer were able to remain in their homes. Citywide, evictions dropped by nearly 40%, landlord filings dropped by 30%, and default judgments fell by more than 30%. But since January 2022, the state court system has failed to uphold New York City's Right to Counsel law, prioritizing clearing court dockets over enforcing tenants' legal rights. As a result, more than 110,000 tenants – and counting – have faced eviction without an attorney. The denial of tenants' Right to Counsel in New York City is ultimately an enforcement issue. Courts must move tenants' cases forward only when an attorney is available to take their case. Because the courts are state-run, only state legislation can hold the courts accountable and ensure full enforcement. Statewide Right to Counsel is critical for New York City tenants as well.

Outside New York City, tenants only recently gained the ability to sue landlords for poor housing conditions through the Tenant Dignity and Safe Housing Act. However, tenants need legal representation to effectively bring and win these cases. Without attorneys, these cases cannot be pursued at the scale or scope necessary to hold landlords accountable, leaving many tenants living in unsafe conditions or facing harassment

Since 2021, the Governor has invested in eviction legal defense statewide. While this is an important step, funding alone is not the same as a universal Right to Counsel. To stop displacement and keep New Yorkers in their homes, **New York State must pass Statewide Right to Counsel (S6772 Jackson / A4669 Solages) and include \$260 million in the Fiscal Year 2027 budget.**

Funding Statewide Right to Counsel with \$260 million is the first critical step toward transforming the lives of tenants, the court system, and civil legal services. At full implementation and with full funding, Statewide Right to Counsel will enable:

- Expansion of civil legal services statewide, ensuring all tenants have guaranteed counsel in every type of case that could lead to eviction or displacement.
- A comprehensive model of legal advocacy adopted by legal services providers implementing Right to Counsel statewide, supporting tenants before, during, and after court and focusing on long-term housing stability.
- An expansion of community organizing support and resources for New York State tenants.
- Improved workplace conditions for civil legal services providers, including competitive pay and manageable caseloads.
- And creation of the Office of Civil Representation, a new state agency to oversee implementation and accountability.

In 2024, Statewide Right to Counsel was successfully included in both the Senate and Assembly one-house budgets – an important step toward fully institutionalizing and funding the policy. With the Assembly, for example, including \$10 million to establish the Office of Civil Representation and \$50 million in OTDA funding for eviction legal defense, and the Senate similarly proposing funding for the Office and expanded eviction defense statewide, the Legislature demonstrated unprecedented momentum behind this policy. While the Governor ultimately did not include funding to establish the Office of Civil Representation – the entity that would administer Right to Counsel – in the final enacted budget, the inclusion of Right to Counsel in both legislative one-house budgets represented unprecedented support and momentum. We remain deeply committed and optimistic about securing a Statewide Right to Counsel this year and will continue building the power, infrastructure, and legislative support necessary to win.

The time to act is now, and we urge the Legislature and the Governor to prioritize this proven tenant protection this year: Include \$260 million in the Fiscal Year 2027 budget and pass and sign Statewide Right to Counsel into law.