

Tenants & Neighbors

Testimony as Prepared

Joint Legislative Public Hearing on 2026 Executive Budget Proposal: Housing

Thank you to Majority Leader Stewart-Cousins, Senate Housing Committee Chair Kavanagh, Speaker Heastie, and Assembly Housing Committee Chair Rosenthal for holding this very important hearing. We welcome the opportunity to submit testimony on behalf of New York State Tenants & Neighbors concerning fiscal priorities for the coming year in the area of housing. We are eager to continue working with the Committees to ensure that New Yorkers across the state have access to secure and affordable housing amidst the rapidly rising cost of living and austerity measures from the federal government.

New York State Tenants & Neighbors Information Service and the New York State Tenants & Neighbors Coalition are two affiliate organizations united by a common mission: to empower and educate tenants; preserve affordable housing and diverse neighborhoods; and strengthen tenant protections across New York. We organize tenants in rent-regulated and subsidized housing who are at risk of displacement or losing affordable housing.

Tenants & Neighbors has been a strong supporter of the Senior Citizens Rent Increase Exemption (SCRIE) and Disability Rent Increase Exemption (DRIE) programs since their inception. We fought for both the original SCRIE law in 1970 and its necessary expansion, DRIE, in the 2000s. We have remained steadfast in our commitment to protect the most vulnerable New Yorkers. These programs have kept tens of thousands of our most vulnerable community members in their homes, but they need reforms to fully live up to their promise.

First, the Legislature must raise the income cap from \$50,000 to \$75,000, and index it to COLA (S1475A/A5344). If the income threshold is not indexed to COLA thereafter, tenants will continue to lose eligibility every year as rents and basic expenses rise, the state will need to continually update legislation while more low-income people are pushed toward displacement. This change is long overdue for seniors and tenants with disabilities who are struggling to keep up with rising rents and the cost of living, which have risen dramatically since 2014, when the

programs were last updated.

Second, the rent freeze itself must reflect true affordability. Under the current system, a tenant's rent is frozen at the legal regulated rent at the time of application—without any consideration of whether that rent is actually affordable. S451A/A7729 must be passed, allowing municipalities to freeze rents at one-third of household incomes, ensuring genuine affordability and housing stability.

Third, the programs remain deeply underutilized; only 42% of eligible households are enrolled.¹ In our organizing work, we consistently meet tenants—especially non-English speakers—who have never heard of SCRIE or DRIE, even though they qualify. Others only find out about the programs when they are already in crisis facing eviction or unmanageable rent arrears. These situations could be prevented through S561/A1863, which would require proactive notices to households about SCRIE/DRIE eligibility, and S5280/A824, which would require municipalities to provide language access services for the programs.

Finally, we urge adoption of reforms that exclude Medicare premiums, Veterans' Disability benefits, and Workers' Compensation from income calculations (A72A). This aligns SCRIE/DRIE with federal benefit standards and provides a fairer assessment of tenants' true income.

It is essential that we strengthen the programs that keep seniors and people with disabilities in their homes. SCRIE and DRIE are lifelines for thousands of New Yorkers, and these reforms will ensure that they remain effective, accessible, and just.

We urge the Legislature to firmly defend rent stabilization amidst attacks by the real estate industry. Rent regulation remains one of the most effective tools for preserving affordable housing and maintaining stable, diverse communities. Any weakening of rent stabilization and the Housing Stability and Tenant Protection Act of 2019 would accelerate displacement, reward speculative behavior, and undermine decades of tenant protection progress. Protecting rent stabilization also requires adequate funding for enforcement and tenant education so that the laws are firmly upheld in practice.

¹ https://www.nyc.gov/assets/rentfreeze/downloads/pdf/2025-scrie_drie_report.pdf

Tenants & Neighbors also strongly supports passage of the REST Act as a necessary response to the statewide nature of today's housing emergency. More and more communities are experiencing rapid rent increases and speculative pressure without having the legal authority to respond. The REST Act would empower municipalities to protect tenants by acting before displacement becomes irreversible.

At the same time, the state must recognize that rent regulation alone is not enough to address the depth of housing insecurity facing extremely low-income New Yorkers. The Housing Access Voucher Program is a critical tool for stabilizing households that are otherwise at imminent risk of homelessness, yet it has not been funded at a scale that reflects the need. Fully funding HAVP would allow tenants to remain in their communities, help families exit shelters more quickly, and reduce the long-term social and fiscal costs of homelessness. For many of the tenants we work with, a voucher would mean the difference between stability and repeated housing crises.

Tenants & Neighbors believes that housing stability is a public good and that New Yorkers deserve policies that prioritize their ability to remain in their homes with dignity. The 2026 Executive Budget presents a critical opportunity to reaffirm New York State's commitment to affordability by strengthening SCRIE and DRIE, defending rent stabilization, passing the REST Act, and fully funding HAVP. We urge the Legislature to act decisively to keep New Yorkers housed and communities intact.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify and for your continued commitment to housing affordability and stability for all New Yorkers.

Respectfully submitted,
Tenants & Neighbors

Genesis Aquino, Executive Director: gaquino@tandn.org
Rebecca Nicol, Communications Manager; rnicol@tandn.org