



Testimony of Juan Diaz
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Citizens' Committee for Children of New York
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Citizens' Committee for Children of New York is a 79-year-old independent, multi-issue child advocacy organization. CCC does not accept or receive public resources, provide direct services, nor represent a sector or workforce; our priority is improving outcomes for children and families through research and advocacy. We document the facts, engage, and mobilize New Yorkers, and advocate for solutions to ensure that every New York child is healthy, housed, educated, and safe.

CCC is also a co-convenor of the Family Homelessness Coalition, a coalition of 20 organizations representing service and housing providers and children's advocacy organizations united by the goal of launching a coordinated, collaborative, multi-agency effort focused on preventing family homelessness, improving the well-being of children and families in shelters, and supporting the long-term housing stability of families with children who leave shelter.

Thank you Chair Sanchez and all the members of the Committee on Housing and Buildings for holding today's important hearing. Below, I provide recommendations related to improving housing stability for families with children, highlighting the importance of ensuring sufficient funding in the FY 2023-24 to address citywide staffing shortages and the urgent need to address rental arrears assistance, affordable housing shortages, and CityFHEPS access and expansion.

Housing Insecurity in New York City

The City is facing a severe housing affordability crises, without adequate alternatives to mitigate this public issue that disproportionately affect families with children of color. Rising rent and basic needs costs, administrative backlogs, and lack of reforms to accelerate relocation to affordable housing and to preserve affordable units have all contributed to thousands of evictions, pending rental arrears, and housing court cases. Since the end of the eviction moratorium in January 2022, thousands of families with children have been evicted and entered the already strained DHS-shelter system. The housing insecurity that low-income families in New York City face is exacerbated by the high housing cost of housing, which is 358% higher than the national average cost.ⁱ

Vacancies at Social Services and Housing Assistance Agencies

CCC and citywide advocacy organizations are deeply concerned with the Mayor's announcement of austerity measures that would impact staff vacancies at essential human services agencies citywide. Overall, the Preliminary Executive Budget outlines PEG reductions across agencies amount to \$340.6 million in FY24, rising to \$2 billion when combined with reductions in the November Budget Modification. Within key social service and housing

assistance agencies, the following PEG amounts in the Preliminary Budget are due to vacancy reductions:

- **DSS: \$20,274,000 for vacancy reductions in FY24 and outyears**
- **DHS \$4,270,000 for vacancy reductions in FY24 and outyears**
- **DYCD: \$2,308,000 for vacancy reductions in FY24 and outyears**
- **HPD: \$1,355,000 for vacancy reductions in FY24 and outyears**

The proposed staff reductions will further exacerbate housing insecurity among the city's most vulnerable families, who are already suffering from severe delays in accessing cash assistance, food support, and housing assistance in a timely manner due to understaffing at HRA. CCC strongly supports City Council Speaker Adams' call for legislation to remove the bureaucratic inefficiencies that block access to housing rental arrears and vouchers assistance. **We urge the City Council to not only oppose staffing reductions, but to advocate that the city provide the resources and support necessary to fill existing vacancies quickly.**

Funding for Rental Assistance

Emergency rental assistance provides households at risk of eviction with immediate one-time support that alleviates the suffering that comes with the risk of eviction and subsequent homelessness. In New York City, there are currently over 200,000 pending housing court cases that are mostly related to rental arrears.ⁱⁱ Moreover, it is estimated that the total amount of rental arrears at affordable housing units amount to over \$145 million,ⁱⁱⁱ and NYCHA rental arrears total amounts to over \$443 million.^{iv} Close to \$600 million in rental arrears assistance is needed to prevent a further larger number of families from experiencing homelessness and the emotional and socio-economic impact that it has on children. With uncertain Federal and State rental assistance on sight, we urge the City Administration to create a plan to address the rental arrears crisis.

CCC strongly supports the following rental assistance funding in FY2024:

- **Restore and enhance \$118.5 million for rental arrears assistance included in FY2023.** As mentioned above, the amount of rental arrears funding needed to cover the estimated amount owed by low-income households is far greater than what was included in FY2023. As such, the City Administration should prioritize additional rental assistance funding and actively advocate at the Federal and State levels for emergency funding assistance.
- **Enhance Homebase rental assistance.** Homebase are neighborhood-based programs administered by non-profit organizations and funded by Federal grants and the Human Resources Administration. These programs provide emergency rental arrears assistance for households that are experiencing potential housing eviction. Because of its proximity and knowledge of low-income communities, Homebase can provide immediate rental assistance so families with children can avoid the complicated process at HRA offices when requesting rental assistance. In recent public hearings and media outlets, elected government officials and advocates have shared their concern over Homebase's severe understaff and underfunding issues. Therefore, we urge the City Administration to

evaluate the importance of Homebase in preventing homelessness and enhance funding so more families with children could access emergency rental arrears assistance and stay in their homes.

Enforce and Fund Access for Affordable Housing

Insufficient affordable housing stock in New York City prevents thousands of low- and moderate-income families with children from securing housing and economic security. We welcome the Mayor's Executive Budget inclusion of funding for Housing Blueprint initiatives, which include \$17.29 million in FY24, \$16.87 million in FY25, and \$21.47 million in outyears. Enhanced funding would allow the Housing Preservation and Development department to support home down payments, expand enforcement against tenant harassment, and loans for home repairs. CCC also supports Speaker Adams proposals to increase affordable housing development by creating legislation to modify zoning codes, and to allow more households to access affordable housing by increasing the income limits to qualify. **All these proposals are positive steps to increase the stock of affordable housing in New York City. However, enhanced funding and enforcement of existing program regulations need to be prioritized in FY2024.**

- **Restore funding reductions for HPD supportive housing realignment that were made in the November budget modification by including \$5 million in FY24, \$2.5 million in FY25, and \$1.2 million in FY26.** In New York City, domestic violence is the leading cause of homelessness for families with children. Supportive housing offers an alternative for families that have experienced trauma and housing displacement. Victims of domestic violence receive essential ongoing services that provide social, economic, housing stability in times of recovery from abuse. Therefore, we urge the City Administration to expand supportive housing funding in FY2024.
- **Enforce the compliance of unit vacancies reduction and repairs at NYCHA.** Interagency support and accountability are imperative to address the considerable number of vacant apartments at NYCHA throughout the city. In January 2022, NYCHA had 486 units considered vacant and available for relocation, however, there are currently close to 6,000 vacant apartments, a 640% increase. Moreover, nearly 1,000 other units have been taken off the list of apartments considered rentable because they need such significant repairs.^v With a shelter population at an all-time high and tens of thousands of children suffering from unstable housing, the City Administration must work together with NYCHA to rapidly make these units available for low-income households.
- **Ensure that existing affordable housing is made available to low-income households.** The Housing Stability and Tenant Protection Act was enacted in 2019 to implement tenant protections including protecting tenants from unlawful evictions and income discrimination and ensuring that landlords make rental apartments available in a reasonable amount of time. Yet it is estimated that over 20,000 affordable apartments remain vacant due to either slow or no action from landlords to make these apartments available.^{vi} We urge the City Administration to coordinate interagency communication

and efforts so that tens of thousands of households facing housing insecurity across the city have

Improve Access to CityFHEPS

Recently proposed reforms to increase access to CityFHEPS assistance are imperative to accelerate the relocation process of families with children to affordable housing, secure housing stability in the community and reduce unnecessary shelter costs. **We urge the City Council to prioritize funding City FHEPs and to pass legislation to remove several restrictions that prevent -expeditious access to the critical housing assistance.**

- **Eliminate the 90-day waiting period for CityFHEPS eligibility (Int 0878 by Sanchez, Ayala, Hanif, Bottcher & Won).** A key strategy for improving families with children's access to CityFHEPS housing eligibility is to eliminate or modify the 90-day shelter stay rule that requires individuals and families to be in shelter for 90 days before becoming eligible for CityFHEPS. We urge you to continue your support for eliminating this illogical and costly administrative rule.

- **Permit accepting a rent-demand letter from landlords instead of a housing court eviction to qualify for CityFHEPS (Intro 2864 by Sanchez).** This eligibility requirement was temporarily implemented during the pandemic, and it helped many families prevent eviction. This change should be made permanent.

- **Remove the requirement that individuals must have had a shelter stay before qualifying for CityFHEPS (Intro 2862 by Ayala).** Residing in shelters can create a harmful environment for children and affects their educational development, among other areas. Additionally, providing CityFHEPS assistance while in the community instead of requiring shelter entry would save the City hundreds of millions of dollars.

- **Require HRA to designate housing specialists within all temporary shelters and to submit an annual report on housing specialists (Intro 0124 by Salamanca Jr.).** Advocates and shelter residents have expressed concerns over the lack of housing specialists to help them find apartments and to inspect apartments in a timely manner.

- **Make youth categorically eligible for CityFHEPS vouchers.** Youth experiencing homelessness in both DYCD-funded Runaway and Homeless Youth and those youth transitioning out of ACS care should be made categorically eligible for CityFHEPS vouchers without first having to enter a DHS shelter. This will prevent young people from unnecessarily entering shelter, make vouchers easier to access, and support the Administration's goals of eliminating youth homelessness.

- **Expand CityFHEPS eligibility to undocumented families.** Currently, only applicants with a valid social security number qualify. This leaves mixed-status families at a disadvantage as their CityFHEPS voucher only covers a portion of the rent for qualifying individuals.

- **Expand CityFHEPS eligibility to families and individuals that enter city shelters through pathways other than just DHS.** This should include HPD, domestic violence and runaway

youth, who currently are ineligible for CityFHEPS unless they enter the system through DHS. While in the DHS shelter system, individuals and families staying in shelters other than DHS must remain 90 days before they qualify for CityFHEPS assistance. This unnecessary use of City resources could be allocated to supporting families to find suitable housing.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify and your advocacy efforts in improving the housing stability of New York City families.

ⁱ Cost of Living in New York City. Payscale website. 2023. <https://www.payscale.com/cost-of-livingcalculator/New-York-New-York>

ⁱⁱ NYC Eviction Tracker. "New York City Eviction Cases". Eviction Lab. March 2023. Retrieved from: <https://evictionlab.org/eviction-tracking/new-york-ny/>

ⁱⁱⁱ Greg B. Smith. "NYCHA Rent Bailout Proposed for State Budget, With \$466 Million Owed". The City. March 13, 2023. Retrieved from: <https://www.thecity.nyc/2023/3/13/23638854/nycha-rent-bailout-erap-new-york>

^{iv} Janaki Chadha and Danielle Muodio Dunn. "NYC's affordable housing struggles with rent arrears". Politico. March 13, 2023. Retrieved from: <https://www.politico.com/weekly-new-york-real-estate-infrastructure/2023/03/13/nycs-affordable-housing-struggles-with-rent-arrears-00086639#:~:text=Beat%20Memo&text=Affordable%20housing%20buildings%20across%20the,nonprofit%20New%20York%20Housing%20Conference>.

^v Ari Ephraim Feldman. "Vacant NYCHA units jumped more than 600% in a year, stranding residents". Spectrum News 1. February 22, 2023. Retrieved from: <https://www.nyl.com/nyc/all-boroughs/politics/2023/02/22/vacant-nycha-units-jumped-more-than-600--in-a-year--stranding-residents>

^{vi} Jay Martin. "There are 20,000 affordable empty apartments in NYC — let's get them unlocked". AMNY. April 27, 2022. Retrieved from: <https://www.amny.com/opinion/op-ed-there-are-20000-affordable-empty-apartments-in-nyc-lets-get-them-unlocked/>