



**Written Testimony submitted on behalf of the
Legal Services Access Alliance**

Presented to

New York State Senate Finance Committee

and

Assembly Ways and Means Committee

2024 Joint Budget Hearing on Housing

Wednesday, February 14, 2024

Submitted by:
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Good afternoon Senator Krueger and Assemblymember Weinstein, Senator Kavanagh, Assemblymember Rosenthal, and members of the Legislature and staff here today. Thank you for the opportunity to submit comments regarding Governor Hochul's Fiscal Year 2024-2025 Executive Budget as it pertains to Housing.

My name is Erica Zimny and I am a Deputy Director of the Legal Aid Society of Northeastern New York (LASNNY). Our Executive Director at LASNNY is Nic Rangel, and she is a board member of the Legal Services Access Alliance.

The Legal Services Access Alliance represents the seven largest providers of free civil legal services outside of New York City and includes Neighborhood Legal Services, Legal Assistance of Western New York, Legal Services of Central New York, Legal Aid Society of Mid-New York, the Legal Aid Society of Northeastern New York, Legal Services of Hudson Valley, and Nassau Suffolk Law Services.

We collectively serve every county outside of New York City and employ nearly 1,000 legal services workers. We have two main budget requests we would like to present to the Committee for consideration.

1. Continue Support for Legal Services for Evictions

We are grateful for Governor Hochul's continued support of \$35 million in funding in the Executive Budget for the Legal Representation for Eviction Services Program. This program is also commonly referred to as the Eviction Defense and Housing Stability Program, and was created to provide legal services and representation for eviction cases outside of New York City. Last year, the Legislature appropriated an additional \$15 million to further expand this program to NYC and other areas throughout New York, for which we and our partners are incredibly appreciative.

The Office for Temporary and Disability Assistance (OTDA) administers this program and this funding has been critical to assisting struggling New Yorkers. OTDA, with expertise in providing services to those with housing

instability, has been an excellent partner in implementing this program and serving the public. With this State support, the Alliance members and partner organizations have helped countless individuals navigate through their eviction crisis.

This funding has been transformative for eviction services in New York. With this State investment, all the Alliance members and subcontracting partners' eviction programs have grown, as has the number of staff who can provide these legal services throughout New York. We have increased the network of eviction legal services and expanded representation in underserved areas, including city, town and village courts in our rural counties, and all other underserved tenants.

Additionally, the Alliance is continuing to develop our partnerships with local law schools to recruit and train new lawyers, which will help to create a diverse and robust pipeline of civil legal service providers in New York. We have also hosted several statewide training programs, attended by hundreds of legal services attorneys, to help build out best practices in providing eviction representation in New York.

Lastly, with this State support, Alliance members have obtained a federal Technology Initiative Grant to develop a statewide intake portal to increase access to legal representation for tenants. We have also created a toll-free hotline that tenants can call to be directed to the appropriate legal services provider in their area.

Members of the Alliance serve the most vulnerable New Yorkers in urban, suburban and rural communities. Working with our local partners in each of our catchment areas, we are doing what we can to lay a strong foundation and create the network infrastructure for an eventual statewide right to counsel in landlord/tenant matters.

There is much more work to be done and the Alliance and our subcontracting partners look forward to working with the NYS Legislature, Governor Hochul and the Office for Temporary and Disability Assistance to build out this initiative more in the future.

We ask for your continued support of \$35 million for the Legal Representation for Eviction Services Program for areas outside of NYC, and an additional \$15 million legislative add to this program for NYC and other areas throughout the State.

2. Restore Funding for the Homeowner Protection Program

While we are grateful for Governor Hochul’s budget proposals to provide the needed supports to address the housing crisis and build additional housing stock, we were incredibly disappointed to see that the Homeowners Protection Program (HOPP) was not included in the Executive budget again this year.

HOPP funds 89 nonprofit legal services and housing counseling agencies, serving every county across New York. These community-based organizations employ hundreds of specially trained lawyers and housing counselors to provide direct services to families facing threats to homeownership.

We respectfully request the Legislature’s support for a full restoration of \$40 million for the Homeowners Protection Program (HOPP) in the enacted 2024-25 budget.

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Thank you for your time and consideration of these budget requests. I am happy to answer any questions you may have.