

**NYS Joint Public Hearing on Rental Assistance**  
**Before the Senate Committees on Housing, Construction & Community Development,**  
**Social Services, and Aging**  
**Housing Works Testimony**  
**February 18, 2025**

Thank you for the opportunity to submit written testimony to the Senate Joint Public Hearing on Rental Assistance on behalf of Housing Works, a healing community of people living with and affected by HIV/AIDS. Founded in 1990, Housing Works now provides a range of integrated services for over 15,000 low-income New Yorkers annually, with a focus on the most vulnerable and underserved—those facing the challenges of homelessness, HIV/AIDS, mental health issues, substance use disorder, other chronic conditions, incarceration, and, most recently, migrants displaced from their homes due to violence or other crises who seek safety and a better life in the United States. Housing Works' comprehensive prevention and care services range from over 750 units of supportive housing, to medical and behavioral health care delivered through our four Federally Qualified Health Centers, to job training.

Housing Works has long understood that safe, stable housing is a fundamental human right, and that the experience of homelessness profoundly undermines medical and behavioral health, overall wellbeing, and the opportunity to lead a full and meaningful life. We also know from long experience that affordable, appropriate housing is simply unavailable to far too many New Yorkers, increasing their vulnerability to housing instability, overcrowded housing situations, and homelessness. We are encouraged and fully supportive of the increased focus of the Legislature on preserving and creating safe, affordable housing opportunities, including supportive housing for those who need it. Housing Works' testimony will focus on initiatives required to meet the urgent unmet housing needs of people across the State, and on the failure of current rental assistance programs to meet the needs of our most vulnerable clients.

**Support for the Housing Access Voucher Program**

Housing Works, on behalf of the vulnerable New Yorkers we represent, fully supports establishment of a state-funded rental assistance program, the Housing Access Voucher Program (HAVP), and calls for FY 25-26 funding for HAVP at \$250 million. HAVP would provide ongoing rental assistance to households at risk of homelessness and to transition households currently in shelters into permanent housing. As you know, Homelessness and eviction are rising dramatically in nearly every city, town and village across New York State, yet unlike New York City, many of these communities lack the resources to fund local rental assistance programs. Moreover, we understand that the HAVP rental subsidies HAVP would be available to New Yorkers regardless of their immigration status, prior felony convictions, and lack of income, households currently ineligible for most local or federal rental assistance programs. At Housing Works, we know from experience how inhuman and dangerous the congregate shelter system is for the thousands of New Yorkers unable to obtain and maintain stable housing in an impossibly unaffordable housing market, and the critical importance of safe, stable housing to the health, independence, and opportunity of individuals and families across the state. It is essential that the State government step up to meet the housing needs of low-income New Yorkers with affordable assistance that limits rent burden to 30% of household income. Our one request would be that the payment standard for HAVP be increased to the same level as Section 8 Housing Choice Vouchers – currently 108% FMR in New

York City. A single payment standard for low-income housing vouchers is important to ensure that no group is at an additional disadvantage in today's housing market.

**Increased Funding for SAEF**

Likewise, Housing Works strongly supports the NYS Senate's call for increased funding for the Shelter Arrears Eviction Forestallment (SAEF) Program, which provides critical emergency rental assistance to prevent evictions in counties across the State outside NYC. Evictions are on the rise across the state, and most local communities are unable to offer emergency assistance to help people stay in their homes and out of shelter. Preserving existing housing is essential to preventing homelessness.

**Increase the Effectiveness of the SCRIE and DRIE Programs**

Housing Works also supports the proposed legislation that would protect and improve the effectiveness of the Senior Citizen Rent Increase Exemption (SCRIE) and Disability Rent Increase Exemption (DRIE) programs. Among other important objectives, these programs help New Yorkers with HIV remain in their homes. Currently, 57% of all New Yorkers with HIV are over the age of 50, and by 2030 over 70% of New Yorkers with HIV will be elderly. Older New Yorkers with HIV face unique health and social challenges, including the difficulty of maintaining the safe, secure housing necessary to benefit from HIV treatment and lead a meaningful life. The proposed changes to ensure awareness of these programs, increase the maximum income threshold, provide the option to limit rent to 30% of income, and ensure ongoing benefits are crucial to making these vital programs work for older New Yorkers with HIV.

**Ensure Existing Rent Subsidies Work for the Most Vulnerable New Yorkers**

Housing Works also wants to share our experience of the failure of existing rental subsidy programs to meet the needs of the residents of the transitional housing program we operate for the Mayor's Office of Criminal Justice (MOCJ). The MOCJ Emergency and Transitional Housing Program (MOCJ ETH) provides up to twelve months of a safe stable place to live for people leaving incarceration without housing, while providing vocational, educational, and therapeutic services as well as assistance to secure permanent housing. Housing Works, as one of several non-profit MOCJ ETH program providers, provides 356 beds combined with skills building, job training, access to medical and behavioral health services, and housing placement assistance. Originally initiated during the COVID crisis, the MOCJ ETH program has been continued and expanded in recognition of the fact that New Yorkers leaving incarceration often require housing assistance and supportive services to make a successful transition back into the community.

During the COVID crisis, MOCJ ETH program participants had access to Emergency Housing Vouchers (EHV) under the Housing Choice Section 8 program. Since Housing Works assumed operations of its program in January 2023, we have assisted 46 program participants to secure permanent housing using these Emergency Housing Vouchers, and 18 participants have secured more permanent housing by obtaining employment sufficient to enable them to identify housing on the open rental market. However, most program participants who complete job training and secure employment are not able to afford market rate housing without a rent subsidy. Unfortunately, the supply of Emergency Housing Vouchers has dried up, with Housing Works recently notified that

our program has been allotted only 44 additional Housing Choice Vouchers that participants can apply for through March of this year.

The difficulty faced by our MOCJ ETH participants is that they are not eligible for any other housing subsidies. Specifically, our transitional housing residents are not eligible for NYC's CityFHEPS (City Fighting Homelessness and Eviction Prevention Supplement) vouchers, because the MOCJ Transitional Housing program is not operated by the NYC Department of Homeless Services (DHS). The CityFHEPS program is designed to help New Yorkers secure housing by capping the maximum rent a landlord can charge and limiting the family's contribution to either 30 percent of household income or their cash assistance shelter allowance. However, CityFHEPS vouchers are available only to residents of shelters operated by the NYC Department of Homeless Services, excluding residents of emergency or transitional housing programs operated by other NYC agencies, including MOCJ ETH residents, young adults (16-24) who access shelter through NYC's Department of Youth and Community Development, persons without a documented immigration status, and households facing eviction.

Like other supportive housing programs for the justice-involved population, the MOCJ Transitional Housing Programs generate reductions in shelter and jail use, inpatient hospitalizations and related Medicaid costs, and substance use. However, this worthwhile investment is squandered when at the end of a successful 12-month transitional housing stay, participants who have completed educational and job training programs, and are stable and employed, are pushed back into homelessness in the mass shelters or on the streets, and in the worst-case scenario end up back in jail. It makes no economic sense to spend over \$130/day on shelter or over \$500K annually to keep someone at Rikers, when the City has invested \$50K to \$60K annually in supportive transitional housing but is unwilling to afford participants a housing voucher that would cost only \$25K to \$36K a year.

Of course, there are other well-known barriers to use of existing rental vouchers, from still-rampant source of income discrimination, to administrative delays, to high rents that limit the use of vouchers to only about 10 zip codes in New York City, with voucher holders concentrated in a few Bronx and Central Brooklyn neighborhoods. Underfunding at the City's Human Rights Commission makes enforcement of source of income protections difficult or impossible, and concentration of voucher holders in the few affordable neighborhoods exacerbates racial and economic segregation in the City.

It is critical to make the CityFHEPS program work better for the most vulnerable New Yorkers.

### **Provide Equal Access to Housing Assistance as Healthcare for All New Yorkers with HIV**

Finally, we must call attention to another existing statewide rental assistance program, the HIV Emergency Allowance, that is used successfully to provide meaningful rental subsidies for public-assistance eligible NYC residents with HIV experiencing homelessness or housing instability but is unavailable in the rest of the state outside NYC. We call upon the Senate to include in your one-house budget the adjustments to relevant Aid to Localities language and ELFA Article VII provisions necessary to provide equitable access to meaningful HIV housing supports for people with HIV experiencing homelessness or unstable housing in all parts of NYS.

We have made significant progress implementing the 2015 [\*Ending the Epidemic \(EtE\) Blueprint\*](#) recommendations developed collaboratively by HIV community members, providers, advocates,

and New York State and local public health authorities, enabling us to to “bend the curve” of the epidemic by the end of 2019, decreasing HIV prevalence in NYS for the first time, and to drive down new HIV diagnoses by 37% since 2011. However, this progress is not benefitting all New Yorkers, with surveillance data showing stark and unacceptable disparities in HIV’s impact on Black and Latino communities, who accounted for 76% of new HIV diagnoses in 2023.

These persistent and unacceptable disparities in HIV health outcomes are driven in large part by the State’s failure to fulfill key *ETE Blueprint* recommendations, including the State Executive leadership’s unwillingness to expand meaningful HIV rental assistance to homeless and unstably housed people HIV/AIDS living outside of NYC. Ongoing homelessness and housing instability among people living with HIV in communities outside NYC is fundamentally unfair, perpetuates HIV health inequities, undermines the State’s ability to end our HIV epidemic, and costs the State money.

Safe, stable housing is essential to support effective antiretroviral treatment that sustains optimal health for people with HIV, makes it impossible to transmit HIV to others, and has been repeatedly shown to dramatically improve individual and public health outcomes, generating savings in public health spending on acute care and averted HIV infections that more than offset the cost of housing.<sup>1</sup> NYS data show that unstable housing is the single strongest predictor of poor HIV outcomes and health disparities.<sup>2</sup> For that reason, NYS’s 2015 *ETE Blueprint* recommends concrete action to ensure access to adequate, stable housing as an evidence-based HIV health intervention.

The *Blueprint’s* housing recommendations have been fully implemented in New York City since 2016, where the local department of social services employs the longstanding NYS HIV Emergency Shelter Allowance program to offer every income-eligible person with HIV experiencing homelessness or housing instability access to a rental subsidy sufficient to afford housing stability, as well as a 30% rent cap affordable housing protection for PWH who rely on disability benefits or other income too low to support housing costs.

Upstate and on Long Island, however, as many as 2,700 households living with HIV remain homeless or unstably housed because the 1980’s NYS regulations governing the HIV Emergency Shelter Allowance (HIV ESA) set maximum rent for an individual at just \$480 per month – far too low to secure decent housing anywhere in the State, and local districts are not required to provide the 30% rent cap affordable housing protection. Only the NYC local department of social services works with NYS to approve “exceptions to policy” to provide meaningful HIV ESA rental subsidies in line with fair market rents and other low-income rental assistance programs.<sup>3</sup> Outside NYC, local communities lack the resources to support the standard 71% share of this public assistance costs.

To finally provide equitable Statewide access to HIV housing supports, we urge the Legislature and Governor to correct the relevant Aid to Localities language on public assistance benefits and enact

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<sup>1</sup> See, e.g., Aidala, et al (2016). Housing Status, Medical Care, and Health Outcomes Among People Living With HIV/AIDS: A Systematic Review. *American Journal of Public Health*, 106(1), e1–e23; Basu, et al. (2012). Comparative Cost Analysis of Housing and Case Management Program for Chronically Ill Homeless Adults Compared to Usual Care. *Health Services Research*, 47(1 Pt 2): 523-543.

<sup>2</sup> Feller & Agins (2017). Understanding Determinants of Racial and Ethnic Disparities in Viral Load Suppression: A Data Mining Approach. *Journal of the International Association of Providers of AIDS Care*, 16(1): 23

<sup>3</sup> The NYC Human Resources Administration’s current payment standard for HIV Emergency Shelter Allowance rental assistance aligns with the local Section 8 Housing Choice Voucher program and other low-income housing assistance, to ensure that PWH are not disadvantaged in the housing market.

Article VII legislation necessary to: i) ensure that every local department of social services provides low-income PWH experiencing homelessness or housing instability access to the NYS HIV Emergency Shelter Allowance program to support rent reasonably approximate to up to 110% of HUD Fair Market Rates (FMR) for the locality and household size (the standard for Section 8 Housing Choice vouchers and other low-income rental assistance programs); ii) make the NYC-only HIV affordable housing protection available Statewide to cap the share of rent for extremely low-income PWH at 30% of disability or other income; and iii) notwithstanding other cost-sharing provisions, recognize the fiscal reality of communities outside NYC by providing NYS funding to support 100% of their costs for providing HIV Shelter Allowances, and of additional rental costs determined based on limiting rent contributions to 30% of income.

We note that this expanded statewide access to the HIV Emergency Shelter Allowance will save both lives and money. The OTDA analysis forecasts additional public assistance spend by the State for the housing assistance of only \$3.5M in the first year of implementation, which would be more than offset by \$4.4M in estimated Medicaid savings from avoided acute care and averted HIV infections. In out years, Medicaid savings are estimated to exceed the NYS housing investment by as much as \$13M annually.

At Housing Works, we have seen firsthand the healing power of safe, secure housing—especially for persons who face the most significant barriers to effective HIV treatment. Currently, over 90% of the residents of our HIV housing programs are virally suppressed, including housing serving vulnerable groups such as HIV-positive LGBTQ+ youth, transgender women, and women recently released from incarceration. We believe that every homeless or unstably housed New Yorker with HIV deserves the same equal access to life-saving housing supports, regardless of which part of New York State they call home.

## **Conclusion**

Of course we cannot end homelessness and housing instability in New York unless we address the gross lack of housing that is affordable and accessible to low-income households, and we welcome the Senate's commitment at the State level to affordable housing development and to expanded access to voucher programs that employ meaningful and uniform payment standards across low-income housing assistance programs to ensure that no population is left behind in the increasingly challenging rental market. We look forward to working with all of you towards this vision of a transformed New York State and City response to the need for meaningful housing subsidies.

Sincerely,

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