



The Building & Realty Institute
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**Testimony of Jason M. Hilliard, Director of Government Affairs, The Building & Realty Institute (BRI) of Westchester and the Mid-Hudson Region,
before the Senate Standing Committee on Housing, Construction & Community Development, the Senate Standing Committee on Social Services, and the Senate Standing Committee on Aging
Joint Public Hearing on Rental Assistance, Executive Budget Proposal SFY 2025-2026**

Tuesday, February 18th, 2025

Good morning Chairs Cleare, Kavanagh, and Persaud and members of the New York State Senate. My name is Jason M. Hilliard, Director of Government Affairs at The Building & Realty Institute (BRI) of Westchester and the Mid-Hudson Region. It is a pleasure to testify here today at the Joint Public Hearing on Rental Assistance.

The Building & Realty Institute (BRI) of Westchester and the Mid-Hudson Region is a wide-ranging membership association that advocates for sound, affordable housing solutions. BRI and its members are involved in all aspects of the building, operation, and maintenance of housing and are committed to bolstering affordable housing options that is so desperately needed by countless families and individuals throughout New York.

To this end, I am here to call upon you, your colleagues in the state legislature, and Governor Hochul to enact the **Housing Voucher Access Program** – A.1704 Rosenthal/ S.72 Kavanagh – that provides rental assistance to tenants who are suffering financial hardship and are at the risk of homelessness.

New York's housing crisis is dire. While we urgently need more supply, New Yorkers are on the brink of homelessness now. The bill establishes a Housing Access Voucher Program which would provide rental assistance in the form of vouchers to individuals who face an imminent risk of losing their homes. These vouchers would both be a critical safety net for tenants who are struggling to pay their rent and a helpful new paradigm for housing assistance that sidesteps traditional squabbles between property owners and tenant advocates.

Similar to Section 8 Housing Choice Voucher, HAVP would be a statewide program dedicated both to helping homeless New Yorkers find stable housing, and to preventing eviction for households at risk of becoming homeless. HAVP would serve more than 13,000 households in New York.

This bill is backed by a broad coalition of over 50 organizations – including advocates for tenants' rights, landlords, children, immigrants, and criminal justice, HAVP is the flexible resource Upstate and downstate communities need to prevent homelessness and get people housed.

The majority of state policies that have been enacted to provide tenant protections or regulate the rental apartment market have been broad, blanket approaches that provide sweeping protections for most tenants while providing insufficient aid for those few who are most in need. The tenant protections of the *Emergency Tenant Protection Act* and its successor *Housing Stability and Tenant Protection Act* both add regulations and limit the increase in rent year after year but do comparatively little to aid a tenant for whom the base rent already represents a housing burden, or who find him or herself facing a temporary financial hardship. Similarly, for those communities that have enacted *Good Cause Eviction* and its sweeping regulations, that law still allows for eviction for failure to pay rent, including during financial hardship, which makes up about 8 out of 10 evictions.

In contrast, the Housing Access Voucher Program is a targeted intervention for those tenants who need it the most. It would shore up at-risk tenants who are suffering financial hardship and who are at imminent risk of financial instability, including those who have already received an eviction notice.

The **Housing Voucher Access Program** is a truly win-win policy. It directly helps those at the greatest risk, without requiring the property-owners to assume all the costs or force those costs to be absorbed by other market-rate tenants within the building. The narrow definition of eligibility not only is an effective use of state dollars, but it will help ensure the program remains financially sustainable for the state. Moreover, given the necessarily high costs to the taxpayer for services aimed at housing and stabilizing the homeless population and the deep financial and emotional damage that can be inflicted upon residents when they suffer through a period of homelessness, the program holds great promise of being a far more effective and cost-effective use of tax dollars.

I do want to mention one additional area of concern, given the overall theme today of adding housing support to the most vulnerable. Among the many worthy bills being discussed today to prevent homelessness, there is not a policy that helps those who require homeless shelter services transition out of the system. This is an issue that the BRI has been working on with the Community of Compassion in White Plains and its allies like Lifting Up Westchester and Caring for the Homeless and Hungry of Peekskill.

Today in Westchester as throughout the state, those who are defined as “shelter residents” – an individual who is given a regular bed in a shelter facility where he/she can leave his or her belongings, return each night, receive mail, build relationships and access case management and other services the shelter may provide – is required to pay a percentage of their income in order to continue residing in that shelter. Based on the formula, this percentage could be as high as 80 to 95% of their income.

Such a blanket policy inhibits those who need services from accessing them and disincentivizes employment for those who do enter the shelter system. It pushed more individuals and families to become shelter “drop in” overnight guests, where there is no such contribution, but also no regularity or continuity for them or their belongings. In most cases, the shelter contribution

calculation results in individuals being left with no material resources to cover expenses such as medication, transportation, cell phone costs, storage costs or other incidental personal expenses.

Whatever the reason may have been for implementing such a policy decades ago, it clearly has not served its purpose, as the homeless population has only grown in the intervening years. Indeed, in Westchester County, some of our shelter services have seen a dramatic increase in length of stay since the pandemic – in at least one municipality, by nearly three times as many days – as cost of living has skyrocketed and housing continues to be unaffordable.

There have been solutions proposed to this, including A. 745 (Lavine) / S. 3787 (Myrie), which would eliminate the contribution entirely. We urge more thoughtful attention to this area. As important as it is to prevent individuals and families from becoming unhoused in the first place, it is also important to create realistic policies for them to migrate out of the shelter system when they can.

Thank you

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