



COUNTY OF ERIE

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Commissioner of Social Services

February 18, 2025

Statement from the Erie County Commissioner of Social Services Before the Senate Standing Committee on Housing, Construction & Community Development; Standing Committee on Social Services; and Standing Committee on Aging.

My testimony today focuses on the value and administrative burdens that come with the SAEF program. My experience with the other programs being considered by the committee is limited and would be speculative.

A small amount of dollars can go farther in upstate New York, and I believe that the SAEF program will prove to have a positive impact in Erie County.

In Erie County there are approximately 140,000 renter households. Since the end of the pandemic eviction moratorium our county has seen an average of 900 evictions each month. This has placed approximately 8% (7.73% actual) of our renter households at-risk of homelessness each year.

In 2024, our Temporary Assistance emergency team assisted 1554 households in crisis to pay back rent and avoid evictions through EAF and ESNA programs. Many more households were denied because they failed to qualify because they received assistance in the prior 5 years, defaulted on prior repayment agreements, or did not have the ability to pay ongoing rent moving forward. There was a time those programs met the need, but that time was ended by the housing crisis. Today the fastest path to permanent housing for a household facing eviction is through clearing rental arrears and keeping them in place by connecting them with a Rental Supplement Program.

Erie County launched our SAEF program in December 2024. We estimate that the \$1.5 million SAEF program allocation for Erie County will help about 250 households with a full 6-months of arrears at current rental rates. To date we have approved disbursement of 12% of that allocation, averting eviction and potential homelessness for 44 households – (49 adults, 54 children). As of February 14th, we had an additional 28 applications pending approval.

- 90% of those approved were minority households
- 88% of applicants referred were unable to pay the cost of ongoing rent

The number of homeless families Erie County DSS currently has placed in temporary housing is the highest I have seen in my 25- year career with the department. The SAEF program is incredibly valuable for keeping families and children out of the emergency shelter system and stabilized in their homes.

I urge you to consider the continuation and expansion of this valuable program, but I also want to express a few concerns faced by our county in implementing this program. The funds allocated for this program require the collection of no less than 30 points of data and compliance and administrative costs were limited to no more than 10% of the allocation. Counties were not provided with an information system that could capture the required data or evidence and were unable to issue the funds through existing Welfare Management financial systems like BICS. This was a similar situation to the problem that counties faced with the Rental Supplement Program. This left counties to develop all the program infrastructure required to begin issuing the allocated funds on only 10% administrative funds. In both cases this has resulted in administrative delays in the launch of these programs and has made these programs expand the amount of time and paperwork required to help people.

As this honorable body continues to reform programs to meet the needs of the State and residents we serve, we need to ensure that closer attention is paid to how these programs are operationalized on the ground by Departments at different scales of operation.

There are many landlords in Erie County that refer their tenants to our offices because they want to continue to help low-income households. When they face unexpected administrative delays in the issuance of funds it further degrades a landlord's trust in low-income programs.

We estimate that 52% of renter households in Erie County are potentially "income eligible" for the SAEF program. Expanding allocations to this program provides counties with a critical tool for homeless prevention.

In closing, I want to thank the NYS Senate Standing Committee on Housing, Construction & Community Development, the NYS Senate Standing Committee on Social Services and the NYS Senate Standing Committee on Aging for your leadership and attention to this issue. Reform brought by the creation of the SAEF program was greatly needed.

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