

Testimony of Ayo Harrington, March 15, 2019, Brooklyn Borough Hall
“Legislative Hearing to Examine the Crisis Facing Homeowners, Particularly Homeowners of Color”

First, I want to thank you State Senator Velmanette Montgomery, Brooklyn Borough President Eric Adams and Assemblymember Tremaine Wright for holding this important hearing aimed at hearing from homeowners in New York City living in buildings with a variety of legal structures facing the loss of homes.

My name is Ayo Harrington and I live in one of New York City’s 1,200 plus Housing Development Fund Corporations buildings, that, together, house 33,000 plus shareholders, commonly referred to as an HDFC. My Community Board 3 has the 5th largest number of HDFCs.

Of the 1,200 plus HDFCs, about 2,000, including mine, were required to participate in sweat equity spending 12 hours a week first gutting abandoned building for several years and then another few years renovating them and - all with our bare hands. I will never be able to count the number of buckets of, in all probability, asbestos laced bricks, concrete and wood I carried down from the 6th floor, the number of once-every-week nights I was required to spend in a freezing building so no one would break in, during construction, or the exact amount of monthly dues I paid over the years to support construction.

And since living in our self-managed building, 30 years come October, a small group of people continue to work, raise families and handle a number of other critical matters while, at the same time, keeping track of bills, arranging for capital and minor repairs, handling communication with City and state agencies. Add to that, buildings that have monitors, and I hope you can imagine how much daily work goes into managing our buildings.

When 42 families moved into 3 completed HDFCs on my block, the block was still less than half occupied. So, we continued to reclaim vacant land by working to gut and rebuild other buildings in our neighborhoods, cleared vacant lots turning them into public green spaces and worked to bring community-based organizations and their services to other abandoned buildings. Now, my neighborhood is a highly sought place to live and destination for tourists who bring an economic boom to New York City. Yet, we didn’t and don’t now get the support or perks developers tend to get who don’t stick around like we have!

While I live on the Lower East Side, my story is the pretty much the same as shareholders here in Brooklyn. I want to sneak in here that I used to live on Brooklyn on Willoughby St and then South Oxford. My son attended the former Mind Power Freddie Hamilton headed and also PS 20.

It was through my organizing parents as head of the United Parents Association that I had the good luck to meet fellow organizer and my sister, Brenda Stokely.

There is little affordable housing left in New York City and each time one of our buildings is lost, fewer of our neighbors will be able to remain in homes they built and neighborhoods they worked hard to improve. Both Brenda and I understood how critical it was to establish advocacy organizations in our respective organizations to fight against this. And, for the past two and a half years have worked separately and together to educate sister shareholders, elected officials and others to help save HDFCs.

Most of us shareholders were not trained in building management, related law, told about resources and, the promise that HPD would both be there to provide ongoing support and remain accountable to us, never happened and, that in part, is why we are here today.

I don't need to repeat everything that's been said and will forward a formal set of recommendations to Senator Montgomery's office no later than Monday, but I wanted to add my voice to shareholders citywide in asking that you for three critical things. First, please immediately put a halt to the proceedings for foreclosures already on the list and place a moratorium on those HPD plans to add. Second, enact effective legislation to prevent the theft, neglect and unacceptable loss of our homes. Please keep in mind that it is mostly Black and Brown people who are being targeted by a concerted effort – make no mistake about this – steal our homes.

And, just to end on an important mention about institutional and community-based racism. We Black and Brown shareholders work in solidarity with all shareholders but, we don't need anyone to speak for us, represent us or to try to tell our stories that those with white privilege will never be able to imagine or understand. That's another part of how we got here.

Again, thank you for holding this hearing!