

# Metropolitan Council on Housing

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## **Testimony by the Metropolitan Council on Housing Regarding the Withdrawal of Section 8 Vouchers by the New York City Housing Authority**

My name is Mario Mazzone, and I'm here on behalf of the Metropolitan Council on Housing, New York City's oldest tenants' union. We are a city-wide tenants' rights organization that is in contact with thousands of tenants in crisis every year, whom we meet through meetings with tenants associations, on our telephone hotline, and at our walk-in clinic.

The inability of tenants to afford their rent, particularly among very low-income families, is clearly the most widespread housing issue in New York City. There are simply no affordable neighborhoods or accommodations for our city's poorest residents to go if they are in need of housing or if they are displaced from housing that were previously able to afford. This was true long before the recession hit, but amid our economic downturn, even more tenants are suffering.

The Section 8 voucher program as it is today does not even come close to serving the number of people who are unable to afford rents in the private market. But the people it does serve absolutely depend on these vouchers to afford their homes. It is, simply put, a lifeline, providing stable housing for people who otherwise be homeless. Its recipients are comprised of people who have transitioned out of a largely inhumane shelter system, out of an often chaotic upbringing in the foster care system, out of an abusive household where there was domestic violence, out of the witness-protection program, or out of a level of poverty where they were forced to make decisions about buying groceries or paying the rent. A Section 8 voucher is, for many, the difference between having a home and being homeless.

The waiting list for public housing is over 130,000 households, and we have heard is that the wait time is 9 or more years for most people. Section 8 funds, in fact, have already been used to prop up state-financed public housing developments, as public housing faces its own budget woes due to its chronic under-funding at all levels of government.

There are no doubt a large number of people and agencies to blame for this disaster, and it's necessary that blame is assigned in due time. Federal allocations certainly played a major part in the creation of this problem, and the federal government may not be a part of cleaning up the mess that they created. However, we have an immediate crisis, and it's critical that leadership is taken to make sure that the current vouchers are not revoked and that promises to give vouchers are honored.

Withdrawing Section 8 vouchers that were already given or which were promised will leave the poorest residents of New York nowhere to turn, it will directly lead to thousands of evictions, and many families who have stable homes today will soon end up homeless and in the shelter system – which is not only a place that we should avoid sending people at all costs, but which this past winter was at capacity and on the verge of running out of beds, dealing with record high levels of homeless people, including unconscionable numbers of families and children.

If humanity is not the appeal, we hope that the fiscal pragmatists recognize that serving families

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in the shelter system will be many times more costly than their Section 8 vouchers are. But fundamentally this isn't a matter of number-crunching. It's a matter of whether we believe that it is tolerable to allow families to be made homeless when we have the means to prevent this, whether the lives of thousands of very vulnerable families will be held hostage to the political games of people who are too timid to take measures to raise new revenues from those who can afford it, and to direct money from sources where the potential for homelessness is not at stake.

There is plenty of expertise and creativity in the room today to develop solutions, if there is a will to do so. My question is: do the people with the power have the will? We all know that cuts are being made to a host of programs and agencies simultaneously. The pain, we are told, is being shared – but this is not really a fair statement. Qualitatively, there are few cuts where the impacts can compare with the massive homelessness that would result from revoking thousands of rent vouchers to our poorest families.

There is a political dynamic to this crisis that can't be ignored. If over 10,000 families lose their vouchers, they may not represent an electoral block in any one district, and they will likely be too occupied navigating the shelter system to be able to organize to oust the elected officials responsible for this outrage. They won't be a significant source of campaign contributions to politicians on any side of the issue. Will this be the unspoken reason why this crisis is not addressed while other constituencies are served.

The way in which elected officials and agency heads respond to this issue will be a reflection of their values. We're waiting to see what those values are.

Sincerely,



Mario Mazzone  
Lead Organizer