

NYS Joint Legislative Budget Hearing on Housing
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Testimony Offered by:
Briana Gilmore
Director of Planning and Recovery Practice
Community Access
2 Washington St, New York, NY 10004
bgilmore@communityaccess.org

Thank you for the opportunity to deliver testimony today.

My name is Briana Gilmore, I work in organizational planning and advocacy for Community Access, a forty-one year old public health agency in NYC that offers over 1,000 units of supportive housing among other community based rehabilitative programs and services. We are committed to promoting the recovery of individuals who experience mental health conditions and the social impacts those conditions often contribute to, including homelessness, unemployment, lack of community integration, and health insecurity.

Homelessness in NYC and across the state—indeed, across the country—has changed. For so long, vulnerability to homelessness was primarily reserved to single people who were marginalized within their communities to the point of isolation: persistent drug users, people released from prisons or psychiatric hospitals, veterans, and single people who had lost their jobs and family connections. Since the protracted economic crisis starting in 2007, however, the face of homelessness increasingly includes once middle-class families who were made rapid victims to economic forces. Job loss across NYC forced individuals and families out of rental spaces at the same time that housing demand and rental costs skyrocketed.

But still, the primary issues facing individuals experiencing homelessness are mental health needs and substance use. The trauma of chronic housing insecurity impacts the sustained well-being of people on the street and in the shelter system in ways that are sometimes invisible but all too often tragic.

I am thrilled that the Governor committed 20,000 units of supportive housing in this year's Executive budget. Combined with Mayor de Blasio's pledge of 15,000 units this will serve to meet the unprecedented statewide need.

To be honest, I am still in near disbelief that this commitment was made. The tense rhetoric surrounding the issue of housing has often and sadly shifted the conversation away from the tragedy of homelessness. If I may spend the majority of my testimony drawing the issue back to the needs of the individuals impacted by homelessness and supportive housing, I will offer testimony on

behalf of two tenants who live in Community Access housing. Our organization strives to incorporate the lived experiences of our participants, and if it weren't for a local advocacy event that these particular individuals are helping to plan, they would be here next to me today to speak with you. These are their words and their experiences.

From Eli Bean, tenant in Community Access Supportive Housing for eleven years:

"I grew up in Brooklyn. I had my own business selling jewelry and clothes. It was the only black owned factory in America. We lost that business through financial inexperience. And then I became homeless due to substance use and depression.

For ten years off and on I was homeless. I stayed in cardboard boxes, shelters that were not safe, and drop in centers and hospitals.

For 11 years I have lived at Community Access. I am involved in community activities. I have my CASAC license. At my permanent residence at Community Access, we have different classes, such as computer classes, computers in the building, a gym, and a back yard. The staff help us with job applications.

When I got the apartment, it helped me stay on track. I had a stable place to live. I stopped drinking. I am 10 years clean. For the last 9 years I have facilitated recovery classes at Cumberland hospital. I speak at different places about recovery.

Supportive Housing gave me my dignity back. I hope everyone gets the chance to live in a place like I do to become a productive member of society."

And from Diana Burgos, tenant in Community Access Supportive Housing for six years:

"There is a very different path that my life could have taken. I know this because I was on that path.

Before Community Access, I fought a long and lonely fight against addiction. My father battled with addiction, and, in too many ways, I followed in his footsteps.

I did not have a happy childhood – and a lot of my adult life has been in the shadow of that unhappiness. I made a lot of mistakes, too, and I hung out with a lot of bad crowds. For 15 years I had a steady job working for a butcher. But my life never felt that steady. Not really.

For five years, my home was an old, abandoned building. I so badly wanted to turn my life around. It was tough. I went from a half-way house to a three-quarter house to a shelter.

Finally, in 2010, I left the shelter to become a Community Access resident. It was the start of a new life.

I can't count all the ways Community Access has been there for me. They've connected me to so many amazing opportunities, and have always supported my recovery.

As of today, I have been clean and sober for five years. I don't know if that would have been possible without Supportive Housing.

Through Community Access, I've travelled to Albany to meet with elected officials. To Philadelphia to attend a Trans-Health Conference. And to Las Vegas to present at America's biggest annual Harm Reduction Conference.

All of these experiences have been very special and memorable. I feel part of something bigger than myself. I feel valued.

I know the importance of Supportive Housing. We all have in common the need for a safe, secure, and loving home. Like the one I finally found at Community Access.”

These testimonies are to remind us that politically fragile commitments directly impact the well-being and futures of our neighbors. There are 60,000 similar stories filling NYC shelters today. Each of these stories could be changed by Supportive Housing.

But we must be resolute in acknowledging the vulnerability of the current housing commitment in the Executive budget. Therefore Community Access joins other advocates in requesting the following:

1. There must be the legislative will to fuel momentum toward a fourth NY/NY agreement between the City and the State for a total of 30,000 units of Supportive Housing;
2. The legislature must maintain the Executive commitment for up to 1,500 scattered-site apartments over the next one to two years to immediately ease the shelter census in NYC;
3. The commitment of adequate operating and service rates for all models of Supportive Housing, in order for past and future operations to remain financially viable and programmatically effective, and;
4. Commitment to the designation of at least 15,000 of the State-funded units for NYC.

On behalf of Community Access, Eli Bean, Diana Burgos, and myself, thank you for hearing testimony today.

