

Testimony of Michael Hollingsworth
Member, Crown Heights Tenant Union (CHTU)

NYS Joint Legislative Public Hearing on 2021 Executive Budget Proposal: Topic
Housing
Housing Committee
February 2, 2021 - 9:30 a.m.

Good morning. My name is Michael Hollingsworth, and I'm a rent-stabilized tenant and member-organizer with the Crown Heights Tenant Union (CHTU), an autonomous, tenant-led, all-volunteer union of tenant associations with member buildings in the 20th, 21st, and 25th State Senate districts and the 43rd, 55th, 56th, 57th, and 58th State Assembly districts. We're proud members of the Housing Justice for All Coalition, the Right to Counsel Coalition, and the Rent Justice Coalition, and I speak today to demand budget justice for tenants, particularly in funding DHCR.

Tenants have spent the past year stepping up to fight for our neighbors because of a massive failure of the federal, state and local government to do the bare minimum to protect us, specifically in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, but also in the context of the existing housing crisis. Since 2013, the CHTU has been bringing long-term residents of Crown Heights, usually Black and brown folks, together with newer arrivals to the neighborhood to join forces and fight back against the cycle of displacement and overcharge that was allowing the real estate industry to exploit and abuse tenants and destroy communities one unit at a time. This cycle of displacement and overcharge was 1) specifically incentivized by loopholes in NYS law, designed by real estate industry lobbyists, and 2) was enabled by an enforcement regime that was designed to fail. CHTU members, whether they were in RS apartments under siege or in illegally deregulated apartments, came to Albany repeatedly with HJ4A to demand change, and in 2019 we finally got a taste of justice... Yes, Albany left the biggest protection, the right to a renewal lease, off the table, and only shrank some loopholes that should have been closed entirely, but our legislature earned back some of our trust with HSTPA.

But as we know, "faith without works is dead." Since our win in 2019, we have seen the limitations of a law without adequate funding or enforcement. Landlords in Brooklyn continue to overcharge or issue illegally destabilized leases to unsuspecting tenants, and harass tenants who try to push back, and DHCR continues to register rents in an antiquated honor-system in which the side with all the economic advantage behaves dishonorably, and the result is a two-year backlog on overcharge cases, unless a tenant wants to roll the dice in Eviction Court, oops, I mean Housing Court.

The recent failure of the COVID-19 rent relief program, in which 60% of the money allocated to an overly complex program ended up unspent, is a perfect symbol of what is wrong. We need Albany to stop choosing piecemeal solutions that put the entire burden of enforcement on tenants, and we need to fund the kind of DHCR that can actually stabilize housing and renew communities. We need Albany to stop giving pointless tax breaks to developers who benefit from displacement (and then defraud the system), and to instead spend the money on the simple technology that it would take to have a functional enforcement system for the rent laws, and of course #CancelRent. It's a lot cheaper than sending thousands of tenants into the shelter system during a pandemic, and it also happens to be the right thing to do.