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Testimony of HaQuyen Pham before the New York State Senate Standing Committee on Social Services on behalf of the Community Development Project of the Urban Justice Center

April 15, 2010

Introduction

Thank you to the Committee on Social Services for holding this hearing today, and for the opportunity to testify. My name is HaQuyen Pham, and I am the Intake and Outreach Coordinator with the Community Development Project at the Urban Justice Center.

The Urban Justice Center serves New York City's most vulnerable residents through a combination of direct legal service, systemic advocacy, community education and political organizing. The Community Development Project (CDP) of the Urban Justice Center formed in September 2001 to provide legal, technical, research, and policy assistance to grassroots community groups engaged in a wide range of community development efforts throughout New York City. Our work is informed by the belief that real and lasting change in low-income, urban neighborhoods is often rooted in the empowerment of grassroots, community institutions.

The Section 8 Crisis

We appreciate the efforts of the Committee to find a resolution to the current crisis facing New York's Section 8 program—a critical issue affecting thousands of low-income families in New York City. The Urban Justice Center works on behalf of many tenant groups and individual clients who are at risk of losing their homes if funding is cut or eliminated from this program. Because of budget shortfalls, NYCHA announced in December that it could no longer fund new Section 8 vouchers and revoked unused vouchers from 2,597 low-income households. Now it may have to take the unprecedented step of revoking Section 8 vouchers from some or all of the 10,500 low-income tenants who are currently using the vouchers. I urge the

Committee to reject this option. It will not only create serious, and in some-cases life-threatening, situations for families who lose their housing. It will also result in many tenants being forced into the city's shelter system, at a cost far greater than that of continuing to fund the Section 8 vouchers. While there are no easy choices for resolving this problem, revoking vouchers must be considered a last resort.

Under the Section 8 program, residents typically pay 30 percent of their income toward rent, and the voucher covers the balance. In New York City, about 102,000 families now have vouchers. For many low-income families, the Section 8 vouchers are the difference between safe, stable housing and homelessness. They also provide a lifeline for those facing urgent housing emergencies. For example, of the people whose vouchers were revoked in December, 1,500 were families who had moved out of the homeless shelter system and 492 who were domestic violence survivors. The city has not yet found a solution for the dealing with the thousands of people whose unused vouchers were voided by NYCHA in December. It should not compound this problem by revoking section 8 vouchers that are already in use.

First, it is simply unconscionable revoke vouchers from Section 8 tenants who have moved their families into their current apartments with the reasonable expectation that they would have a stable housing option at an affordable and predictable price. These families have budgeted their incomes by factoring in the subsidies that the vouchers provide. As we are all aware, New York suffers a chronic dearth of affordable housing. The overall vacancy rate the New York City is only 3% and the market for stabilized rentals is even tighter—just 2.14% of rent stabilized units are unoccupied.¹ Many Section 8 families cannot afford to live in their current apartments if the subsidy is reduced or removed and will be left with no alternative housing options.

Second, revoking vouchers would inevitably increase the number of New Yorkers who are homeless and further tax the City's shelter resources. 2009 was the worst year for

¹ Moon Wah Lee, New York City Department of Housing Preservation and Development, *Selected Initial Findings of the 2008 Housing and Vacancy Survey*, at 1 [June 30, 2009], available at <http://www.nyc.gov/html/hpd/downloads/pdf/Selected-Findings-tables-2008-HVS.pdf>.

homelessness in New York City in the past three decades.² In January of this year there were nearly 40,000 homeless people in New York, including 10,000 homeless families. Research shows that the primary cause of homelessness, particularly among families, is lack of affordable housing.³ Reducing funding for the Section 8 voucher program will not alleviate the City's budget crisis—it will simply shift the cost to the already-burdened shelter system and ultimately increase the budget shortfall. For example, the cost to the City of housing a family in a homeless shelter is \$36,000 per year, which is more than the cost of providing voucher subsidies for the same family.⁴ The City should continue its efforts to reduce the size of the homeless population in New York, not take actions that will remove current tenants from stable homes and force them back into the shelter system.

Third, even for those families who might be able to find alternative housing arrangements in the wake of a revoked Section 8 voucher, the social costs are enormous. In addition to being emotionally and financially draining, relocation—especially forced relocation on short notice—causes significant hardship for families. According to sociological studies, residential instability is also associated with myriad problems, including reduced access to health care,⁵ increased violent behavior among adolescents,⁶ and difficulties in school.⁷

Recommendations:

Section 8 is the primary option for low-income people to find decent and affordable housing. The State and City must take responsibility for addressing the housing needs of low-income New Yorkers for whom the Section 8 vouchers provide an essential lifeline.

² Coalition for the Homeless, *Basic Facts About New York City Homelessness*, available at <http://www.coalitionforthehomeless.org/pages/basic-facts#FACTS>.

³ *Id.*

⁴ Julie Bosman, *City Pays for One-Way Tickets Home*, N.Y. Times, July 28, 2009.

⁵ James B. Kirby and Toshiko Kaneda, *Access to Health Care: Does Neighborhood Residential Instability Matter?*, J. Health & Soc. Behav., Vol. 47, No. 2, pp. 142-155 (June 2006).

⁶ Dana L. Haynie and Scott J. South, *Residential Mobility and Adolescent Violence*, Soc. Forces, Vol. 84, No. 1, pp. 361-374 (Sept. 2005).

⁷ Erik Eckholm, *To Avoid Student Turnover, Parents Get Rent Help*, N.Y. Times, June 24, 2008; Nan Marie Astone and Sara S. McLanahan, *Family Structure, Residential Mobility, and School Dropout: A Research Note*, Demography, Vol. 31, No. 4, pp. 575-584 (Nov. 1994).

- NYCHA should continue to advocate for increased Federal HUD funding to cover the budget shortfall.
- The State of New York should provide funding to ensure that no current vouchers are revoked.
- NYCHA should ensure that those voucher holders whose vouchers have already been revoked receive priority when NYCHA begins to issue new vouchers.

Conclusion

We urge the State and city government to find a solution for every family already affected as soon as possible and to prevent the wide-spread and calamitous effects of revoking additional Section 8 vouchers.

Thank you for giving me the opportunity to testify on this important issue.