



NEW YORK STATE SENATOR

Sean M. Ryan

## The City of Good Neighborhoods: A Housing Vision Built for Buffalo

SEAN M. RYAN February 13, 2025

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This comprehensive, community-focused plan addresses the shortage of high-quality, affordable housing in Buffalo. By increasing the number and improving the condition of affordable housing units in the city, the plan will address the various barriers to keeping people housed in Buffalo.

In an effort to make affordable housing more readily available, as well as support homeowners and renters across Buffalo, Senator Ryan has proposed (and ultimately created) several programs that combine to address many of the underlying problems that have led to a lack of access to affordable housing in Buffalo and similar cities throughout New York.

## Established Programs

*The following programs proposed by Senator Ryan have already been established in New York State.*

### **Creating Infill Housing**

The [Block by Block infill housing program](#) supports small, concentrated, new construction infill projects of one and two-family homes on vacant lots in Buffalo, Albany, Syracuse, Rochester, and Binghamton. The funding covers construction costs and subsidizes the sale of the new homes to low-to-moderate income New Yorkers to increase homeownership opportunities while revitalizing underutilized blocks. The Block by Block program was established as a pilot program with \$40 million of funding in the FY 2024-2025 state budget. Senator Ryan has requested \$100 million in the FY 2025-2026 budget to expand the program.

### **Improving Vacant Rental Units**

The [Vacant Rental Program](#) offers small, local, and responsible landlords grants of \$50,000 or \$75,000 to renovate vacant units in exchange for a 10-year commitment to rent the units at affordable rates corresponding to each grant amount. The Vacant Rental Program was established as a pilot program with \$40 million of funding in the FY 2024-2025 state budget. Senator Ryan has requested \$100 million in the FY 2025-2026 budget to expand the program.

### **Preventing Evictions**

Through the [New York State Shelter Arrears Eviction Forestallment \(SAEF\) program](#) a total

of \$10 million is being distributed to New York's 57 counties outside of New York City and Long Island, with each county's allocation determined by its 2023 eviction rates. The program was designed to reach families in need of temporary rental assistance who are left behind by New York's existing Emergency Assistance to Families (EAF) and Emergency Safety Net Assistance (ESNA) programs. It was conceived based on the knowledge that it is easier, safer, cheaper, and more compassionate to keep someone housed than to try to find them alternate housing once they've lost their own. SAEF was established with \$10 million of funding in the FY 2024-2025 state budget. Senator Ryan has requested \$20 million in the FY 2025-2026 budget to expand the program.

## Proposed Programs

*Senator Ryan has proposed establishing the following programs in New York State.*

### **Insulating More Homes**

Senator Ryan has introduced a bill to task utility companies statewide with enhancing insulation in thousands of houses across the state. The bill is designed to reduce New York's carbon emissions and make energy bills more affordable for low- to moderate-income New Yorkers. This bill [passed the Senate in June 2024](#) but has yet to pass the Assembly.

### **Helping Seniors Age in Place**

Senator Ryan has requested \$100 million in the FY 2025-2026 budget to establish [Aging in Place for Upstate Seniors \(A-PLUS\)](#), a grant/loan program for low-income, senior homeowners. A-PLUS was conceived as a companion program to the recently established Block by Block program that would support legacy homeowners in Buffalo, Albany, Syracuse, Rochester, and Binghamton. It would create 80%/20% or 90%/10% grant/loan opportunities of up to \$150,000, allowing seniors to make necessary repairs to their properties, increase the energy efficiency of their homes, and improve their homes'

accessibility to help them age in place safely and comfortably.

## **Media Coverage**

[Click here to read an article](#) written by Debadrita Sur of The Buffalo News.

[Click here for a video and web story](#) by Kelly Dudzik of WGRZ in Buffalo.

[Click here for a video and web story](#) by Michael Schwartz of WKBW in Buffalo.

# Good ideas

*Ryan offers sensible plans for more-affordable homes and relief for renters*

**H**ousing is an urgent need in New York. Some might say it is at crisis point. As part of the 2023 state budget, Gov. Kathy Hochul proposed an ambitious plan that would have brought 800,000 new units online, but the package, which included mandatory overrides of zoning laws if housing quotas were not reached, was rejected by the Legislature. The quotas and mandates were a bit hard to swallow for many of Hochul's fellow Democrats, especially those with suburban constituencies.

As the state begins another year with no comprehensive housing initiative in place – or likely to be – regional solutions make sense. State Sen. Sean Ryan has a four-part housing plan for Western New York that's well worth considering.

It will take a combination of legislative and budgetary action to implement Ryan's ideas; both are strongly encouraged.

Ryan's thoughtful four-component strategy is crafted with Buffalo in mind; it's not focused, as so much of New York's housing policy is, on downstate models that tend to call for large, multi-unit developments. It pursues infill housing throughout neighborhoods studded with vacant lots, includes eviction prevention, helps landlords fix up their apartments and directs resources toward energy efficiency – bringing down costs and forwarding New York's climate goals.

## Human-scaled housing

Many people don't want to live in high-rises or even three-



JOSHUA BESSEX, NEWS FILE PHOTO

**State Sen. Sean Ryan is proposing a five-year plan to address housing issues in Buffalo and other upstate cities. It makes a lot of sense.**

build 2,000 homes in five years, market them to low- and moderate-income buyers and generate as much as \$12 million in property tax per year. Unlike many big mixed-use projects that include apartments, these homes would not be tax-exempt.

## Forestalling homelessness

With 90% of evictions arising from the inability to pay rent, Ryan has a solution that would keep families in their apartments, and it's money that is meant for this purpose. The state's Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) fund already has \$1.3 billion in surplus that can be used for eviction prevention; it's a much better use of government funds than paying

## Reducing energy costs

Utility companies National Fuel, National Grid and Noco are open to helping with the fourth pillar of this housing plan, according to Ryan. It would improve insulation at no cost to owners and could even expand to more ambitious green energy upgrades.

Ryan is correct in asserting that the market will not solve Buffalo's housing problem. The market has gotten us to where we are: unaffordable homes and high rents – a situation that punishes low-income families.

Hochul hasn't given up on her aspirations for building New York's affordable housing stock. Through executive actions, she plans to give \$650 million to certified Pro-Housing Communities in Western New York that

[Click here to listen to](#) Senator Ryan's interview with Joe Beamer of Hardline on WBEN in Buffalo.

[Click here for a full transcript and a link to an audio recording](#) of Senator Ryan's interview with David Lombardo of The Capitol Pressroom.

# Think local

*State budget priorities include housing, but most policies will not help Buffalo*

**H**ousing is an urgent need throughout New York State but there is no one-size-fits-all solution. What helps densely populated New York City, where residents are faced with small spaces and ridiculous rents, will not work for Buffalo and will work even less well for Western New York as a whole.

Urban, suburban and rural communities, of which this region is a mix, have different types of housing needs, but make no mistake – they all need more of it. And more of it needs to be affordable.

All three proposals for the state's 2024-25 budget have been released: the governor's spending plan, as well as the one-house budget bills from the Assembly and Senate. All three contain housing recommendations, with various iterations of carrot-plus-stick strategies.

What finally comes out of Albany regarding housing – whatever else it contains – needs to protect lower-income tenants from continually hovering on the edge of eviction, incentivize developers to produce affordable units and extend the dream of home ownership to those it has long eluded.

Those are the needs of Western New York.

## Strategies for new housing proposed

Gov. Kathy Hochul's proposal includes an easy lift that makes sense: building on state-owned property. She also intends to support new housing with \$650 million to certified Pro-Housing Communities through executive action.

Both the Senate and Assembly support – to varying degrees – the resurrection of a '50s-era program known as Mitchell-Lama. As it did 70 years ago, this would enable the construction of housing developments for middle-income families and senior citizens. The difference is that it would be tied to building on state-owned land. However, though supposedly statewide, Mitchell-Lama would help New York City the most.

**The most encouraging news from Albany on housing is that**



DEREK GEE, BUFFALO NEWS

**State Sen. Sean Ryan is proposing a multifaceted approach to tackle Buffalo's housing crisis. It is included in the State Senate's budget proposal and should stay in the final budget.**

**Sen. Sean Ryan's idea of building 2,000 one- to two-family houses on vacant lots in Buffalo is in the Senate bill. Albany, Syracuse, Rochester and Binghamton also would benefit if this survives the budget process.**

Many Buffalo residents long for home ownership and prefer human-scaled housing to large apartment blocks.

## Protecting vulnerable tenants is important

Good cause eviction legislation is a continual refrain among Legislature progressives, but it won't help those who simply can't pay their rent, because, though Good Cause may guard against unreasonable rent increases, it can't keep tenants in apartments if the rent is already unaffordable. **The Ryan legislation includes what many housing advocates in New York, including the New York Housing Conference, are also urging: easier access to emergency rental assistance funds.**

## What Buffalo can do

Recommendations and reports are coming from Buffalo's Affordable Housing Task Force, which was appointed in February 2023 and has been meeting regularly ever since, including two meetings that were open to the public. So far, the Task Force is looking at:

■ Updating Buffalo 2006 Fair Housing Law, to further remove

barriers that hurt lower-income renters.

■ Increasing transparency about exactly who owns Buffalo's many limited liability companies. LLC status often allows negligent owners to hide from consequences.

■ Conducting a vacancy study. If vacancies are less than 5%, the city can initiate rent stabilization measures.

■ A more robust launching and more funding for Buffalo's Proactive Rental Inspection (PRI) program of investor-owned single and double units. The program was passed by the Common Council in 2020, but never fully implemented.

All of this makes sense, but so far these are just proposals. There are no plans yet for implementation. In Buffalo, that's a big gap.

Finally, just as New York State's solutions cannot be trained solely on downstate issues, Western New York's cannot be limited to Buffalo. Suburban municipalities must find a way to accept more affordable housing. Indeed, there are pockets of resistance in some communities to adding more housing of any kind.

Specific, locally targeted housing solutions require the acute attention of Western New York lawmakers, governments and advocates. All should be held accountable if this crisis is not met with action.

# Ryan's housing plan is right for Buffalo

HENRY-LOUIS TAYLOR, JR.

**A** News March 17 editorial stated that "housing is an urgent need." A key element of this need is facilitating the transformation of the East Side into a thriving community of neighborhoods by implementing an infill housing strategy.

The housing plan developed by Sen. Sean Ryan is exemplary and doable. Buffalo should work with him to make it happen.

A neighborhood analysis of vacant lots indicates that thousands have been randomly scattered across residential streets on the Black East Side.

"Vacant" lots are interwoven between owner-occupied houses and

rental units on residential streets. They are more than an eyesore; they are ways the city-building process unbuilds a community.

When the city randomly moved through these neighborhoods, knocking down houses and other structures without replacing them, they were unwittingly "unmaking" communities.

You cannot turn the East Side into a great place to live without an infill housing strategy that also facilitates community remaking. That is the bottom line.

Current "affordable" housing strategies do not operate within a community context. Those strategies focus on profit-making by

building huge apartment complexes that become ivory towers, disconnecting their tenants from the realities of everyday life and culture in the neighborhood.

In contrast, we seek to build a *community* based on unity, inclusion, belonging, and engagement. Of course, there is a place for apartment buildings in East Side transformation, but neighborhood residents should decide how they will be made part of the fabric of community life.

The Ryan infill strategy facilitates building a community, but other elements must be added to the infill strategy to make it work.

For example, the new in-fill housing must be structured within

the neighborhood's existing urban design and layout. Residents must be engaged in designing and implementing the infill housing projects on their streets. The Ryan housing plan will invest millions of dollars and produce many jobs. The City must seize this opportunity by creating unique on-the-job training programs, ensuring that Black and Brown workers can participate in these infill housing projects.

The Ryan housing plan is a foundation that we can build on. Let's make it happen.

Henry-Louis Taylor, Jr., Ph.D. is Professor, U.B. Center for Urban Studies.

## Ryan secures \$80M for two pilot housing programs

JONATHAN D. EPSTEIN  
News Business Reporter

It's a far cry from the \$1.1 billion package that he was pushing in January to create hundreds of new starter homes and rehab thousands of affordable apartments across upstate New York, but State Sen. Sean Ryan has succeeded in getting his fellow lawmakers in Albany to approve \$80 million to test out his concept.

As part of the series of bills to pass the new state budget, the state Legislature backed a pair of pilot programs as a "proof of concept" for Ryan's proposed housing plan to create more safe and affordable homes in Buffalo, Rochester, Syracuse, Albany and Binghamton.

The first program will provide \$40 million to New York State Homes and Community Renewal for construction of affordable one- and two-family homes in the upstate cities. That funding is intended to cover the construction costs and subsidize the sale of the homes to low- and moderate-in-



JOSHUA BESSEK, NEWS FILE PHOTO

**"These investments represent a major step forward to address the housing crisis facing our region and our state as a whole," said State Sen. Sean Ryan.**

come homebuyers.

The goal of the infill housing program is to revive struggling neighborhoods, while enabling those who have been priced out of the housing market to still become homeowners. It was initially

proposed by Ryan specifically for Buffalo, to solve the city's scarcity of affordable housing and generate more tax revenue, but the Senate saw an opportunity to help other cities as well.

However, with an estimated

construction cost of \$300,000 to \$400,000 per new house – roughly the minimum going rate – that'll produce only 100 to 130 houses.

The second program, also with \$40 million, will provide grants to small landlords to make major improvements to their rental properties. In exchange, the rehabbed units must be rented at an affordable rate as set by the state HCR for 10 years. The goal is to add more affordable but high-quality units to the rental market.

Ryan's original five-year plan, dubbed "The City of Good Neighborhoods," had featured \$800 million to construct 2,000 starter homes in Buffalo and grants of up to \$75,000 per unit to improve 4,000 affordable rental units each year in four cities. It also included emergency shelter assistance, as well as an energy-efficient program.

Instead, the state will use the two pilots to test out the initiatives and determine how to run them most effectively. If successful, once they're up and run-

ning, the programs can be scaled up with additional funding in the future, Ryan noted.

Ryan also secured another \$10 million to help renters in counties outside of New York City to get access to emergency funds for households that are facing eviction because of unexpected financial challenges. The goal of the smaller program, which will be administered by the Office of Temporary and Disability Assistance based on community need, is to keep people in housing, pay off their delinquent rents and relieve pressure on overwhelmed shelters.

"Affordable housing shortages are a statewide problem," Ryan said. "This significant investment in upstate housing will allow us to build more homes, get more rental units onto the market, and prevent families from being evicted in cities across the state. Taken together, these investments represent a major step forward to address the housing crisis facing our region and our state as a whole."

[Click here to read an article](#) written by Max Faery of WBEN.

[Click here to read an article](#) by Spectrum News.

[Click here to watch Senator Ryan's interview](#) with Dave Greber and Jordan Norkus of WIVB.

[Click here](#) to read commentary submitted to the Albany Times Union by housing expert Alan Mallach.



## Commentary: These two budget housing initiatives could have a big impact on upstate cities

Now the state must make sure plans for infill housing and renovations are rolled out in a way that realizes their potential.

By **Alan Mallach**  
May 6, 2024



A vacant lot on Third Street in Albany is seen May 24, 2022.  
Lori Van Buren/Times Union

[Click here for a full transcript and a link to a video recording](#) of Senator Ryan's interview with Susan Arbetter of Capital Tonight.

[Click here to read an article](#) about the rental improvement program written by Holly Kirkpatrick of WBFO.

## Feedback

Senator Ryan solicited input and advice from national experts, local community leaders, and a wide range of stakeholders while devising this vision for improving access to safe and affordable housing in Buffalo and across New York.

As he continues to work to make this vision a reality, gathering feedback from the community is critical to ensuring that the interests of all New Yorkers affected by the plan are taken into account.

[Click here to provide your feedback](#)

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### RELATED LEGISLATION

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## 2023-S8575A

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- - In Committee Assembly
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- - On Floor Calendar Assembly
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- - Passed Assembly

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- Delivered to Governor

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Enacts the "home utility weatherization jobs act"

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