



NEW YORK STATE SENATOR

Ruth Hassell-Thompson

NYS Members of Color Push for Repeal of Vacancy Decontrol to Protect Thousands of Low- and Moderate-Income New Yorkers

RUTH HASSELL-THOMPSON June 1, 2011

| ISSUE: **HOUSING**

Laws to sunset in two weeks; group urges Gov. Cuomo to strengthen rent regulation laws

Albany, NY – Sen. Ruth Hassell-Thompson, chairwoman of the New York State Black, Puerto Rican, Hispanic and Asian Legislative Caucus, was joined today by Sen. Adriano Espaillat, Assemblyman Hakeem Jeffries, 40 other members of the Caucus and tenant advocates from Real Rent Reform, to express their strong support for strengthening the state’s rent regulation laws and repealing vacancy decontrol. Legislators and advocates say that these measures are vital to keeping communities of color affordable and protecting thousands of low- and moderate-income New Yorkers from being pushed out of their homes. The Emergency Tenant Protection Act (ETPA), which safeguards against the deregulation of rent laws and the eviction of thousands of New York families, is set to expire on June 15. “The issue of rent regulation and protection is a defining one for the caucus and the communities we represent,” said Sen. Hassell-Thompson (D, WFP-36th SD). “A simple extension of the deadline is not acceptable. Tenant protection laws must be strengthened in a meaningful and comprehensive fashion.” “Renewing our rent laws is one of the most important actions the New York State Legislature must take this year,” said Assemblyman Herman D. Farrell, Jr. (D-71st AD). “Thousands of tenants will be at risk of sky-high rents and eviction without the protection of the rent laws. Tenants matter. Their rights matter. And housing permanency matters to the ongoing stability of our city and state. The rent laws are a perfect example of why government and laws exist; to protect the poor and weak from the rich and powerful.” According to a survey by the Community Service Society, and using U.S. Census Bureau statistics:

- More than two million New Yorkers live in rent-regulated housing;
- the median annual household income is \$38,000 per year;

- Twenty-two percent of rent-stabilized tenants have income below the federal poverty line;
- 32% of rent-stabilized tenants are Latino, 22% are Black, and 9% are Asian;
- 53% of rent-stabilized households are headed by immigrants or someone born in Puerto Rico.

The survey also notes that rents have exploded in neighborhoods such as Harlem, central Brooklyn, parts of the Bronx and Washington Heights, where people of color are being priced-out of their communities. For example, rent rose by 51 percent over a six year period in Upper Manhattan and by 39 percent in Queens and Brooklyn compared to 29 percent in other parts of Manhattan.

“Protecting New York’s tenants is the single most important - and timely - action our government can take right now,” said Senator Adriano Espaillat (D-31st SD), the top ranking Democrat on the Senate Housing Committee and prime sponsor of the senate legislation. “Our communities simply cannot survive another housing crisis, the likes of which we can expect if rent regulations are not extended and strengthened. Over two and a half million New Yorkers are counting on us to keep a roof over their heads. We must extend and strengthen rent regulations and we must do so now.”

“This legislative session will be a profound disappointment for communities of color unless our tenant protection laws are significantly strengthened,” said Assemblyman Hakeem Jeffries (D,WFP-57th AD), a member of the Assembly Housing Committee and prime sponsor of the assembly legislation. “There is no more important issue than keeping New York affordable for the more than 2.5 million residents who live in rent regulated apartments.”

Caucus members say that repealing vacancy decontrol must be the first step towards protecting the state’s shrinking affordable housing stock. The system of vacancy decontrol has become rife with fraud, and a complete lack of enforcement. For the more than 15 years that vacancy decontrol has been in effect, many landlords have simply treated vacant apartments as deregulated – without spending the necessary funds to reach the threshold and achieving de facto decontrol. When new tenants move in, they are told that the unit is not stabilized.

No one knows how many apartments have been illegally decontrolled by dishonest landlords, but it is clear the problem is widespread. In lower income neighborhoods and communities of color, such practices are standard operating procedure. It does not matter whether the decontrol threshold is \$2,000

per month, or higher. Dishonest landlords will continue to remove apartments from regulation through the back door, knowing the odds of getting caught are slim. Only full repeal of decontrol will stop the eradication of our rent-stabilized housing stock.

“Our diversity is what has made New York City the greatest city in the world. It is essential that we preserve our communities. We must not let families be priced out of their homes,” said Assemblyman Carl Heastie (D-83rd AD), a member of the Assembly Housing Committee. Without rent regulation, programs that the state has created to protect our elderly and disabled citizens, such as SCRIE and DRIE, will become meaningless. Middle and working class New Yorkers will likely lose their homes. Communities of color will suffer most acutely.

According to Hassell-Thompson, “The rent regulation legislation that has been introduced by the Senate Republicans weakens rent control efforts and allows for untoward loopholes in the law.”

The Caucus supports the passage of A2674-A and S2783-A, which renews the state’s rent and co-op/condo conversion protection laws and full closure of the loopholes that have caused the loss of hundreds of thousands of affordable apartments. The current rental market is hostile to the poor, working families, middle class residents and communities of color.

“Harlem residents are on the front lines of the battle for affordable housing in New York City,” said Assemblyman Keith Wright (D-70th AD), Chairman of the Assembly Subcommittee on Public Housing and a member of the Housing Committee. “We have seen landlords use every weapon in their arsenal against our tenants. From unscrupulous and unwarranted eviction proceedings, to unnecessary major capital improvements, it is clear that affordable housing in Harlem is under direct attack. As elected officials representing the millions of residents who rely upon rent stabilization in the city, we must pass this legislation and ensure that our neighborhoods remain vibrant and affordable for generations to come.”

“One of the biggest issues facing residents of Southeast Queens is finding a suitable and affordable place to live,” said Sen. Shirley L. Huntley (D-10th SD). “City residents pay some of the highest rental costs in the nation, and working families are struggling to make ends meet. We now have the opportunity to take the necessary steps to renew and strengthen rental protection laws throughout our state that support and protect sustainable housing.”

“New York’s rent laws are an essential life support system for more than one million New Yorkers living in rent regulated apartments throughout our state and we can’t afford to allow those laws to be riddled with loopholes,” said Assemblywoman Vanessa L. Gibson (D, WFP – 77th AD) a member of the Assembly Housing Committee. “During these difficult economic times, families throughout our community are under the economic gun of unscrupulous landlords and we can’t play a legislative game of Russian roulette with tenant protections when so many families face the threat of being forced out into the street.”

Members of the Caucus are committed to working with Governor Cuomo to repeal vacancy decontrol and strengthen tenant protection laws in New York State and urge the governor to champion rent regulation with the same purpose and enthusiasm that he demonstrated with respect to the property tax cap, implementing the Medicaid reform recommendations, reducing state education expenditures and abandoning the personal income tax surcharge for wealthy New Yorkers.

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Attachment (1): Letter sent to Governor Cuomo on April 5, 2011 by the Caucus