



Kenneth W. Jenkins
Westchester County Executive

Leonard G. Townes
Commissioner
Department of Social Services

February 14, 2025

Honorable Senators and members of these Important Standing Committees,

I present to you my testimony in support of the New York State Shelter Arrears Eviction Forestallment Program (SAEF). This program, launched in October 2024, is an important tool in local social services offices to complement available emergency assistance to families and singles at risk for eviction.

Westchester County knows firsthand the impact of escalating housing costs and affordability outside the reach of residents most in need, leading to increased eviction proceedings and homeless placements. In pre-pandemic years, and in the years following the expiration of the pandemic-related eviction moratorium, Westchester County expects as many as 10,000 eviction proceeding filings per year, most without legal representation (93% according to the Westchester County Right to Counsel Coalition, WCRTCC), leading to the creation of the Westchester County Office of Housing Counsel to provide much needed representation. Such proceedings have substantially contributed to a growing population of individuals and families placed in Westchester County homeless shelters and emergency housing units since the end of the eviction moratorium. Since 2021, the number of singles and families in emergency shelters/housing units or overnight drop-in sites has increased by 33% from an average of 615 in 2021, to 816 in January 2025.

As the WCRTCC Coalition has pointed out, the evictions,

“...is a stigma which follows a family forever by cutting off access to safe, stable housing from reputable landlords and perpetuating the cycle of poverty for generations. Evictions make it harder to rent another apartment and cause psychological trauma especially for children who lose the security of believing their parents can provide a home.”

In addition to available emergency and safety net assistance, as well as locally developed eviction legal representation and prevention programs, SAEF provides a number of important features including:

1. Payment of up to six months of arrears directly to the landlord/property owner on behalf of the tenant.
2. Assistance that although foreseen, may still have been unavoidable.
3. No limitations on future ability to pay to restrict immediate need and access to benefits, allowing an opportunity to increase future self-sufficiency.
4. No restriction if the recipient may have received assistance within the prior five years (a long period of economic instability).

Although just beginning, in Westchester County, we are already seeing results. Since October 2024, in only four months, we have already received and reviewed 150 cases, leading to 15 eligible cases, and four payments to landlords. So far, the average number of months of arrears covered is six, with an average payment of \$4,707. We expect these numbers to grow significantly in the months to come.

Without this program, and other local supports like budget classes and rent monitoring, these individuals and families would otherwise be at imminent risk of eviction and homelessness, leading to greater costs and detriment to family and individual community well-being, and leaving landlords who help support the community with affordable housing with rent owed.

Again, we strongly support this program, see it as an invaluable tool to supplement the important work NYS and local districts already do to prevent evictions and homelessness, and encourage you to continue and expand it to combat growing housing insecurity.

Thank you for your time, efforts, and consideration on behalf of the residents of New York State.

Sincerely,

Leonard G. Townes

Commissioner