

February 18, 2025

Senator Cordell Cleare
Chair, Committee on Aging
Senator Brian Kavanagh
Chair, Committee on Housing, Construction, and Community Development
Senator Roxanne J. Persaud
Chair, Committee on Social Services

Re: Joint Hearing on Rental Assistance

Dear Senator Cleare, Senator Kavanagh, and Senator Persaud:

The Housing & Homeless Coalition of Central New York is a Coalition of over 35 non-profit organizations, stakeholders, and private citizens working to end homelessness and housing instability in Central New York. The Coalition also acts as the lead of the Housing & Urban Development's Continuum of Care for homelessness in Oswego, Onondaga, and Cayuga counties.

The Coalition works to end homelessness by assessing community needs, creating community-wide policies and procedures, and ensuring an effective and efficient homelessness response system that works for all people who need to use it. Since 2021, this work has become significantly more challenging.

Prior to 2022, the Central New York region was decreasing homelessness year after year, experiencing historic lows in 2021. But now the landscape has changed. New York State is in a housing crisis, resulting in a homelessness crisis. In Central New York, homelessness has increased by 29% from 2023 to 2024. Family homelessness has increased 192% since 2019 and is at the highest rate it has ever been.

Homelessness is a housing problem. Homelessness increases when housing stability decreases. The City of Syracuse has seen drastic increases in rental costs, increasing the number of rent-burdened families and pricing many households out of the rental market altogether, resulting in families and individuals needing to seek emergency housing options. On average, families used to stay in emergency shelter in Central New York for 21 days. Now that average is over 70 days, with many shelter and housing projects reporting that is extremely challenging to find safe, affordable housing for everyone who needs it.

Though housing production is a solution to the crisis in the housing market, people experiencing homelessness cannot wait for the time it takes to create new affordable housing development. Homelessness is already attributing to family instability, increased absenteeism, and trauma for

minor children. Rental assistance programs like the Shelter Arrears Eviction Prevention and Housing Access Voucher Programs are the solutions we need to assist families now.

Eviction remains one of the top reported reasons people enter homelessness, 45% of people experiencing homelessness in the region report experiencing eviction in the past year. In our efforts to end homelessness, we have developed several effective systems to re-house families when they experience homelessness. However, the resources we have to rehouse cannot keep up with the number of households finding themselves experiencing homelessness.

Three quarters of evictions in the City of Syracuse are for non-payment. The expansion of the SAEF program would be a critical tool in preventing homelessness, which is one of the most critically underfunded services in the effort to end homelessness.

Housing vouchers are considered the golden tickets of the homelessness response system. Providers breathe a sigh of relief when a family is able to access any form of housing vouchers, knowing the family will now have a real chance at housing stability and the ability to choose neighborhoods of choice and opportunity. The Housing Access Voucher Program will give that sigh of relief and that sense of home.

By expanding rental assistance programs, New York State would stabilize housing and give opportunities to help deconcentrate poverty by allowing the freedom of choosing one's own neighborhood that is often not currently afforded to many people. These strategies would put New York State on the path of truly ending homelessness.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Megan Stuart', with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

Megan Stuart
Executive Director
Housing & Homeless Coalition of Central New York