



731 James Street | Suite 200 | Syracuse, NY 13203 | [www.cnyfairhousing.org](http://www.cnyfairhousing.org) | Phone (315) 471-0420

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:

CNY Fair Housing is a private non-profit organization dedicated to eliminating housing discrimination, promoting open communities, and ensuring equal access to housing opportunity.

Our services include fair housing investigations, enforcement, and litigation on behalf of victims of housing discrimination, education and outreach, and research and technical assistance for municipalities to improve housing opportunity in their communities.

We are based in Syracuse, but our 14-county service area stretches from Binghamton to the Canadian border and is home to more than 2 million people. We are the primary fair housing services provider for 1 out of every 9 people living in New York and one third of the population Upstate.

We serve rural communities, small towns, growing suburbs, and regional cities. Everywhere we go we hear the same thing: rising housing costs are driving housing instability and homelessness and perpetuating economic and racial segregation. In Syracuse, family homelessness has skyrocketed and 2 children in every City School district classroom have experienced homelessness this year. In Cayuga County the Department of Social Services is spending more money than ever before to house people in hotels. In Massena, the police department is putting out cots in their station because there aren't other beds available. Across our service area, this is a new trend that has emerged since the pandemic and which has communities scrambling in response.

Homelessness presents a particular challenge in the sparsely settled parts of Upstate where there are no homeless shelters in most communities. We had a client in Oswego County who was experiencing homelessness. DSS placed her in a hotel in a very rural community with few stores or services. She didn't own a car and had to walk an hour and a half to reach the nearest grocery store. The County DSS office was a three hour walk from the hotel and the only transit option was a bus that ran once a day.

We know that the main cause of homelessness is housing costs, and Upstate's housing costs are on the rise. Our post-pandemic housing market has been defined by skyrocketing prices, loss of traditionally

affordable housing stock, and extreme competition for what few apartments and houses go onto the market.

Homelessness is a fair housing issue. The people most vulnerable to housing instability are members of protected classes. When the housing market is tight like it is now, landlords have the power to deny rental applications and to evict for trivial reasons—they know there will always be someone else willing to pay the rent. We have clients who have lost their homes for asking for a reasonable accommodation for a disability. In this context, it's dismaying, but not surprising, that people with disabilities, families with children, Black families, and veterans are all more likely to experience homelessness than the population at large.

In the long run, we absolutely need to bring down costs by building more new housing, but the families and individuals slipping into homelessness right now don't have the time to wait for those larger economic forces to do their work. We need to provide housing stability now, and that means providing rental assistance like the Shelter Arrears Eviction Prevention and Housing Access Voucher Programs that can prevent homelessness in the first place.

In Syracuse City housing court, three quarters of all eviction cases are for non-payment, and the amounts are often trivially small. The SAEF pilot program has already successfully prevented evictions in Onondaga County, and an expansion of the program could do even more to prevent homelessness. Similarly, HAVP would expand direct rental assistance to allow more families to afford a place to live, and that's critical in communities like Central New York where half of all tenants are rent burdened.

Too often, homelessness and poverty are concentrated in just a few neighborhoods in a community. NIMBYism excludes emergency shelters and affordable housing from politically powerful neighborhoods, and the result is concentrated poverty. Rental assistance can help break that cycle by allowing people to find homes among a broader section of the community. That's why fair housing organizations like CNY Fair Housing are fighting to enforce New York's 2019 Source of Income protections. Where you live matters, and now people who pay for their housing with vouchers or other forms of public assistance have more housing opportunities open to them. New York State needs to capitalize on this relatively new Fair Housing protection by expanding rental assistance so that more people have those opportunities.

Sincerely,



Sally Santangelo  
Executive Director  
CNY Fair Housing