

**February 18, 2025**

**Joint Public Hearing: To Assess Rental Assistance Programs and Examine the need for Expanded Residential Rental Assistance to Prevent Evictions**

**by Vikan “Jimmy” Vivekanandan**

Hello, my name is Jimmy Vivekanandan. Thank you for this opportunity to testify.

Spending my 18th birthday after one year and five foster homes, I felt the weight of adulthood when my social worker handed me a packet of forms. After signing a handful of papers, I felt a surge of newfound hope. The promise of a home I could finally call my own was within my reach. All I needed was for NYCHA or Section 8 to call my name, which seemed to be almost any day now. Or so I thought, rather naively. Days passed, months passed, and now, it has been three years, and the promise has yet to be realized as it lies dormant in some unknown spot on a never-ending waitlist, which, true to its name, has only kept me waiting and waiting. And, while waiting, I have lived in five more different places since I became an adult.

In those years of uncertainty, I turned to college—not just as a path to becoming a doctor, but as a means to secure stable housing. Despite being accepted into the university of my choice, I had to find housing off campus since there were no dorms available. Armed with a promissory note from the educational support program College Choice, I made door-to-door visits, imagining my move-in date and how I would arrange my new home as I explored the various potential houses. Regrettably, akin to a child's insignificant sandcastles, the landlords dismissed me abruptly, valuing a deposit more highly than a letter from an unfamiliar organization – especially since it was expected that they wouldn't receive their rental payments until months after I'd moved in.

After a long search, I had to settle for the only apartment, completely unfurnished, whose landlord was willing to partake in this arrangement, but the hurdles didn't end there. The apartment was about two hours away from my school by public transportation - so I faced the difficult choice between spending the vast majority of my stipend on car services or sacrificing four hours out of my already overloaded days studying, all for a roundtrip commute. Additionally, the rent, as well as the stipend for my daily living expenses, was not provided until several months into the semester, and to further complicate matters, neither College Choice nor my foster care agency would pay to furnish my apartment.

The most challenging hurdle came when I became severely ill from mold poisoning that I strongly believe stemmed from this apartment. The stress of seeking funds and furnishings and the fear of continued housing instability on top of my studies further exacerbated my illness. Even after realizing what was making me sick, I had no choice but to stay because it's not like I had any other choice. Eventually, my illness progressed so much so that I spent a month in the hospital and had to withdraw from college on medical leave. Due to being unenrolled, I was taken off of College Choice benefits, I no longer had financial support for my rent, and the lease was broken. As of right now, I am temporarily in a transitional Supervised Independent Living Program (or SILP) through foster care, but that was only after three months of waiting for my

application to be approved and two different foster care respite stays, including one in the company of cockroaches and an unkind foster parent.

No foster youth should have to choose between their future and a place to sleep. Yet, that is the reality. My dreams should not have to account for “ifs,” “maybes,” or “or so I thought.” That is not a luxury I can afford. I was pushed to the sidelines and forced to watch my academic success crumble because of circumstances I had no control over, a situation I trusted my government to handle. While programs such as College Choice or SILP are crucial resources for this crisis, they are not without flaws. To make the path we youth walk on easier, I believe the housing access voucher program would greatly help, knocking off one more worry that shouldn't exist in the first place. Looking back on my own life, I could see it preventing the frantic goose chase I underwent before college or the lack of control I had over housing choices post hospitalization, allowing me to focus on my academics and health without worrying about whether I will lose my home again. If this bill is passed, foster youth, among the other people it benefits, can finally look up in search of their dreams and not for a roof to live under.