



Thank you Majority Leader Stewart-Cousins, Senate Housing, Construction and Community Development Committee Chair Kavanaugh, Speaker Carl Heastie, Assembly Housing Committee Chair Rosenthal, the New York State Finance Committee and the New York State Assembly Ways and Means Committee for allowing me to speak at this hearing.

I am a leader with the organization VOCAL-NY, a grassroots nonprofit that works with people directly impacted by homelessness, mass incarceration, the overdose crisis, HIV and AIDS, and the war on drugs. We fight for policies that can address the root causes of these problems in our communities, not simply try to cover them up by putting people in jails or shelters.

I would like to testify to the growing crisis of housing insecurity and homelessness in my city of Rochester, and a meaningful step the legislature can take this year to address it; passing and funding the Housing Access Voucher Program.

5 years ago, I was so excited to see the introduction of the Housing Access Voucher Program because I knew that if it was passed and funded it would be the only program that could serve tens of thousands of people across our state who have no housing or are at risk for an eviction. I was excited because it would be available to folks who are undocumented, people who had felony convictions, and people who had been sanctioned by social services. More than anything, it would finally allow upstate communities the opportunity to run the kind of rental assistance program that we cannot afford to fund by ourselves.

While we have worked tirelessly to get this bill past, the problems in our communities that drove us to propose this program in the first place have only gotten worse. Over the last 10 years, while we were investing hundreds of millions of taxpayer dollars in football stadiums and horse racing tracks, homelessness has increased 26% in Monroe county. As shocking as that number is, we are far from the worst ones hit; Ithaca/tompkins county saw an increase of 366%!

We often do not think of homelessness as a problem for rural communities, or for young children, but I am here to tell you that is exactly whose lives are being up-ended by this crisis! In one of New York's most rural regions, made up of Wayne, Ontario, Seneca, and Yates Counties, child homelessness has risen by a staggering 1,137% between 2014-2024.

We must stop for a moment and remember- the lives of these children cannot be captured in statistics. These kids ought to be focused on learning, making friends and developing their independence. Instead, they are worrying about whether or not they will have a safe place to

sleep at night. In one of the richest states in the richest country in the history of the world, that is an embarrassment.

The Governor acknowledged that something had to be done about childhood poverty when she formed the Childhood Poverty Reduction Advisory Council (CPRAC), and tasked them with finding policies that could halve childhood poverty by 2030. While she adopted some of these findings into her executive budget, she failed to recognize that the policies the CPRAC recommended work together. Unequivocally, the CPRAC said we cannot address childhood poverty without providing New York State families with an immediate pathway to stable housing. The CPRAC said that pathway would be created by forming a new, state-wide, market-rate rental assistance program. In other words- that pathway is HAVP.

In the last few months, we have seen a new level of chaos from the federal government, and specifically, the housing choice voucher program that HAVP was modeled after came under attack. We know these are tactics to make us confused and afraid, but they should also be a reminder that as a state we can do better; the Section 8 program has never been as inclusive or flexible as our communities needed it to be. We have never received enough voucher to cover the true need in our community.

Let's use the 2025 State budget to show the United States what progressive leadership looks like during the current presidential administration. When the federal government threatens life-saving programs like Section 8, let's respond by passing and funding even stronger programs like HAVP.

Right now, people across our state are looking at their checking accounts, and coming to the horrible realization that they will not be able to cover their rent in a week. Far too many of them have nowhere to turn, and will be evicted. While their housing sits empty, their children will struggle to attend school from a shelter. The stress of shelter life will impact their health, both physical and mental, and they will find themselves feeling sicker and sicker. Their economic mobility will stagnate, and it will be harder for them to work. And the state will pay. It will pay for the eviction, it will pay for the shelter stay, and it will pay for the inevitable ER visits, family separations, and justice involvement. All when we could have just helped pay the rent.

In the five years since HAVP was introduced, we have allowed this cycle of eviction, displacement, homelessness, and poverty to upend the lives of hundreds of thousands of New Yorkers. We have also built the support for a new approach, one that focuses on the most effective and common-sense solutions at our disposal. I believe this is the year we will pass and fund the Housing Access Voucher Program, and I applaud those of you who are supporting us in making that happen.