

TRINITY CHURCH WALL STREET

02.28.22 - Trinity Testimony - Committee on General Welfare

February 28, 2022 | **Subject:** Oversight - Impact of the Expiration of the Eviction Moratoriums.

Dear Chair Diana Ayala and Members of the Committee on General Welfare,

My name is Bea De La Torre, and I am the Managing Director, Housing and Homelessness, at Trinity Church Wall Street. Thank you for providing Trinity with the opportunity to submit testimony on the expiration of the eviction moratorium and our recommendations for what New York City's elected leaders should do to protect vulnerable New Yorkers from the threat of eviction.

As many of you know, Trinity Church Wall Street is an Episcopal Church down the street from City Hall with a congregation of more than 1,600 parishioners, who represent all five boroughs and form an ethnically, racially, and economically diverse congregation. In addition to our parish ministry, Trinity Church carries out our mission of faith and social justice by providing direct services, operating a grant-making program, and engaging in advocacy at the City and State level to break the cycles of mass incarceration, mass homelessness, and housing instability across New York City.

Trinity Church is deeply concerned by how the COVID-19 pandemic has worsened New York City's housing and homelessness crisis. Although the State's eviction moratorium provided vulnerable New Yorkers with a critical layer of protection from the threat of losing their homes at some of the worst points of this crisis, this policy was only a temporary solution to a much deeper crisis. In light of this reality, Trinity has focused its advocacy efforts on ensuring that the City and State have adequate resources in place to protect vulnerable households from eviction once the moratorium was lifted.

Since the onset of COVID-19, nearly one million residents—a [quarter of renters](#)— throughout New York State have fallen behind on their rent and amassed rental arrears due to the financial hardship caused by this pandemic, and a disproportionate number of these households are in New York City. An alarming [report](#) from *The New York Times* also recently uncovered that more than 68,000 NYCHA households (about 42% of all NYCHA residents) have accrued rental arrears as of November 2021.

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Now that the eviction moratorium has expired and landlords have resumed hauling tenants to Housing Court again for nonpayment proceedings, we urgently need our elected leaders at the City, State, and federal levels to enact critical policies and improve key programs to protect New Yorkers with outstanding rental arrears to stave off a massive wave of evictions in the months ahead.

We commend Governor Hochul for the significant improvements that her Administration made to the State's Emergency Rental Assistance Program (ERAP) to ensure the efficient distribution of rental assistance funds over the past few months and help hundreds of thousands of households pay their rental arrears. We also thank all our elected leaders at the City and State level for their efforts to build greater awareness about the ERAP program and ensure that more vulnerable New Yorkers had access to these critical funds. However, as the demand for the Emergency Rental Assistance Program continues to vastly outpace the federal government's funding allocated to New York, we urge the City Council and the Mayor to continue lobbying members of Congress and demand that they secure additional aid to replenish critical funding for ERAP.

We also believe that the recent changes made to the CityFHEPS program will help to protect New Yorkers from the City's looming eviction crisis. We commend the City Council for its passage of [Intro 0146-2018](#) last year, which raised the value of the CityFHEPS vouchers to match the Section 8 program while allowing individuals to remain eligible indefinitely as long as their income does not exceed 80% of the Area Median Income (AMI). These long overdue changes to CityFHEPS will help address New York City's homelessness crisis and ensure that more households can access safe and affordable housing. We also applaud the Governor's signing of legislation to provide a similar increase for StateFHEPS vouchers.

Despite these changes, we believe that the City Council can make additional changes to the CityFHEPS program's eligibility and administrative rules to make it a more effective tool in protecting vulnerable New Yorkers from a wave of mass evictions in the months ahead, as well as reduce the duration of shelter stays.

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In the program's current form, New Yorkers can qualify for CityFHEPS only if they have resided in a homeless shelter for three months. Additionally, recent [reports](#) have highlighted how countless New Yorkers who qualify for the program often have to extend their stays in shelters due to delays and administrative hurdles during the approval process, often caused by significant staffing shortages and poor communication within the Department of Social Services (DSS) and with their partner nonprofit service providers, as well as complicated paperwork and bureaucratic obstacles.

We urge the City Council to introduce and pass legislation that would expand the eligibility for CityFHEPS to low-income New Yorkers that are brought to Housing Court for nonpayment eviction proceedings. This change to the program's eligibility rules would ensure that households facing the threat of eviction are given the critical support needed before they are forced to enter the shelter system in the first place.

We also call on the City Council and the Mayor to expand funding in the FY23 budget to hire more staff within DSS devoted to processing CityFHEPS applications and provide them with training, as well as streamline the entire application process and speed up payments to landlords. We believe that a larger and better prepared staff devoted to this issue would help reduce the average duration of shelter stays and help more New Yorkers find affordable and safe housing.

While the recommendations outlined above are by no means exhaustive, we believe that they would have a significant impact on preventing evictions in the immediate months ahead, while also helping more New Yorkers secure permanent and affordable housing opportunities in the future.

Thank you for providing Trinity the opportunity to submit testimony.