



Homes and Community Renewal

Oral Testimony of RuthAnne Visnauskas Commissioner/CEO New York State Homes and Community Renewal

Joint Budget Hearing of the Legislative Fiscal Committees on the Housing Budget for Fiscal Year 2021

Good afternoon Chairs Krueger, Weinstein, Kavanaugh, Cymbrowitz, and distinguished members of the Legislature.

My name is RuthAnne Visnauskas and I'm Commissioner and CEO of New York State Homes and Community Renewal. I'm honored to testify before you today on the housing portion of Governor Andrew Cuomo's Executive Budget proposal for the 2021 State Fiscal Year.

Once again, the Governor's Budget demonstrates his unwavering dedication to a progressive agenda that addresses homelessness and sweeps away barriers that block New Yorkers' opportunity to have a safe and affordable place to live in the community they choose. National data on the housing landscape across the US reinforces the need for a strong commitment here in New York State and I am happy to report today on our accomplishments on the Governor's housing plan to date.

A study released last month from Harvard's Joint Center on Housing Studies provided data supporting some troubling factors in the US rental housing market: vacancy rates are at their lowest levels since the 1980's, the number of people experiencing homelessness nationally is over 500,000, and one in four renters is cost burdened and pays more than 30% of their income on rent.

I'm thrilled to work for a Governor who understands the need to tackle each of these issues: housing supply, the need for supportive housing and the rising cost of rental housing.

For proof of this commitment, look no further than the progress we've made to date in carrying out the State's \$20 billion, five-year Housing Plan to create and preserve more than 100,000 affordable housing units and 6,000 supportive housing units.

On supply, I am pleased to announce that as of the end of this past December, we have produced more than 60,000 affordable and supportive homes and in keeping with our initial vision for this investment, approximately half of the units are in New York City, and half are located across the rest of the state – with every region benefiting. This includes new construction, preservation, and home mortgages for low-income first-time homebuyers. This is



Homes and Community Renewal

a strong investment in our communities and creates job opportunities as well as neighborhoods of opportunity.

Don't take it from me, here are the words of a resident at one of the projects we financed near Albany.

“My family and I were chronically homeless. My son attended 5 different schools by the time he reached the eighth grade because we were always moving. At the time I was offered affordable housing I was spending 89% of my gross income on rent and utilities, and avoiding homelessness was my top priority. Since securing an affordable apartment, I was able to enroll in college and I am now one semester away from earning my bachelor’s degree. Additionally, I was able to secure full-time employment doing work I love at an organization that values my lived experiences.”

And while this story is from a woman who lives near Albany, we enable this transformation across the State and across diverse groups of people. We are serving seniors and veterans, public housing residents and Mitchell Lama residents, and thousands and thousands of first-time homebuyers. And we are incredibly focused on our supportive housing goals. Across the state, we have created homes for survivors of domestic violence, for the growing senior population, individuals suffering from mental illness, youth aging out of foster care and the developmentally disabled, and, of course, for those people who are at risk of being homeless.

I am proud to say we’ve financed more than 4,600 supportive apartments to provide housing with essential services that allow people to live independently in the communities that they call home. This puts us on target to meet the 6,000 supportive unit commitment by the end of next year.

There is always more to do, but we believe we are making a real impact in the fight to reduce homelessness and housing insecurity and are truly grateful for the support we have come to count on from our partners in government, finance and the nonprofit and private sectors.

And while creating opportunities and increasing access to affordable housing is paramount to HCR’s mission, so too is addressing the issue of housing cost burden. In 2019, together we further protected the rights of New York’s 2.5 million rent regulated tenants.

When I sat before you last year, we were on the precipice of what became the most sweeping changes in the history of the State’s rent laws.

You played an essential role in making these much-needed reforms a reality. It is obvious that these new laws have had an immediate impact for many renters in New York.



Homes and Community Renewal

As Governor Cuomo said in his budget presentation: “it’s not what you say, it’s what you do” that makes changes in people’s lives.

Together we have done a great deal.

Together we have made tremendous progress.

I am honored to work with all of you and, on behalf of the great HCR team, I ask for your continued support securing the resources and advancing the legislation we need to continue to make a real difference in New Yorkers’ lives and communities.

Thank you. I am happy to address your questions.

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