



Homes and Community Renewal

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

Assembly Standing Committee on Housing
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Hearing on Oversight of FY 2021-22 State Budget for NYS Homes and Community Renewal

Good morning, Chairman Cymbrowitz, and distinguished members of the Assembly Housing Committee.

I am RuthAnne Visnauskas, Commissioner and CEO of New York State Homes and Community Renewal. It is my pleasure to appear today to provide you an update on the state's housing plan and the ongoing work of HCR during the 2021-2022 State Fiscal Year.

As I testified earlier this year, we remain on track to reach our target of creating and preserving 100,000 affordable housing and 6,000 supportive housing units. This includes the preservation and new construction of multifamily housing, the creation of homeownership opportunities across the state, and our many community development projects.

Continuing Our Mission

As the economic aftershocks of COVID continue to ripple, HCR is steadfast in its commitment to increase affordable housing. Despite the pandemic, I have traveled to many regions of the state this year. From Buffalo to Long Island, and so many places in between, I've witnessed the joy and hope that comes with every ribbon cut and every shovel that goes into the ground as we celebrate possibilities and welcome people to their new homes.

For those of you who have joined me at these announcements, you know what it means to New Yorkers when we remove barriers to safe, decent housing and offer access to support services that truly improve people's lives.

I would like to note some examples from the last few weeks. In mid-September we cut the ribbon at Dayspring Commons in Yonkers. This \$43 million dollar investment included renovating the deteriorating 19th century Dayspring Presbyterian Church into a 27,000 square-foot community facility that provides a range of services including comprehensive youth and adult education programs, year-round after school and summer youth programming, vocational training and employment counseling, family programming, a food pantry, and more.

Last week I was in Buffalo celebrating the opening of 201 Ellicott, a \$76 million mixed-use development with 201 apartments that includes a standalone 22,000 square-foot fresh food market in an area of downtown close to transportation and jobs that had been a food desert.

And just two days ago on Monday I was in Syracuse celebrating the completion of the \$22 million renovation of 20 residential buildings called Winston Gaskin Homes. The project modernized and preserved affordability for 66 rental homes for individuals and large families and included twenty apartments supported by ESSHI for individuals who have experienced homelessness or housing insecurity.

These recent events were all ribbon cuttings. As you all are aware, the developments that we finance take years to put together and years to build or renovate, but we are today at a place where we consistently celebrate completed buildings where individuals and families are getting new opportunities to live affordably and with supports in the neighborhoods they call home. These are all a reflection of the success of the state's housing plan.

We have also launched a series of initiatives this year to support our work.

Last month, we launched the \$7.5 million Clean Energy Initiative in partnership with NYSERDA. This pilot program is designed to create up to 600 energy-efficient, all-electric affordable housing units. It will allow more New York families to benefit from healthy, energy-efficient homes, while providing housing developers with streamlined access to technical assistance and financing.

We are also focused on broadband. We have instituted new policies to help prioritize closing the digital divide in our communities, especially for low-income households. High-speed broadband is essential for success in our new remote world, and without it, households are disconnected and disenfranchised. Across our funding programs, we are now prioritizing developments that offer free or low-cost broadband to residents.

And we are very focused on closing the racial homeownership gap; we are all aware of the impact that racist housing policies have had on our housing market for owners, would-be owners, and renters. While this is a problem that will take years to surmount, we recently launched a new program called "Give Us Credit." We expanded the eligibility criteria used to evaluate responsible financial management, and we can now qualify more first-time homebuyers, which we believe will increase the number of ownership possibilities in historically underserved markets.

More recently, this past summer, we launched the Legacy Cities program to finance the rehabilitation of homes in New York's upstate cities. This initiative allocates up to \$25 million in state funding to eradicate vacant properties and transform blighted structures into newly renovated, move-in ready, homes in neighborhoods across upstate New York. The renovated homes will help expand affordable homeownership opportunities for low- and moderate-income residents, specifically first-time buyers and households of color.

All of these new initiatives support our work across the state to make our investments greener, more equitable, and to address historic injustices.

Looking Ahead

In closing, our success – our shared success – is that the state’s first five-year housing plan goals will be fulfilled, and that we are well poised to continue this effort. The times that we find ourselves in offer historic opportunities to recover from the pandemic; keep health at the center of housing; work to close the racial wealth gap; reduce the carbon footprint of housing; and to expand access to safe and affordable homes across the State. As the COVID crisis has made even more clear— “home” is an essential service and more important than ever.

As we reach the final stretch of the current housing plan, we are laying the groundwork for the next one. Throughout the summer, we began a broader engagement process with our partners across the state to solicit ideas to help shape the next housing plan.

Our success in delivering good quality affordable housing to New Yorkers in need will be dependent on our continued partnership with all of you. I am proud and grateful of what we have already accomplished together, and I look forward to working with you to achieve even more.

Thank you. I am happy to address your questions.

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