NEW YORK CITY – HUMAN RESOURCES ADMINISTRATION (HRA)
OFFICE OF CIVIL JUSTICE (OCJ)

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IN THE MATTER OF:

PUBLIC HEARING ON OCJ'S UNIVERSAL ACCESS TO LEGAL
COUNSEL PROGRAM

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DATE: November 18, 2021

HELD AT:

BEFORE: JORDAN DRESSLER,
        Civil Justice Coordinator

DIGITALLY RECORDED PROCEEDING, TRANSCRIBED BY:
GABRIELLE ATKINSON
UBIQUS
MR. JORDAN DRESSLER: I'm going to unmute myself. Can you all hear me? If you can give me a thumbs up. Okay, great. Good evening, everybody. Welcome to the City of New York's Fourth Annual Public Hearing on the implementation of the City's Right to Counsel Law. My name is Jordan Dressler. I'm the Civil Justice Coordinator for New York City's Office of Civil Justice in the unit of the Department of Social Services and Human Resource Administration. We're going to start in earnest in a few minutes, to give everybody a chance to join the meeting. Everybody should be muted at this point. Just wanted everybody who's here now to note that this hearing is being recorded. Thank you. Then we'll get started in just a couple minutes. Thanks. Okay, good evening, everybody. As we get started I want to let everybody know that language interpretation services tonight are available in Spanish, Haitian Creole, Mandarin, and Russian. Since we're on Zoom I want to make sure that everyone hears this, so please listen closely. If you need or want interpretation services in any of these languages, please listen not because I'm going to ask our language interpreter to introduce themselves and give instructions on how to access language interpretation. First, will the Spanish interpreter please introduce themselves?
RAOUL: [Introduction in Spanish]

MR. DRESSLER: Thank you. Will the Haitian Creole interpreter please introduce themselves?

HAITIAN CREOLE INTERPRETER: [Introduction in Haitian Creole]

MR. DRESSLER: Thank you. Will the Mandarin interpreter please introduce themselves?

MANDARIN INTERPRETER: [Introduction in Mandarin]. Thank you.

MR. DRESSLER: Thank you. Will the Russian interpreter please introduce themselves?

RUSSIAN INTERPRETER: [Introduction in Russian]

MR. DRESSLER: Thank you. I'm just going to give it a moment to let folks go into their respective rooms if they want, and then we'll continue. If you'd like to continue to listen to this proceeding in English, please select English for the best experience. If you're using Zoom on a computer you can do this by clicking on the globe icon on the bottom of your screen. If you're using a mobile device you can click on the three dots on the bottom of your phone screen, and if you've dialed in by phone, don't worry, you'll still be able to hear all the proceedings. This hearing is public. We invite anyone who wishes to be heard on tonight's topic of Right to Counsel and Housing Legal Services to speak. In terms
of procedure, I'll say a few words, and then we have a speakers list made up of people who have already signed up. But if you wish to speak this evening and you're not on the speakers list yet, please let us know in the Zoom chat box and we will be sure to get to you. If you joined this hearing by calling in by phone, you can raise your hand by pressing star 9 and we will add you to the speakers list. I do want to remind everybody that this is a public hearing for all. We will not be answering questions nor will be asking any questions of speakers. This is an opportunity for the public to be heard. With that, we're going to get started. Good evening, and welcome to the Fourth Annual Public Hearing on the City's Right to Counsel Law and Universal Access to Legal Services Program. My name is Jordan Dressler. I'm the Civil Justice Coordinator with New York City's Office of Civil Justice at the Human Resources Administration. I'm very happy to be joined tonight by Sara Zuiderveen, Deputy Commissioner for Homelessness Prevention at HRA; Jaclyn Moore, OCJ's Executive Director, and Assistant Coordinators Agne Jomantaite and Anabel de Castro. I also want to acknowledge Carolyn Robledo and Camelia Mitchell of DDS's Office of Refugee and Immigrant Affairs. As you may know, OCJ is a unit within HRA which is a part of the City's Department of Social Services, the largest social
services agency in the United States. HRA assists more than 3 million New Yorkers annually through the administration of a range of public assistance programs including cash assistance, employment services, the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, otherwise known as food stamps, rental assistance, and eviction prevention. Since OCJ was established at HRA in 2015 our office has launched and operated a range of civil legal services programs for New York City residents in need. The centerpiece of our work is the implementation of New York City's groundbreaking Right to Counsel Law, also known as Universal Access to Legal Services, which is the subject of this evening's hearing. Four years ago the City of New York made history, becoming the first city in the United States to enact a law ensuring that all tenants facing eviction in housing court or in administrative termination of tenancy proceedings and public housing have access to free legal services. I want to acknowledge the leadership of the New York City Council, and in particular main sponsors, council members, and soon to be borough presidents, both, Mark Levine of Manhattan and Vanessa Gibson of the Bronx, and sincerely and personally thank them for their tireless support for this important work. Since that day in 2017 when the Right to Counsel Law was enacted, the landscape for access to justice for tenants
in New York City and elsewhere has been transformed.

Cities and now states across the country have moved forward with their own tenants Right to Counsel initiatives following our work in New York City, and other jurisdictions across the United States are exploring their own tenant legal services initiatives. Here in New York City I am proud to report that four years after enacting the law we have made real and substantial progress in increasing and enhancing access to justice, and not just access to justice, leading to fair and just outcomes for tenants. Today, as the City continues its recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic, and as the courts continue to be affected by COVID-related legal and operational changes and reforms, New York City's Right to Counsel Law is now implemented city-wide, with all tenants and eviction proceedings in New York City Housing Court and [unintelligible] determination proceedings having access to free legal services regardless of zip code, provided by a network of OCJ-contracted non-profit legal services provider partners. As the pandemic began, OCJ shifted from a phased-in expansion to providing access to legal services to all eligible tenants city-wide, regardless of geography or zip code. OCJ's approach was later codified by the City Council and signed into law by the mayor in May of 2021. Local Law 54 of 2021, which officially
accelerated the mandate for Right to Counsel implementation by more than a year, serves as validation of our swift response to tenants' needs during the pandemic. Our Right to Counsel legal services provider partners across the five boroughs have worked in partnership with us and the New York City Housing Court, as well as policymakers, advocates, and other stakeholders, to greatly increase the availability of high-quality legal assistance for tenants, hard work that predated the COVID-19 pandemic. So, when the COVID-19 emergency began in March of 2020, the processes that OCJ had put in place with system stakeholders to expand and enhance legal services for tenants proved to be critical as the City faced the devastating impacts of the COVID-19 emergency, and were supplemented by new approaches to delivering legal help to tenants who need it. We have established protocols with the Housing Court to connect unrepresented tenants facing eviction in court with assigned legal providers to provide free legal services in their eviction proceedings. Working with OCJ, the court now requires landlords petitions and motion papers to include information about how to access free Right to Counsel legal assistance, and OCJ has been referring unrepresented tenants facing the enforcement of a pre-pandemic eviction warrant to reach out for free legal
services to an OCJ legal provider. OCJ also partnered with Housing Court administrators and legal providers to establish daily provider assignment court parts and calendars where Right to Counsel attorneys operating on a rotational basis join court conferences to assist all and represent the tenants in court and offer them Right to Counsel legal services, allowing tenants to access critical legal help in an efficient and effective manner. As reflected in our most recent progress report which we released yesterday and is available on our website, which is NYC.gov/civiljustice, C-I-V-I-L-J-U-S-T-I-C-E. This accelerated implementation of Right to Counsel and the introduction of new access and intake processes has led to a dramatic increase in the rate of legal representative for tenants appearing in eviction proceedings and Housing Court. The rate of New York City tenants appearing in their eviction cases with legal representation in court which once stood at 1% in 2013 reached 71% by the end of fiscal year 2021. This comes after the number of evictions conducted in New York City had dropped to historic lows prior to the pandemic, falling by 41% between 2013 and 2019, which evictions nationwide have been up. In all, as of the end of the last fiscal year, approximately 540,000 New York City residents, over a half-million New Yorkers had received free legal
representation, advice, or assistance in eviction and other housing-related matters since the start of the DeBlasio administration through tenant legal services programs administered by HRA. As we have found since the start of the implementation of the Right to Counsel Law, in the overwhelming majority of cases, when attorneys represent tenants in eviction proceedings in court they achieve a positive outcome for their clients. In cases that resolved in fiscal year 2021, once again, 84% of tenant households represented in Housing Court [unintelligible] proceedings by OCJ-funded tenant lawyers were able to remain in their homes. As proud as we are of reaching these milestones, I want to acknowledge that this has been enormously challenging work, and these accomplishments have not come easy. Despite all we faced and continue to face since the COVID-19 pandemic began, OCJ, our provider partners, and other system stakeholders have worked to meet the moment and provide effective access to comprehensive free legal assistance to tenants in need under these unprecedented challenging circumstances. As you know, the pandemic has substantially altered operations in New York City Housing Court, and both substantive and procedure law have been transformed through a series of eviction moratoria, administration orders, and other legal mandates.
Throughout it all, tenant legal service providers supported by OCJ have stepped up to provide New York City tenants with legal assistance and protection, and we are proud to support this vital work. We haven't just rested on providing services, though. We have wanted to get the word out. Since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic the DSS has shared pertinent information and taken questions about DSS programs and client needs, including updates from OCJ about evictions, court proceedings, and the availability of legal services through the weekly teleconferences that DSS Commissioner Steven Banks has held with elected officials, service providers, CBO partners and advocates, and then weekly follow-up informational newsletters. Additionally, we have conducted proactive outreach to tenants at risk of eviction through the pandemic, including a partnership with the mayor's office on a mail campaign announcing the launch of the City's Tenant Help Line, as well as targeted mail and phone outreach initiatives directed at New York City tenants facing eviction. Today OCJ is working with stakeholders on outreach initiatives to further increase awareness of Right to Counsel, as well as tenants' legal rights in New York City. This week the City launched a multimedia city-wide public awareness campaign about Right to Counsel, which will be featured on digital platforms as
well as local news media that serve diverse cultures and neighborhoods, and later this year I am proud to say that OCJ will be partnering with community-based organizations on a range of tenant education and outreach efforts to inform about tenant rights in New York City Housing Court. This program, initiated pursuant to Local Law 53 of 2021, will include Know Your Rights education sessions, distribution of written materials, and targeted outreach to tenants at risk of eviction. Certainly challenges lay ahead with the expiration of broad statewide eviction protections in January as just the start. But we have all experienced years of challenges, from standing up a full-fledged Right to Counsel program that effectively and efficiently gives tenants real and meaningful access to vital legal help, to working hand-in-hand with all of you to upend a tradition and a courthouse culture that for too long said that if you're a tenant you are on your own, or maybe someone can help you, to where we are today where you can and you will get the legal help you need. We have met these challenges head-on. We have found innovative solutions. We have found common ground, and we have, to borrow a phrase, changed the game, leveling the playing field for our neighbors, our loved ones, our fellow New Yorkers in need. As we move forward, OCJ will continue to partners with all system stakeholders to make the
protection and support of legal services available to New York City tenants facing eviction, and tonight's hearing is an important part of that effort to make sure we continue to serve New Yorkers effectively, and with cities and states across the country following our progress, it is crucial that we hear from you, advocates, tenants, and members of the community, as well as elected officials, legal providers, labor unions, and other non-profits. I hope that we hear about your own experiences with the initiative, what you think is working, where you think there is room for improvement, and how we can move forward together to continue to meet this unprecedented moment of need for so many of us and our neighbors. So, with that, I thank you. I'm going to turn to housekeeping and hearing procedure. So, here's a few words about how tonight's hearing will go. As I mentioned earlier, the hearing is public. We invite anyone who wishes to be heard on the topic of Right to Counsel and Housing Legal Services to speak. We will not be answering questions, nor will we be asking any questions of speakers, because this is an opportunity for the public to be heard. If you wish to speak but are not yet on the speakers list, you can get on the list by doing one of the following: if you're participating online, look for the Participants icon and the black bar running along the bottom of your
screen. Click on Participants. You will see an option called Raise Your Hand. If you click on that you'll be added to our speakers list. If you're using your phone to dial in, press star 9 to be added to the speakers list, and when it's your turn to speak, I'll call your name, or if you're dialing in I'll call out your phone number. Everybody will be on mute up until then, and when it's your turn to speak you can unmute yourself. Again, for those who might've come late, I want to give an opportunity for our interpreters to again call out for folks who might want to make use of interpretation services. So, will the Spanish interpreter please introduce themselves?

RAOUL: Can you hear me?

MR. DRESSLER: Yep.

RAOUL: [Introduction in Spanish]

MR. DRESSLER: Thank you. Will the Haitian Creole interpreter please introduce themselves? No? Are they in the room? Is that the issue?

MS. CAROLYN ROBLEDO: Wedley, you are on mute. Please unmute yourself.

MR. DRESSLER: Oh, that's the issue. Thanks, Carolyn. How about we come back? Will the Mandarin interpreter please introduce themselves?

MANDARIN INTERPRETER: Yes.
MR. DRESSLER: Just the same as before.

MANDARIN INTERPRETER: Oh, so we're going to make the announcement again, right?

MR. DRESSLER: Yep, just in case we had any late-comers. Thank you.

MANDARIN INTERPRETER: Hello?

MR. DRESSLER: Yes. Can you hear me?

MANDARIN INTERPRETER: Yeah, so—

MR. DRESSLER: [interposing] Please give the announcement again, just in case there's somebody now who wants to join the room.

MANDARIN INTERPRETER: [Introduction in Mandarin]. Thank you.

MR. DRESSLER: Thank you. Will the Russian interpreter please introduce themselves and give the announcement again? Thank you.

RUSSIAN INTERPRETER: [Introduction in Russian]

MR. DRESSLER: Thank you. Back to the Haitian Creole interpreter. Please introduce yourself.

HAITIAN CREOLE INTERPRETER: [Introduction in Haitian Creole]

MR. DRESSLER: Thank you. Okay. If you would prefer not to speak in public and would rather submit a statement in writing, OCJ is collecting all written statements and will make them part of the record of this
hearing, which we will make available to the public on our
website at www.nyc.gov/civiljustice in the future, and
written statements can be submitted to OCJ online at our
email address civiljustice@hra.nyc.gov. Also, as I
mentioned, tonight's hearing is being recorded. It's also
being transcribed, and we'll make that transcription
available on the website as well. In order to ensure
everyone who wants to will have an ample opportunity to
speak, we must limit speakers to three minutes apiece.
I'll alert you when your three minutes have ended. We're
just about ready to start. I'm going to call speakers one
by one. When you hear your name or your phone number
you'll need to unmute yourself and turn on your microphone
so we can hear you, and I would appreciate it if everybody
stayed on mute until that time comes. Okay. Okay. And
now I will call the first speaker, as soon as I know who
the first speaker is. Thank you for indulging us. Okay,
first speaker, Raun Rasmussen. Raun?

MR. RAUN RASMUSSEN: Yes, sorry. I'm taking
myself off mute.

MR. DRESSLER: No, no, no. I don't mean to rush
you. Sorry, just making sure--

MR. RASMUSSEN: [interposing] No, that's all
right. Yes.

MR. DRESSLER: Raun Rasmussen, you're on.
MR. RASMUSSEN: Thank you so much. Thank you, Jordan, Legal Services NYC. I'm Raun Rasmussen. I'm the Executive Director of Legal Services NYC, and we welcome the opportunity to give testimony tonight. Our mission is to fight poverty [unintelligible] social and economic justice on behalf of low-income New Yorkers. We are thrilled to be able to provide legal services through the Right to Counsel program in all the boroughs of New York. I have just a couple of points that I'd like to address. Despite the dramatic and important successes that Jordan has just described that we have all read about in the report, and that many of us know about from the personal experience of doing the work, the need for anti-eviction legal services is going to grow, and soon. Based on the work of NYU's Furman Center, we know that tens of thousands of New Yorkers owe hundreds of millions of dollars in back rent, and although HRA, thank you, through a variety of grant programs, and OTDA through the recently closed, I'm sorry to say, Emergency Rental Assistance Program, have provided billions of dollars in rental assistance. Neither of these agencies can possibly provide all the back rent needed to address the tens of thousands of old and new cases that will be prosecuted in the near future, and in dramatically increasing numbers when the eviction moratorium ends. Eviction filings
during the pandemic have been significantly suppressed, and I think most of us know that. When the moratorium ends and the filings begin to climb, the Right to Counsel program is going to be more important than ever as tenants will need more scrappy, legally savvy fighters by their sides to keep their homes. Despite the fact that the fact that the Right to Counsel Law is four years old, we've really only begun to build the foundation for this movement, and as you know, Jordan, and others here at this hearing know, this is a movement not just for the provision of a lawyer to every tenant, it's a move to provide justice and to empower tenants and to stabilize neighborhoods, and to build better, fairer systems of conflict resolution, and to eliminate racism in the courts. Although we are on the way, we have not yet fully figured out even the simple stuff, how to effectively address at scale the problems of delivering the highest-quality, highest-impact legal services to every tenant who wants our help through a model that's financially sustainable and that provides the right kind of professional development for our staff. [Background noise] I had no idea I would be called first. I turned on the teapot. Sorry about that. So, I want to just repeat that sentence for a second, that although we're on the way we really haven't figured out how to do this, how to
address at scale the problems of delivering high-quality, high-impact legal services through a model that's financially sustainable and that provides the right kind of professional development for our staff. The work to provide a right to counsel must be done in the context of our determination to meet the many other goals that I mentioned above, because if we don't build long-term neighborhood stability while we prevent evictions we'll never be able to become a more just society.

MR. DRESSLER: Raun, I have to cut your time. Your time is up, so could you wrap it up?

MR. RASMUSSEN: I just want to say thank you to you, Jordan, for building this program from scratch and nurturing all of its successes by creating this really dynamic, effective partnership, and we really look forward to continuing our work with you and to building on successes, so thank you.

MR. DRESSLER: Thank you. Next up, Adriene Holder.

MS. JULIA MCNALLY: Good evening, my name is Julia McNally. I will be speaking on behalf of the Legal Aid Society. I'm the Director of the Queens Neighborhood Office. Thank you so much for the opportunity to testify tonight, and in particular, Mr. Dressler, thank you so much for your tireless commitment to this work. We are so
proud to be a partner in New York's historic Right to Counsel program. Right to Counsel in Housing Court is not only a requirement of due process, but also a key tool to mitigate the worst effects of the pandemic. During the pandemic, low-income people, people of color, and our most vulnerable immigrant communities have been disproportionately impacted by the loss of a family member, long-term health consequences, job loss, and increased caretaking obligations. As a result of government policies that have contributed to and caused the racial wealth gap and housing segregation, these same families are most likely to live in substandard housing and to pay an exorbitantly high portion of their income as rent. The people whose lives have been most severely disrupted by the pandemic are the most vulnerable to harassment, displacement, and eviction. With OCJ's support, Legal Aid has fought harassment, neglect, and illegal lockouts, all of which have the life or death consequences of displacement during a pandemic. We have successfully advocated for system-wide reforms such as eviction moratoria, the Safe Harbor Act, and emergency rental assistance, and we are working more each day to ensure that our clients get the benefits of those reforms. As the combined impact of our policy and practice work, evictions have been fortunately exceedingly rare during
the pandemic. In the future we hope to deepen our partnership with OCJ. We urge OCJ to join us in urging OCA to bridge the digital divide. While we've learned that virtual appearances can work, more needs to be done to bridge the digital divide for our clients. For example, interventions such as a simple and straightforward means of requesting a reasonable accommodation and full-time technical assistance can promote due process. At the end of the eviction moratorium we will also need a simple means for pro se litigants to file orders to show cause, as well as a simple means for OCJ to be alerted at the time that a notice of eviction is served.

MR. DRESSLER: Julia, you've got about 60 seconds to go.

MS. MCNALLY: Okay, thank you very much. We ask HRA to join us in advocating to expand federal funding for rental assistance, to back the Good Cause Eviction Bill, to increase the effects levels, and to ensure that there are sufficient resources to fully fund the Right to Counsel. We are looking towards the end of the eviction moratorium, and we urge OCJ to carefully monitor trends and eviction filings, and the restoration of cases to the calendar to ensure that legal services providers will continue to be able to offer assistance to all eligible
New Yorkers and stem the eviction tide that we are all concerned about. Thank you for your support.

MR. DRESSLER: Thank you. Thank you, Julia.

Next up, I'm very pleased to introduced the City Councilman from Manhattan, and now future Manhattan Bureau President, Mark Levine.

MR. MARK LEVINE: Thank you so much, Jordan. I am just thrilled to be with all of you to acknowledge the enormous success of New York City's first-in-the-country legislation. I want to take a minute to thank you, Jordan, for being the founding leader of this office, and to have been just outstanding in your dedication and effectiveness in rolling out this legislation. It's been a pleasure working with you, and my whole team feels that way, so thank you. Thank you to the incredible coalition of advocates; so many of you are on now who made this possible. We have impacted lives, and the data that's come out in the most recent report makes that quite clear. We have many fights ahead, but I'll tell you, I am so grateful that we have this law in place as we approach the end of the pandemic and the possible large number of evictions that await us on the other side. We're going to need this law more than ever. We're going to need to make sure it's implemented well. We have an agenda in Albany, for sure, to take Right to Counsel statewide. We have an
agenda in Washington to get more funding for rental relief for tenants who still haven't gotten it in New York State. I don't want to minimize the work ahead in what could be a difficult period for tenants, but I am just so grateful to all of you on this call, both in OCJ and advocates who are testifying today for what you've done to make this possible. So, that's it for me. Thank you, everybody. I look forward to partying with you in my new role continuing to fight for tenants, fairness, and justice in Housing Court for many years to come. Thank you so much.

MR. DRESSLER: Thank you, thank you. Not on mute, thank you very much. I'll apologize in advance. We're all in the office this evening doing this, and it turns out the floors are being cleaned, so you may hear some vacuum cleaners. So, I am going to apologize in advance and we'll work through it if it really becomes an issue. Thank you again, Councilmember, or President-elect. Next up we have Sheila Boston, Alison King, and Andrew Scherer who I think may be presenting as a group, and if not, please let me know.

MS. SHEILA BOSTON: Correct.

MR. DRESSLER: Okay, great. Thank you, Sheila.

MS. BOSTON: Good evening. This testimony is presented on behalf of the New York City Bar Association Civil Right to Counsel task force formed in the spring of
2018 to advocate for the most effective implementation of New York City's newly established Right to Counsel in eviction cases. To support the extension of that right to other jurisdictions, and to advocate for the extension of the right to counsel in other civil matters where fundamental human needs are at stake. New York Law School professor Andrew Scherer and Alison King, pro bono counsel at [unintelligible] Porter are the task force coaches. The task force includes the two immediate past presidents of the City Bar as well as the current president, myself, who sits ex officio, as well as prominent members of the bar, judiciary, and legal academia, leading housing rights advocates, and liaisons to other relevant City Bar committees. The task force does not include representatives or organizations with an immediate stake in the Right to Counsel program. The Right to Counsel for tenants in New York City is leveling the playing field in Housing Court, giving people a fighting chance to assert their legal rights, and sending a message that the lives and homes of New York City's low-income households are entitled to be treated with dignity and respect. It's helping to preserve low-income housing, stabilize low-income communities, stem the displacement of low-income households, promote the stability in the households of thousands of children whose development depends on it, and
reduce the incidence of homelessness and its concomitant human and governmental cost. It's helping to transform the culture and nature of the Housing Court to a more balanced law with greater stability and deeper attention to legal rights and principles. During the pandemic it has saved lives as well as homes by ensuring that tenants have been able to avail themselves of pandemic-related protections against eviction, as well as preexisting rights, and the City is to be applauded for leading the state and the nation by adopting this measure, for enthusiastically moving forward with a massive undertaking of implementation, and for engaging in ongoing dialogue with key stakeholders.

MS. ALISON KING: Thank you, Sheila. This is also an unprecedented enrollment with profound implications for the Right to Counsel. New York is in the midst of a housing crisis as a result of the pandemic, and a staggering number of New Yorkers have lost their jobs, some permanently, and over 1.4 million households in New York State are at risk of housing instability or rent shortfalls. New York State's eviction moratorium will end on January 15, 2022. The impact of this potential avalanche of eviction cases and resulting judgments will follow most heavily on people of color, people with disabilities, seniors, veterans, and low-income New
Yorkers who constitute the vast majority of respondents in eviction cases, and whose communities in our city are the most critically affected by the pandemic. Measures have been taken to address this crisis, as Jordan has described, but we believe that they're not sufficient. Courts are already overwhelmed by hundreds of thousands of pre-pandemic pending cases and will be further compromised with—

RECORDED VOICE: [interposing] Recording in progress.

MS. KING: --I'm sorry--in cases if sufficient additional remedial measures aren't taken.

MR. ANDREW SCHERER: So, thankfully, there is a wide consensus about the importance of counsel for tenants in New York City who face eviction at a time like this. The City, the legal services organizations, and the courts have all worked hard to transform themselves almost overnight to continue to do all that they can to keep the tenants and stakeholders safe from the pandemic and to extend the right to counsel, at least for the moment, to basically everyone who's coming to court in an eviction case. These measures are so important, not just to families, but to the current and future stability of the neighborhoods of our city, and are very much to be applauded. We as the task force offer the following
comments and suggestions. First, we urge the City to actively support the statewide effort to create a Right to Counsel statewide that would cover any case that could result in a tenant losing their home and that requires courts, judges, and landlords to ensure that tenants know about their right to counsel and how to use it, and requires the courts to adjourn cases until tenants have had time to retain and consult with their Right to Counsel attorneys. So, it would actually really be value added to the program the City has in place. We urged the City to increase, as Jordan said, it's about to do its outreach and fostering awareness. It's more important than ever for the City to initiate an aggressive public outreach and awareness campaign. We understand that plans are on hold but we're very pleased to see that the plans are underway and the word will get out in a way that it really hasn't thus far. We urged the City to make sure that multiple languages are used in the media campaign. We'll have all sorts of platforms. We urge the City also to rapidly implement and adequately fund Local Law 53 to engage community organizations in the outreach efforts, and we urge the City to implement a uniform process to provide right to counsel and make sure that the calendaring is based on the capacity of the legal services organizations to fund what's actually needed to make sure that there are
enough attorneys and support staff to meet the need, to
make sure that there are social workers, paralegals,
public benefit advocates, mental health professionals, and
other service providers, in addition to housing attorneys
who are so necessary to assure that entrants receive full
and adequate representation. We also want to urge the
City to make sure that as we're moving to this next year
with the a new mayor to do everything that needs to be
done to make sure that other sources of funding for
housing-related legal services may continue to be
provided, and that the services are maintained that have
been in place for these last several years. Also, this is
somewhat more minor, but not so minor. We want to applaud
the City for really making a solid shift to using the
language of Right to Counsel. We have become a model, as
people have been saying, for the whole country, and it's
really important that people understand that this is a new
right and an important right, and that it was hard-fought,
and that people will fight to preserve it if they need to,
and there are places all over the country now that are
trying to emulate us. Thank you very much for your time
and consideration. Please don't hesitate to call upon the
task force if we can be helpful, and we very much look
forward to continuing this important dialogue. I also
just want to gratefully acknowledge two of my law students
who helped us prepare the testimony for tonight, Carly Cartenburg [phonetic] and Joe Rockman. Thank you very much.

MR. DRESSLER: Thank you. I'm going to just pause for a moment for just an announcement quickly. Actually, not so quickly. We may have created some undue pressure on folks to try to rush their statements to make sure they get in in under the three-minute mark. Not at all our intention. Sometimes the speed has caused some challenges for some of our interpreters. So, if folks can just slow down a little bit, I assure you, we'll go easy on cutting folks off. We'll be reasonable. I think anybody who's been in these hearings before knows we don't cut mics if we don't need to, and we've never had to, so if everybody can just make sure they're just speaking at a nice ordinary pace to make sure that our interpreters who have been so helpful can make sure they can interpret appropriately. Thanks. Next up, Austen Refuerzo.

MR. AUSTEN REFUERZO: Thanks, Jordan. Hi, I'm Austen Refuerzo, a supervising attorney at the Housing Defense practice at Neighborhood Defender Service of Harlem. NDS is a community-based public defender office that provides high-quality legal services to residents of [unintelligible] Manhattan, and a member of the LEAD [phonetic] Coalition. As a holistic public defender NDS
is particularly familiar with the collateral consequences of homelessness, including an increased chance of entering the criminal legal system. The New York City Right to Counsel has begun to fundamentally upend the dynamic of Housing Court. Housing Court has historically and notoriously operated as a high-speed eviction mill, a place where unrepresented tenants were deceived, tricked, and bullied out of their homes. The past four years have proven tenants represented by an attorney are significantly more likely to be able to remain in their homes. Keeping tenants in their homes protects families, preserves communities, and prevents the destabilization that often precipitates involvement in the criminal, legal, or child welfare system. As a holistic public defender, NDS knows that the Right to Counsel when fighting an eviction case is a bulwark against the worst injustices of our legal system. It is alarming to imagine how woeful the last 20 months would have been had the Right to Counsel not been partially, and thanks to [unintelligible] 2050 fully implemented during the pandemic. By marshaling the existing army of Right to Counsel attorneys we are able to avoid the tragic, violent, and potentially fatal wave of evictions feared at the beginning of the pandemic. HRA and the Right to Counsel attorneys have done an admirable job reacting to
the dual affordable housing and COVID-19 crises. However, we at NDS seek to provide a more lasting stability, and in doing so, interrupt the cycle of the same tenants appearing in Housing Court over and over. At NDS, social workers ensure that Right to Counsel clients have the support and access to services they need, while legal advocates connect tenants to rental assistance and rental subsidies which provide long-term solutions and lasting stability. These are services not currently funded through HRA or promised to every Right to Counsel attorney, but they should be. We much acknowledge—

MR. DRESSLER: [interposing] About 60 seconds to go.

MR. REFUERZO We must acknowledge that racist, cultural, and oppressive systems are connected, and that an attorney is but a balm treating the symptoms of larger problems, not a panacea. An effective right to counsel is one funded in a way to ensure that tenants have access to social workers and legal advocates if they require them. Imagining a better Housing Court landscape requires a Right to Counsel that is more proactive and holistic. The pandemic has thrown a harsh light on the prevalence of landlord harassment and deplorable housing conditions. The Right to Counsel must meet tenants where they are, a reality that can only be achieved by the incorporation and
funding of community organizers into the Right to Counsel program. Because of the Right to Counsel program, fewer New Yorkers have been evicted. However, with the forced resumption of Housing Court proceedings, it's axiomatic that the Right to Counsel requires support that enables attorneys, social workers, and advocates to dedicate the required resources to fight for lasting stability. Thank you. Thank you for your work, Jordan.

MR. DRESSLER: Thank you, Austen. Jenny Laurie is our next speaker.

MS. JENNY LAURIE: Thank you. My name is Jenny Laurie. I'm the Executive Director of Housing Court Answers. I want to start by echoing everyone else, and thanking you, Jordan, for your great work at OCJ, and also thank your staff, they've been terrific. You've all been so supportive and great to work with as we've both gone through the beginning of the Right to Counsel, but also during the pandemic. Housing Court Answers operates the Right to Counsel hotline. HCA staff work in partnership with OCJ and the City's legal service providers to help tenants facing eviction in Housing Court. As the most recent OCJ report shows, the Right to Counsel has been a great success. The report shows that 84% of tenants with legal representation were able to stay in their homes. Recent reports on the City's family homelessness say that
numbers have gone done as evictions have also gone down. Despite the success, the pandemic threatens to overwhelm our eviction prevention systems. I want to thank the Right to Counsel Coalition which led the campaign to enact the current law and which leads the current campaign to win the statewide Right to Counsel which is so important. The coalition led by tenants who have lived through eviction and housing instability have some really good suggestions for ways to prepare for the coming end of the eviction moratorium. I'd like to highlight two of those that others have spoken of as well. The first one is just to ensure that there is a fair and systematic process for connecting tenants with counsel and ensure that cases in court are not moving too fast for that process. This means pushing back on the force for greater efficiency in the courts. This is a force that would have us go back to the pre-pandemic assembly-line style of justice in Housing Court. There will be a frightening volume of cases in the City's courts when the moratorium ends. The other is preserve the other City-funded legal programs that help tenants. At Housing Court Answers we spend a lot of time over the phone coaching tenants who need help filing HP actions against landlords who are depriving their buildings of basic services. While these folks are not facing classic eviction case in Housing Court, they are
being forced from their homes through other means. We urge the City to preserve the anti-harassment and tenant protection funded work. And that's it. Thanks again, Jordan, for your great work.

MR. DRESSLER: Thank you. Okay, where's my little list here? Okay, thank you. Thank you, Jenny. Next up, Joanna Laine.

MS. JOANNA L AINE: Good evening. My name is Joanna Laine and I'm a tenant defense attorney in the Brooklyn office of the Legal Aid Society. I'm also an officer of the Association of Legal Aid Attorneys, UAW 2325, or ALA, for short. ALA is the labor union representing a diverse group of attorneys at several different legal services organizations who are dedicated to safeguarding the rights of tenants. We want to thank you, Mr. Dressler, for your stewardship of the Right to Counsel program, and for allowing ALA to testify today. As tenant advocates we applaud the expansion of Right to Counsel to tenants in New York City's five boroughs and all zip codes. However, or organizations are becoming increasingly unable to sustain the Right to Counsel program with the level of resources that are currently allocated to us. It's our understanding that the funding that organizations receive is not enough to finance the true cost of the Right to Counsel program. We as staff
attorneys experience this first-hand every single day as we struggle to maintain untenably high case loads. Nearly every member of our union reports being overwhelmed, and we expect this will worsen even more when the eviction moratorium expires. We're therefore deeply concerned that the level of resources currently being provided to fund Right to Counsel won't be enough to sustain the momentum of this great and essential program. Beyond the Right to Counsel program, funding must also be sustained for tenant organizing as well for affirmative litigation, group representation, and representation in other cases which arise from landlord-tenant disputes. With increased landlord aggression during the pandemic we've had to take on many affirmative cases like illegal lockouts and HP actions for repairs to ensure that our clients aren't forced out of their homes in other ways. We're also seeing landlords file cases in new forums in order to put pressure on tenants to self-evict. So, the City must preserve an expand all housing-related legal services programs, not just the Right to Counsel. We also ask that OCJ work with the courts to ensure that cases are calendar-based in the capacity of legal services providers with sufficient time to ensure that cases are fairly adjudicated, and we must draw on the lessons of the COVID-19 pandemic to improve Housing Court. One unexpected gift
of the pandemic has been the option of virtual appearances which allowed tenants to appear in court without having to miss work or find child care. We encourage OCJ to advocate for a permanent virtual option in routine Housing Court appearances, and for resources for tenants with limited access to technology. Finally, OCJ must work with the courts to ensure that tenants who don't yet have a lawyer are adequately notified of their court appearances in advance. We've observed a really troubling number of tenants who failed to receive proper notice of their court case, and therefore end up at risk of eviction simply by default. In this challenging time we as attorneys will continue to fight for our clients, but we cannot do this alone. Again, we need OCJ to adequately fund our offices' essential housing-related work, and to support a court system that truly gives justice to New York City tenants. On behalf of ALA, thank you again for taking the time to hear our testimony.

MR. DRESSLER: Thank you. Okay, next up, Kevin Li. Kevin?

MR. KEVIN LI: One second, I'm getting my camera all set up. Hello, everyone. My name is Kevin. Thank for this opportunity to testify about the Universal Access Program. My name is Kevin Lee and I'm an attorney at CAMBA Legal Services. CAMBA Legal Services is proud to be
one of the providers of the Universal Access Program where we have services in Brooklyn and Staten Island, and recently, surprisingly, [unintelligible] boroughs. We are a member of LEAP, a coalition of 17 New York City civil legal services providers, many of which participate in the legal access program. We would like to thank the city counsel for continuing the universal access program at a time when municipal budgets across the world have been forced to do more with less. The [unintelligible] administration for the work on this program which will leave a lasting legacy on New York City, our partners are working with as the Right to Counsel program expands to help more people than ever, and many others as the Right to Counsel Coalition, the community-based organizations, and its organizers from across the city all work tirelessly to promote justice for all. Of course, last but not least, we would like to thank the Office of Civil Justice for its continuing work to ensure that those in need obtain the legal help that they need to keep their homes. Their hard work in the past four years has helped create an incredibly important and successful program. We have spoken in the past about the overall financial savings the program provides to the City budget by limiting homelessness; this continues to be true. However, today we want to highlight the unquantifiable
human health that the program and its participants that
CAMBA Legal Services have provided during these trying
times. This past year CAMBA Legal Services has continued
to assist our fellow New Yorkers with housing issues amid
the COVID-19 pandemic. This unprecedented pandemic has
resulted in hardships that would have culminated in more
homelessness were it not for this program which has
expanded across the city to help nearly everyone facing
evictions in housing court. Without the program, tens of
thousands may not have had the time, knowledge or help
applying for the Emergency Rental Assistance Program, also
known as ERAC, which provides much-needed help for rental
arrears that have accrued because of the pandemic. With
the help of the Office of Court Administration, Housing
Court judges and their staff, Universal Access has helped
create a process to ensure that everyone facing evictions
knows their rights of what’s unnecessary eviction and
preserves their tenancies. We also want to unequivocally
state how successful virtual representation has been,
despite some issues which we all continue to work together
to resolve. We have proven that virtual representation in
and of itself has not resulted in diminished
representation, and it has in fact expanded access to
justice [unintelligible] process connecting those sued by
landlords to legal service providers have ensured that
almost everyone facing eviction be able to talk to a lawyer. Even if someone is not eligible for full representation, they have an opportunity to have someone review their case, which enables them to know their rights and thus better protect themselves. In short, virtual representation of our clients and Housing Court's implementation of it has been an unqualified success and should continue following the pandemic. Despite these successes there are still things that need to be done to ensure that those facing eviction have the right to protect themselves. They include access to all court files digitally. The New York City Judiciary System and Office of [unintelligible] Administration has done a commendable job during this pandemic, balancing the need to access courts with safety. One of its most impactful actions during the pandemic was implementation of the New York State Court Electronic Filing System for Housing Court, also known as NYSA. This has been tremendously impactful and allows us to provide access to court files vigilantly without having to go into various housing courts with the City. [Background noise] My baby's very excited--

MR. DRESSLER: [interposing] Kevin, it's about 60 seconds to go, and it sounds like you might have your hands full.
MR. LI: We encourage that the court continues to digitize files which are [unintelligible] have not been regularly digitized. A lot of New York cases have been digitized very well. We encourage OCJ to provide more resources to the court for the OC, Office of Court Administration provide that support as well. In addition to that, we also have told some other of our colleagues that we want to expand access to HP cases. We've witnessed landlords resort to put more pressure on our clients by harassing them, by turning off their services, in hopes of trying to get them out of the apartments. We believe that tenants have a hard time to start their own HP cases, and we urge that OCJ provides more resources to the legal service providers so that we can help them, as we all know HP actions serve as a deterrent to prevent landlords from doing things that are what we believe to be incredibly unscrupulous. Thank you for giving me the opportunity to testify. We want to close our testimony by just saying all defendants that we helped virtually, they were able to stay in their apartments, and that we take great pride in the work that we've done, the program has achieved. We look forward to working together to ensure that all tenants have the right to counsel so that they can keep their home. Thank you.

MR. DRESSLER: Thank you. I understand there
was a question in the chat about an issue with the Spanish interpretation process. I think that's been taken care of, but I do understand. I'll caution everybody again, and again we will go maybe even a little bit easier on timelines. We do want to make sure everybody has an opportunity to speak at a reasonable hour. Please just try to slow down a little bit when you're giving your statement. Thank you. Okay, next up is Zac Hale [phonetic].

MR. ZAC HALE: Thank you, Jordan. Thank you, HRA, and to everyone else who is speaking. Can you hear me?

MR. DRESSLER: Yep.

MR. HALE: Okay, thank you. My name is Zac Hale. I'm an attorney with the Preserving Affordable Housing Unit at Brooklyn Legal Services Corporation A, or Brooklyn A. Brooklyn A has been providing low-barrier, high-quality legal services to tenants for over 50 years, and in that time few developments have been as crucial to the safety and security of New York renters, as has the City Council's passage of the Universal Access or Right to Counsel in 2017. Before Universal Access, unrepresented tenants face frivolous eviction cases and had little recourse in the face of harassing negligent landlords, but in just four years the program has enabled providers like
us to keep countless tenants in their homes and keep those homes safe, healthy, and affordable. Brooklyn A alone has helped over 10,000 New Yorkers stay in their homes in the years since 2017. That's over 10,000 New Yorkers who avoided the trauma of forced displacement, thanks to the City Council's enactment and expansion of Universal Access. In a city where more than two-thirds of households are renters it's impossible to overstate the benefit that access to counsel has brought, not only to tenants, but to the City as a whole. Facing an eviction is a scary, overwhelming, and isolating time for families already facing financial and personal hardships. Appearing in court alone is an intimidating process, but thanks to Right to Counsel, tenants can show up empowered and informed with an attorney by their side. Universal Access lifts our clients up and puts them on equal footing with their landlords, providing the dignity of legal representation without the burdensome cost. Without Universal Access many tenants would be unable to afford an attorney, would have to proceed pro se. Navigating the legal process as a pro se litigant is very challenging. As recently as 2013 only 1% of tenants in Housing Court were represented by lawyers, compared with 95% of landlords, as many of you know. Universal Access levels the playing field, as we've heard over and over again.
tonight. It prevents evictions and ensures repairs are made. It stops harassment, stops self help, prevents homelessness. Right to Counsel reduces the number of evictions and it's shown in the data, and it also saves the government money by reducing shelter costs and other expenses. A recent Brooklyn A case illustrates the importance of Right to Counsel, so I'll share that with you now before closing. We had a client, an elderly woman, who called 311 after her landlord had cut off her heat in winter. In retaliation, the landlord locked her out of her apartment and proceeded to call the police and make false allegations against her that led to her arrest. Brooklyn A picked up the phone, worked with the public defender to get the charges dropped so they wouldn't prevent her from getting back into her home. We sued the landlord for locking her out, and we took the case to trial and won. The client was able to change the locks and return to her home. The landlord was persistent, however, and soon after, while the client was out shopping one day on a weekend, the landlord did the same thing again. This time our attorney was able to show up, speak with the police, provide the court order and explain it to them so she could get back into her home. This is a critical for moment for tenants just like that client that I spoke about, and with COVID, many New Yorkers have lost
income, exacerbating the already dire housing crisis. Stable housing is the cornerstone of stability for all of the other areas of someone's life, and now more than ever it's essential to the recovery of New York and New Yorkers that we protect stable, safe, affordable housing. Legal services ensures that that can be reality for the tenants in New York. As we prepare for the lift of the moratorium on evictions, it's crucial to maintain and even expand the resources that uplift the rights of tenants and preserve affordable housing for all. We look forward to partnering with the City, HRA, OCJ, and continuing with Right to Counsel, expanding the Right to Counsel, and getting our communities the resources they need to stay safe and healthy at this trying time. Thank you.

MR. DRESSLER: Sorry, I was unmuting. Thank you. I'm going to just take a little bit of privilege here to pause the proceedings. We've been at this for about an hour. I wanted to say this at the top of the meeting and then realized people would be filing in, and maybe I'd say it at the end of the meeting and then realized people would be filing out, so I'm going to take the nice meeting middle to take a moment to acknowledge the important critical, hard, and exemplary work, not of the providers, which are great, not of the advocates, which are great, but of the team at OCJ. Some of you know
I'm approaching my last days at OCJ, and I just want to take a moment to say thank you and to make sure that everybody here who's so invested in the success of this program, the success of this ecosystem, the continued reforms and improvements, understands how critical the work of the Office of Civil Justice, the team that works here at 4 World Trade, is to making all of that possible. It is often unsung, but the work of the contracts and the schedules and the payments and the rotations and the coordination of referrals, and the coordination with the courts and with providers are literally the glue that hold this system together. I have been very fortunate to work alongside some of the best professionals in government, some of the best professionals full-stop in making this work a reality. While we spent admirable and appropriate time talking about the direct delivery of services and the direct delivery of outreach, I do want to take a moment just to say very sincerely thank you to everybody at OCJ for making that a reality. So, with that, we will get back to our speakers. The next three speakers, I know we had a lot of folks sign up early and it all sort of came in at the same time. We have a few legal professionals who are on the list. I assure you we're getting to you soon. We do want to turn to folks who do not appear to be legal professionals and hear from them and come back, and
we'll be going in order. So, I'm going to give the next three names so folks can get ready. Ervin Bennett, Gloribel Castillo, and Sandra Mitchell. Ervin Bennett, you're up first. Maybe not. Okay, Gloribel Castillo? Okay, we can come back to these names. Sandra Mitchell?
Okay.

MS. ROBLEDO: I think Ms. Mitchell was trying to speak. I see her--you're on mute.

MR. DRESSLER: Okay.

MS. SANDRA MITCHELL: Can you hear me now?

MR. DRESSLER: Sandra Mitchell?

MS. MITCHELL: Yes, I [crosstalk] chat box.

Thank you for that. [Crosstalk] Sandra Mitchell. I am a New Yorker that is proud of New York, and I am proud of the HRA staff too, since I used to work in Accounts Payable. I used to process all those checks. And I am too so proud of our elected officials, Mark Levine, and also the unsung heroes that are behind the scenes answering the phones and filling out the forms, and just everything. I'm just so proud to be a New Yorker. Good evening, everyone. I just want to say thank you, Mr. Dressler--and I'm from the South so we say Mister and Misses and Ma'am to show respect--for making New York proud again. It takes leadership, and you have been a great leader for us. You have a listening ear for the
people and your team has as well as a reflection of you, and the heart and the bravery and the patience to work tirelessly to keep our city safe from homelessness and extensive costs. Before the Right to Counsel was created that was not the case for me. I was forced into homelessness but an unscrupulous landlord who wants to have people move in, only to have them move out so he could jack the rent up. I did represent myself pro se and I wouldn't want this to happen to any human being. I thought that my innards were just going to fall out and I would die every time I stood up in front of the judge. But doing volunteer work with CASA, Community Action for Safe Apartments, being in the shelter, and getting special letters written so that I could stay at the [unintelligible] guidelines for court hearings, and I could come back at 2:00 in the morning from our fearless leader Shayla and the wonderful staff that held me up, even when I was in the shelter fighting for better supports for people before you get thrown in a shelter. So, my story is a little bit different. Right to Counsel came after I lost my case. I could've gone further on but I didn't have the strength to do it, so now Right to Counsel is here and it's universal, and I'm very proud to be a part of that. I'm very proud to work with everyone, the community-based organizations and attorneys that
stepped up, and I'm really hoping and praying every day that we have a system that is sustainable so that everyone will get access to Right to Counsel, and that I hope, I'm praying, that we will make sure that it is available to people, that we make people aware that no one has to stand alone, like how I had to. I'm very concerned about the cost to New York City, and any city, any state in this United States of America, because in the shelter where I was it cost $2.1 million to run that shelter, and a lot could be done with that $2.1 million by making sure that people can stay in their homes, and that they don't have to face eviction, and that also they can provide sustainable housing, low income housing, and there were a lot of women there in that shelter that because their spouse either died or did not have jobs, or they separated, they were in there, they were working, and there was no housing for them.

MR. DRESSLER: I hate to interrupt. I just want to let you know you've got about 30 seconds to go.

MS. MITCHELL: Yes, that's all I have to say. Thank you so much for having the heart of the people of New York City, and for your staff, and for everyone that's on this call who are here from CASA, who are here from Northwest Bronx Community Clergy Coalition, who are here. Now I'm in my apartment, it's been four years, and I'm
just really very grateful for how New York City stood up, the knight in shining armor, and the beacon of light for the rest of the states, for the rest of the cities. Thank you.

MR. DRESSLER: Thank you. I said a moment ago how good our staff is. They're so good that they reminded that in years past I would read out names three at a time to give folks some sense that they might be coming up, so I'm going to do that now and going forward, as soon as I get back to my list, if you could just bear with me. Okay. The next three names, we'll take them in order, Cristina Quinones Betancourt, Jesenia Ponce, and Hannah Fishman. So, Cristina?

MS. CRISTINA QUINONES BETTANCOURT: Yes. Thank you, and good evening. My name is Cristina Quinones Betancourt and I am a supervising attorney in the housing project Mobilization for Justice in our Bronx office. MFJ envision a society in which there is equal justice for all. Our mission to achieve social justice by prioritizing the needs of people who have low incomes, have disabilities, or are otherwise disenfranchised. One of the very important ways that we do this is by providing zealous representation to tenants facing eviction. MFJ appreciates the opportunity to share information with OCJ about the vital work MFJ has done because of Right to
Counsel, as well as some thoughts about the implementation of Right to Counsel could be improved. We would also like to take this opportunity to extend a special thank you to Jordan Dressler. He has been instrumental in the implementation of Right to Counsel, as many people have already mentioned. He has been beyond helpful as we have continued to navigate the daunting challenges posed by COVID-19 pandemic. It is an understatement to state that Right to Counsel is necessary. Currently MFJ participates in Right to Counsel in the Bronx every Tuesday, and on that day a team of around 16 advocates comprised of supervising attorneys, staff attorneys, and paralegals appear in court virtually to conduct intakes for dozens of tenants who are all at imminent risk of eviction. We also receive additional referrals from HRA on a weekly basis via email. In the last year the right to counsel MFJ provided advice, counsel, and representation to thousands of tenants and prevented hundreds of evictions. We have also obtained millions of dollars in monetary assistance for our Right to Counsel clients. All of this was achieved in the middle of the pandemic and further demonstrates that Right to Counsel works. It is undeniable that Right to Counsel has saved countless tenants from eviction, however, MFJ also believes there is room to improve the implementation of the program to
ensure that we better fulfill our obligations. I'm not going to repeat many of the insightful comments that have already been made during this hearing, however, the following are some additional ways the process could be changed to better benefit clients, the court, and attorneys. To start, although HRA has improved its referral process over the last couple of years, we have suggestions on how that process could be further improved. Currently HRA refers some court cases to us via email with each case being referred in its own separate email. The system makes the referrals difficult to track, and it could lead to cases falling through the cracks. Accordingly, we would appreciate a more centralized system that would allow us to see all referrals for the entire week in a single place, such as a PDF, spreadsheet, worksheet, or document. Additionally, housing law is highly technical and complicated, and every single case typically requires advocates to conduct substantial investigation into the facts of the case before being able to provide confident representation. Accordingly, we would ask that HRA provide us with as much advanced notice as possible when referring cases to providers, because we frequently receive some referrals for cases that are scheduled to be conferenced within a matter of days. This short turn-around time is often insufficient to complete
an intake, much less to make meaningful strides towards resolving the tenants' legal issues, and also causes significant stress for tenants who then feel like they might have to go to court without representation.

MR. DRESSLER: 30 seconds to go.

MS. BETANCOURT: Yes, thank you. Finally, in order to provide holistic representation to our clients, as has already been mentioned, we would ask that legal service providers be authorized to prepare CityFHEPS applications in-house. The outsourcing of these applications creates needless delays and places tenants at risk of eviction. So, while we appreciate our partners at home base, and I understand that they are dealing with a massive volume of cases, allowing our paralegals to handle the process from start to finish would greatly benefit our clients. Thank you very much.

MR. DRESSLER: Thank you. Jesenia Ponce?

MS. JESENIA PONCE: Thank you, Jordan, and hello, everyone. Good evening, everyone. My name is Jesenia Ponce. I'm a supervising attorney here at NMIC. On behalf of NMIC I want to thank you for the opportunity to testify on the Right to Counsel program that has deeply impacted tenants in our community, in the communities that we serve. I do realize that my time is limited here, and I will briefly summarize some points in our written
testimony for our Right to Counsel staff has assisted [background noise] leveraging millions of dollars in rental arrears assistance since the acceptation of this law. However, their legal [background noise] often relies on the support of the team of staff who leverage City and private sources to ensure that we are able to address underlying issues that are often required for our advocacy to be successful. So, this is why funding for proper staffing is essential to the long-term eviction prevention idea. Our work does not end with settlement, as many of us know here. Eviction proceedings require far more than litigation. Our community needs a holistic approach to resolution that will not leave tenants unstable in their homes after we sign a stipulation for them or with them in court. Also, as attorneys navigate through the upcoming eviction wave that will be early 2022. The predatory practices by landlords will likely be exposed at a greater scale. As it stands, most of our work focuses on eviction prevention, however, we are unable to conduct investigative work and find patterns of inconsistencies across the City to then engage in progressive work. We cannot really make a difference long term if we can't engage in the [background noise] investigation in this progressive work. Systemic issues as we know as exist, as many of us have encountered through our litigation or
advocacy in court. Without proper funding to research the
issues, like I said, we cannot make a difference long
term. Impact litigation is crucial for a long-term
solution to housing instability brought on by predatory
landlords. So, this is essential for our work.

MR. DRESSLER: 60 seconds.

MS. BETANCOURT: Thanks, Jordan. With the
moratorium lifting, the Right to Counsel program will play
a significant goal, as we all know, in maintaining
affordable housing stock in New York City and assessing
how the program can be improved will result in lasting
result at eviction prevention for years to come, for
generations to come. Thanks again, Jordan, for hearing
our testimony.

MR. DRESSLER: Thank you. I'm going to make
another reminder to everybody to please try to slow down.
I know there's a lot of information to cover, and again, I
know we're placing somewhat of an external pressure on you
because we've got a time limit, but you understand the
good reasons why we have that, but we do want to make sure
that folks taking advantage of interpretation services are
hearing all of the important things that you all have to
say. So, please just try your best to slow down a little
bit. Also, I wanted to give a heads up that after Hannah
Fishman provides a statement, we're going to be moving on
to some folks who actually are going to be speaking
through the Spanish interpreter. I'm going to give those
names now so folks can get ready. I just want to warn
everybody this will be a moment where we want to make sure
the technology works, so you may want to give us just a
little indulgence to make sure everybody's in and properly
heard. Those names are Maria Vasquez, Lorena Santana, and
Daisy Santos. They'll come with a Spanish interpreter
right after Hannah Fishman. Hannah, you're up.

MS. HANNAH FISHMAN: Good evening. Thank you
for the opportunity to speak tonight. My name is Hannah
Fishman. I'm a supervising attorney in the New York Legal
Assistance Group's Tenants' Rights Unit. NYLAG is a civil
legal services organization and a proud Right to Counsel
provider. The Right to Counsel for tenants in New York
City has already been a resounding success as we've
already heard tonight. Though the program has prevented
eviction and enforced tenants rights for thousands,
there's more that needs to be done to make sure not just
access to counsel, but access to the high-quality legal
services and programs dropped [unintelligible] and to
complementary services that will better serve our clients
needs. First, it's imperative that OCJ develop a process
for providing tenants with their right to counsel that
ensures cases are assigned and calendared based on the
capacity of legal services providers. Even with exponential growth in the tenant bar, attorneys already are dealing with case loads higher than ever before. Overburdening advocates with unmanageable case loads not only may lead to a deterioration in the quality of services we can provide, but also will burn out our staff, preventing the field from retaining the passionate, diligent advocates we work hard to develop and train. There's a culture change happening in Housing Court today. Landlords and their attorneys, long accustomed to the eviction mill operating on their timeline are now facing the highly competent attorneys representing tenants. A case that may have resolved quickly in the past no longer necessarily will because of the heavy litigation required to assert tenants' rights. This vital culture change bringing Housing Court back to its inception as a place for tenants to assert their rights can only be effectuated with advocates who are sufficiently resourced to meet their clients' needs. Second, many tenants face challenges accessing their right to counsel because they are persons with disabilities, limited English proficiency, or both. OCJ must ensure those tenants can have those needs met even at the early stages of the litigation process, such as when tenants first get assigned to counsel. Finally, the Right to Counsel alone
cannot solve problems facing New York City tenants. They will be best served with the assistance of social workers, public benefits advocates, mental health professionals, for example, in addition to housing attorneys. The Right to Counsel program is as successful as it is because of programs like One-Shot Deals, CITYFEPS, CASA. These services should both be protected and expanded, as should affordable, safe housing in the City. Eviction defense attorneys can reduce evictions and avoid the violent eviction process.

MR. DRESSLER: 30 seconds.

MS. PONCE: They cannot create affordable housing where there is none. Thank you.

MR. DRESSLER: Okay, all right. So, next up is Maria Vasquez who I understand is going to be using the Spanish interpreter [crosstalk].

MS. MARIA VASQUEZ: [via interpreter] Good evening. My name is Maria Vasquez. I'm a resident of the Bronx. I'm a member of CASA. I'm here to testify how the organizations like CASA are important for the people of the Bronx. The Bronx usually is the highest borough with the levels of eviction compared to other boroughs. Eviction of 79 units higher during the pandemic. How the eviction affects my community? If a tenant like me is facing an eviction, to have an attorney is the key to
keeping me in my house. I'm in court, I'm being arrested, and in need of repair, and I'm also a victim of COVID-19. Eviction disrupts the children's' education, destroys whole communities, and has a few other traumatic consequences.

MR. DRESSLER: Just about another minute to go.

MS. VASQUEZ: Okay. [via interpreter] To have legal assets also--

RAOUL: I'm sorry, I'm asking her to repeat.

MS. VASQUEZ: [via interpreter] Legal representation protects the tenant's rights, and also to fight for their homes. That would be all. Good night.

MR. DRESSLER: Thank you. Next up we have Lorena Santana.

MS. LORENA SANTANA: [via interpreter] My name is Lorena Santana. I'm a tenant. I'm a leader for the [unintelligible] immigration. We are not tired to say how far we have come in order to represent the rights of the New York City tenants and to part of the coalition with that name. We are also very excited to see that fund has been spanned to the whole city and all zip codes, and to get funds in order to build power in our communities. As long as the time is passing we can see how needed is the right of representation. We have still seen that in our communities as tenants we have seen how 84% of the tenants
with these rights won, and to see how the case of the landlord are decreasing in the courts. This right to representation helps us to develop more accurate and equal laws. Lower the rent, regulate the apartments, and also repairs by the landlords. The COVID-19 pandemic shows how big is the crisis of living spaces and is important to have a shelter when the time is not good or we are struggling. Even though we are now dealing with the crisis that we have and the affects of the pandemic, many tenants can't pay the rent. Further, local laws have made a [unintelligible] with housing. Since March 15, 2020 to November 1, 2021 the landlords, the big corporations wanted to evict more than 72,000 cases [crosstalk] or other than the pandemic case. If we add the [unintelligible] of eviction this program will finish January 15th, and now there is no money for thousands of people that still need help. As well we want to recommend to the City and to the Office of Civil Justice to make sure that every tenant in the City aren't by themselves, but also they have the support in order to keep his or her home. Increasingly the right to representation in the City [crosstalk] way and in languages of the City.

MR. DRESSLER: Just about another--pardon me, madam, I'm so sorry. Pardon me, madam. Just about another minute to go.
MS. SANTANA: [via interpreter] Implement and finance the Local Law 53 in order that all tenants have the right and now how to use it. Support and join to our coalition to ask to the Governor and the Senate and the Assembly that make the right of representation a law for the whole New York State. Put in place a process equal and systematic in order the tenants get access to this right. Preserve the existing programs when the right to representation becomes a law. Tenants' right of representation we have advanced a lot, implementing the rights of the tenants.

MR. DRESSLER: I'm sorry to interrupt. We need to really wrap it up here to make sure other folks have-- any last words?

MS. SANTANA: [via interpreter] I'm about to finish.

MR. DRESSLER: Okay, go ahead.

MS. SANTANA: [via interpreter] That's why we have to take advantage of this crisis in order to create opportunities and keep growing. Thank you very much.

MR. DRESSLER: Thank you. Next up we have Daisy Santos, and after Daisy Santos, I want to give a heads up, we have Ava Ferenci [phonetic], Dennis Donnelly, and Bruno Daniel Garcia after Daisy Santos. So, Daisy Santos [crosstalk].
MS. DAISY SANTOS: [via interpreter] Good evening. My name is Daisy Santos. I'm a tenant and I live in the Bronx and I'm part of the Housing Committee. The Bronx is a very poor community and it's like a mix, too. That's why a lot of people don't have information. There is a lot of animosity between the tenants and the landlords. Even though the law has to be the same for all, it's very hard to get [unintelligible] if we don't have the right representation in front of the justice. A lot of people don't know that they have that right. For example, when I arrived to this country and I just knew that I had right just a short time ago. But institutions like CASA taught me a lot. [Crosstalk] the situations of persons that live in very bad conditions and the landlord doesn't care about it and they do nothing. But if we are represented by an organization like CASA and other organizations we can live a little bit better.

[Background noise] I'm sorry, somebody is talking?

MR. DRESSLER: I'm sorry, let me interrupt. I apologize. Let me just interrupt for a moment to just announce, I think this is the case, but if not, anybody who's not speaking ought to be on mute, that's myself included, until it's time to flag for time. I'd appreciate if you would just [crosstalk]. Please, go ahead.
MS. SANTOS: [via interpreter] Sorry. I think that we need more help here in communities like this; we may need for information because we need it. We need it in order to defend ourselves. It's good to know that we have lawyers that can be our voice, and they can express our sense. The only way to keep the democracy in our country is to close the gap between the poor and rich, and the low is the same for all. It doesn't matter our race and condition. Thank you.

MR. DRESSLER: Thank you, thank you. We're going to take a moment to move the interpreter back into the Spanish room, and I want to make sure that happens smoothly, so let's just take a moment to let that happen. Then, as I said, I believe the next name is--sorry, I lost my list again--I think I said Ava Ferenci. But I want to make sure and I don't want to confuse anything. Yes, Ava Ferenci is going to be next in just a moment. Apologies if I'm mispronouncing that or any other name this even. I think I've been doing an okay job. Okay.

MS. ROBLEDO: Raoul, you are now in the English room. Please go ahead with the consecutive interpretation.

MR. DRESSLER: Okay, great. We consider this a great victory that we've done this fairly smoothly. In a night talking about a lot of great victories, we're happy
about this one, too. Okay, Ava Ferenci? Maybe not? Or on mute? Ava or Ava [crosstalk]? Okay, we'll come back. Sorry. Again, apologies. Next up, Dennis Donnelly.

Dennis? Mr. Donnelly?

MR. DENNIS DONNELLY: Yes, hi, everyone.

MR. DRESSLER: Thank you.

MR. DONNELLY: Thank you. My name is Dennis Donnelly and I'm a staff attorney at Communities Resist where we provide legal services and organizing support for tenant associations and individual tenants throughout Brooklyn and Queens. Thank you to Jordan Dressler, OCJ, and HRA for your unwavering support, for organizing, and for legal services that have helped thousands of tenants across New York City during this recovery. It's with your continued support that we'll be able to help our clients as the City moves towards recovery. We're here today to speak in terms of where to put the Right to Counsel program, as well as the Anti-Harassment and Tenant Protection program, both of which desperately need to continue to be funded and supported by OCJ and the City as they provide complimentary legal services for tenants throughout New York City. We are proud members of the Right to Counsel [crosstalk] Coalition and we echo the comments made by many others in support of not only the existing Right to Counsel program but in many ways to
strengthen and expand it as it is fully implemented. I want to echo the comments specifically about the benefits of advocating for the passage of statewide right to counsel, as this would provide much-needed additional funding and support for legal services throughout the rest of New York, as well as in New York City, as well as the need for New York City's Right to Counsel program as well as the state program to provide funding not just for lawyers but for the vital and necessary work of social workers, mental health advocates, benefits advocates, tenant organizers, and other staff who help tenants throughout the City in so many ways that lawyers often are less-equipped to do, speaking from my own personal experience. But what I'd also like to talk about is the community-based legal services work that I personally do really under the Anti-Harassment and Tenant Protection grant, which is a part of the demand you've heard from many people that other programs continue to be funded as OCJ also expands Right to Counsel. The HP program provides additional protection that goes beyond the general shield that Right to Counsel gives anyone in an eviction case.

MR. DRESSLER: I'm sorry to interrupt you. Just about 60 seconds to go.

MR. DONNELLY: Thank you. We know in many areas
in New York, but especially in gentrifying communities or areas that have been targeted by re-zonings, that the worst landlords don't just politely file one eviction case in court, they also go to unscrupulous tactics such as not making repairs, stopping heat and hot water and other essential services, construction as harassment, and other more explicit and old fashioned forms of harassment and discrimination that we know are still a huge problem for tenants throughout the City. Legal services that work under a community or group representation model allow for tenants who are facing these kinds of predatory and unscrupulous landlords to be able to use their power more effectively, not just with legal services getting better outcomes in court, but with winning better conditions in their homes and with providing relief for Right to Counsel providers so that they are not overburdened with a large number of cases from specific buildings run by some of the worst evictors in New York City.

MR. DRESSLER: Sorry to interrupt. We need to wrap it up around there, so maybe--

MR. DONNELLY: [interposing] Thank you. My last thought was just again to thank everyone and to stand in support with the Right to Counsel Coalition, the Right to Counsel program, and other legal services funding. Thank you.
MR. DRESSLER: Thank you. Okay, I'm going to give the three next names who I don't think are going to need a switch-out of interpreter. We'll find out if that's true. Before I do, I just want to remind everybody, if you want to speak and you have not yet signed onto the list, you can do so in the chat. If you are on a phone and want to weigh in, we can do that too, and just want to make sure I get the right instructions on how to do that. I believe it's pressing star 9 to raise your hand. Is that right? Yes? Star 9? Yes, I'm told it's right. So, you can feel free to do that. But now we have Laura Govan, Anita Martinez, and Kim Statuto [phonetic]. So, Laura Govan, you're up first. Laura Govan? Apologies if I'm mispronouncing it. No? Okay, we can come back. Anita Martinez? Oh, shoot. I'm sorry, there was a name that I did skip. I skipped Bruno. Thank you. I can see it in the chat which I happened to see. Let me go back. It happens once every year. Bruno Daniel Garcia, sorry, you have the floor. I apologize. Bruno?

MR. BRUNO DANIEL GARCIA: [Audio garbled] Thank you so much for giving me the time. I'm glad [unintelligible] represent [unintelligible] all of my colleagues [unintelligible] elaborated on a lot before.

MR. DRESSLER: Bruno, I'm very sorry. We're having some trouble with the audio. I'm hearing it at
least, and I'm looking at our ASL interpreters and I think they're having some trouble as well. I'm not quite sure what to do about that.

MR. GARCIA: I'm not sure either. Is [unintelligible]?

MR. DRESSLER: If it's okay, and if you don't mind, want to drop off and log back in? And we'll keep an eye out for your name in the chat, and come right back to you. Would that be okay? We'll give it a try? I think he did. Let's give that a try. Okay. Let's come back to Laura Govan, see--okay. And now Anita Martinez?

MS. ANITA MARTINEZ: Hi. How are you? Thank you for your time. I'll make it really quick, less than probably 60 seconds. So, this is just a concern that I have. We lost our mother to COVID and she was the head of household on a lease. The management is saying to us that she does no longer exist and that we have to leave the premises. We are trying to avoid leaving and we need assistance and we don't know where to go or who, at this point, to go to. I also want to say that they should at least--the landlords should post for assistance where to go, and was wondering if anybody can help in that response. Thank you.

MR. DRESSLER: Thank you. Kim Statuto?

MS. KIM STATUTO: Good evening, everybody.
Thank you for letting me be here. I'm actually a product of eviction. Way before Right to Counsel I was evicted in 1994 with four children because I did not understand legal jargon in Housing Court they were able to take the apartment that inherited due to my mom's passing. Had I known what I know today they would have never got the apartment. When the Department of Homeless Services found out what was going on we when to court, we won the case, but management and landlord said, oh, well, we'll have to put her back on the waiting list because we've already given that apartment away. So, all the work that Right to Counsel has done post-1994 is great, but had we had them then I would have not become homeless for seven months in the New York City shelter system. I support them firmly. I thank you for letting me be here. Evictions are not only violent, they are traumatizing to children, because I had four children, one under 3 months, and they watched their stuff be thrown on a truck and there was nothing I could do for them. Thank you.

MR. DRESSLER: Thank you. I'm going to come back to Laura Govan.

MS. LAURA GOVAN: I'm here. Can you hear me now?

MR. DRESSLER: Yeah, sure can. All good.

MS. GOVAN: I have to make it brief because I
have children here, but [unintelligible] require my
attention as well. My name is Laura Govan. I've lived in
my home for 32 years. My housing situation involves
illegal, unlawful evictions that's not resolved,
discrimination, unethical, harassing, and unethical issues
and conduct which are still not resolved. I was not able
to get an attorney because Right to Counsel in Housing
Court was not available when my cases or proceedings
started in Housing Court. To make it as brief as
possible, I think Right to Counsel is important because
tenants have a right to know about what their rights are
and to remain in their homes and where to get assistance
and/or help. And what's required to preserve their
tenancy and to have community-based groups that would be
available for outreach and available to educate the
tenants to their right to housing and help or assistance
to preserve their rights to their tenancy and to require
courts and landlords to ensure tenants know about Right to
Counsel and getting assistance, perhaps with social
workers, paralegals, or whatever, to aid them with helping
the tenants preserve their rights to remain in their
community and to preserve their tenancy, and that's about
as far as I could go right now. These are the issues that
I believe that's needed for people to remain at home. I
think we need Right to Counsel. Okay. Thank you.
MR. DRESSLER: Thank you.

MS. GOVAN: You're welcome. Okay, we're going to come back to Bruno Daniel Garcia who's been able to rejoin. Again, sorry about that, Bruno. I know there were those audio issues. All right, we can come back. I think we now need a moment because the next two speakers are going to be Spanish speakers, and so we want to give another opportunity for our interpreter to rejoin our larger group to be able to give the interpretation, so let's just take a moment.


RAOUL: Can you hear me?

MS. ROBLEDO: Perfectly.

MR. DRESSLER: Bear with us. Okay. The next name is Yoselyn Gomez, and if you just give us a moment we'll be able to share the next two so folks can gear up and get ready. After Yoselyn Gomez we'll have Anjelica or Angelica Rojas and Rosa Guzman. But now we have Yoselyn Gomez. Thank you.

MS. YOSELYN GOMEZ: [via interpreter] Good evening. My name is Yoselyn Gomez. I'm a member of the Right to Counsel, and I'm also a member of the CASA organization here in the Bronx. I'm not going to repeat what others have said before. I just want to let you know
the reasons why the tenants live here in the Bronx need to remain in their homes. We have been fighting for the Right to Counsel to since 2015 and we are proud that this should be the first one in the nation. I tried to benefit from the state-approved benefits of the COVID housing fund, but I have not received a single cent from that. That was offered to tenants as kind of a rent fund. That means that I'm a victim and I'm in line to be homeless starting in January of next year. By my organization CASA has been at the forefront of the struggle for the tenants' rights here in the Bronx. I want to ask the authorities to expand the Right to Counsel to all citizens of New York State, because the right to a decent home is a right that has existed since 1948 at least. I want to ask you if you can please provide additional funding and expanding financing for organizations such as CASA that fight on behalf of tenants. Because we also need to provide information to tenants that they do have a right to counsel and that's a right that exists. Today I live in my own home--

MR. DRESSLER: [interposing] I'm sorry to interrupt. We have about 60 seconds to go.

[Spanish crosstalk]

MS. GOMEZ: [via interpreter] I'm here because the lawyer represented me in front of Housing Court. I
want this right to be expanded to all of the communities. Thank you.

RAOUL: She said that the interpreter doesn't [unintelligible].

MR. DRESSLER: All right, we're going to move on. Thank you, everybody. Okay, and I apologize. Angelica Rojas. And again, we will need the help of the interpreter here. Angelica Rojas?

MS. ANGELICA ROJAS: Yes, hi, everyone. They're making me have an interpreter.

[Spanish crosstalk]

MS. ROJAS: [via interpreter] Good evening, my name is Angelica Rojas. I represent the CASA organization. This organization helped me and my neighbors to organize ourselves. This organization helped me find a lawyer, and they helped us fight against the injustices from the landlords. I live in a complex of seven buildings. The landlord doesn't give us heating or hot water, and during the pandemic this happened. Thanks to legal counsel we won the case. Thanks to legal counsel we were able to remain in our homes. And thanks to legal counsel we continue in the struggle. The landlord has not paid the electric bill. Because the organization helped us organize ourselves and seek legal assistance, we received a notice on Tuesday that they're going to shut
off electricity and gas service in the building. Through CASA and legal services the landlord paid the electric bill yesterday because we were able to pressure. Organizations like CASA provide legal assistance, lawyers, and workshops where we received education in relation to our legal rights as tenants, and that's why we keep fighting and we remain in our homes. There should be more punishment of landlords. They should be punished because they are not providing basic services to their tenants. Our building is infested with rats and cockroaches. I live on the fifth floor and the roof is always leaking every time it rains. At CASA we receive the legal help to provide the services and for the representation that we need. They also helped us with the interpretation. We get education in relation to our rights as tenants, how to be good leaders, and to organize ourselves.

MR. DRESSLER: We are just about--do you have any final--we're at about 45 seconds out. If I could have a moment. We know it takes longer when it's [crosstalk]--it's okay. I was just going to say we know it's been taking longer with interpretation naturally, so we've been given more time, but please, continue.

MS. GOMEZ: [via interpreter] [audio breaks up]. [Spanish crosstalk]

MS. GOMEZ: [via interpreter] The landlord has
behave in such a way that everything has become a chronic type of harassment, and he's always seeking to remove us from the building. We need legal services like CASA to help us in these issues. We need organizations like CASA and legal services to defend ourselves. Thank you for listening.

MR. DRESSLER: Thank you. Okay, bear with me. Okay, next up we'll have Rosa Guzman, and then following Rosa Guzman we'll have Ines Arzu [phonetic]. Before we move on, I just want to ask if there's anyone else who wants to sign up to speak, and in particular, just for logistics' stake, if there's anyone Spanish speaking who would like to say a few words, please sign up in the chat. We'll give that a minute. But in the mean time, Rosa Guzman?

MS. ROSA GUZMAN: Hello?

MR. DRESSLER: Great, yes.


RAOUL: Could you please bring in the next interpreter? I've been interpreting straight for almost half an hour.

MS. ROBLEDO: Will do, Raoul.

RAOUL: thank you.

MR. DRESSLER: Can we continue now though and
we'll follow up for the next one? No? Okay.

FRANCIS: Okay, can you hear me now?

MS. GUZMAN: Hello?

[Spanish crosstalk]

MS. GUZMAN: [via interpreter] My name is Rosa and I live in the Bronx. I am a member of CASA, and I'm here to testify that CASA organization have been very important for the Bronx community. Usually the Bronx community has a higher rate of eviction compared to other cities. If a tenant like me faces an eviction you have a right to have legal counsel, because that helps us to keep our home safe. Eviction causes dramatic consequences for the families and to the communities. Thanks to the CASA organization we feel a little bit safer. We learn a lot from them, including our rights of a tenant, because we know that a lot of landlords live [unintelligible] the tenants. I think that the City has to care that all tenants have the right to legal representation to have a safe community and quiet in the house. I think that the City spent more money taking care of homeless that what they pay in order that the tenants have representation. That will be all. Thank you very much, and good night.

MR. DRESSLER: Thank you very much. Next up we have Ines Arzu.

MS. INEZ ARZU: [via interpreter] Good night,
good evening. My name is Ines Arzu. I came here to testify that the group that helped me a lot is CASA. I've been living in this building for about 19 years, and they help me a lot in court. Because I'm a single mom and you know that in this country it's very hard to be a single mother. I also applied for the relief that gave the government to pay the rent. I applied since the month of June; at this time I have no answer. They said that they are missing a letter from the landlord, and the landlord is telling me apply for a One-Shot Deal. I think it's a One-Shot Deal. I called to [unintelligible] from CASA and I explained to them my situation, and they said don't apply for One-Shot Deal because I have no proof of the help that I was supposed to get from them. I would like that the lawyer can communicate with those people in the government in order that they give them an answer in cases like ours. Because I have kids and I also have my mother, she is sick. Where can I go with them? And I'm thinking CASA because of the reputation and because they have been there for me. [Unintelligible]. And Section 8 is not paying because they found violations here. They have me [crosstalk] today and tomorrow and they are not doing anything for me. And thank you to CASA for being here fighting our cases. January 15, 2022 a lot of people, we are going to be out there, a lot of people. And I hope
and pray to God that we can get help in order to pay our rent. Last year I was in quarantine because one of my kids had COVID. This year too my daughter [unintelligible] has COVID and I had to quarantine with her too. How can we pay the rent if we are not working? Thank to CASA for the advice that they gave us day by day in order that we learn how to fight for our house. Thank you. Good night.

MR. DRESSLER: Right on schedule. Thank you. Okay, I want to call out some names. These are folks that we understood had signed up. They may not be present, but with the interpreter here I want to make the most of it. So, Jimmy Moran? Okay. Marisol Morales? All right. Teodolina Ponce [phonetic]?

MS. TEODOLINA PONCE: [via interpreter] Good evening.

MR. DRESSLER: Go ahead.

[Spanish crosstalk]

MS. T. PONCE: [via interpreter] Good evening, my name is Teodolina Ponce, and I'm a member of CASA. I live in the Bronx, and I think that improving the [unintelligible] in order that the tenant can know what to do. The City should put publicity and banners and campaigns [unintelligible]. The most solid knowledge for the tenants, improve the behavior of intimidation by the
landlords and the unethical behavior from the attorneys of
the landlords. Improve compliance of the intimidation
behavior of the landlord and investigate the worst
evictions. Implement the Local Law and give money to the
community groups to make activities for education.
Improve the right to legal representatives and to stay
level in order that be sent to all tenants, doesn't matter
the incomes and the type of cases. And require that the
courts and the landlords make that the tenants know RTC.
It's important that the City makes sure that all tenants
have and use this rights to legal representation,
especially during economic crisis of worldwide hell. The
City can and has to do more to stop evictions and educate
and support the tenants how to navigate for the Housing
Court.

MR. DRESSLER: We have about 60 seconds to go.

[Spanish crosstalk]

MS. T. PONCE: [via interpreter] Nobody should
remain with no home or to be afraid to lose his or her
home. As a Bronx residence I think we need organizations
like CASA to educate us and expose us better. Thank you
to all for listening to me.

MR. DRESSLER: Thank you. Okay. Mercedes
Acosta? Okay. I think with that our able Spanish
interpreter can go back to the Spanish room. We'll give
that a moment so that the transfer happens. Then the next few names we're going to call are Kevin Worthington, Linda [crosstalk]—wait, I'm sorry, Kevin, just give me one second to give a couple of names if they're present. [All phonetic] Linda Seward, Mercedes Escoto, and Elias Gomez, and Elvira Uribe. But first, Kevin Worthington. Kevin, thank you.

MR. KEVIN WORTHINGTON: Good evening, and thank you for the opportunity to testify tonight. My name is Kevin Worthington. I'm a staff attorney at Communities Resist, and I'll be reading my colleague Bruno Daniel Garcia's testimony. We're here in solidarity with the Right to Counsel Coalition of which we're a proud member. We continue to stand in full support of the expansion and accelerated implementation of Right to Counsel, and therefore thank the City for passing and implementing Local Law 54, and for enacting Local Law 53 requiring the City to work with [unintelligible] fund neighborhood-based organizing groups. A recent report indicates 61% of eligible tenants don't know about their right to counsel before arriving in court, so we urge the City to implement and find Local Law 53. When Right to Counsel was first passed the coalition presented the City with a list of principals for implementation, preserving all the funding sources for legal services was and is still critical. The
City must preserve all City-funding housing-related legal services programs and ensure that current funding for existing programs providing affirmative litigation, building-wide work, or publishing specific legal services is not eliminated, reduced, or redirected. Through the LEAD Coalition, funding from the Anti-Harassment Tenant Protection Program has served over 16,000 for the past seven years. We believe that programs like HTP work very much in coordination with Right to Counsel. We have worked in buildings where tenants once prevailing over an individual eviction have been able to organize with their neighbors and realize even more success by fighting for repairs and ending harassment. HTP-funded services are also able to provide outreach to tenants early, organizing buildings before evictions are commenced. During the pandemic we saw the concerning rise in harassment tactics such as illegal lockouts. Landlords hope that these tactics would be an avenue to forcibly misplace tenants without having to follow proceedings in court. We saw that many families on the brink of eviction have horrible long-term repair issues that the landlord hopes will cause families to self-evict. Our experience has shown that an effective response is to organize tenant association for group representation. For these reasons, Communities Resist enthusiastically supports the expansion of Right to
MR. DRESSLER: Okay. So, I'm going to do a few things. Again, Linda Seward, Mercedes Escoto, Elias Gomez, and then Mariatou Diallo [phonetic]? Okay. I said there were a few names that I would come back to a second time just in case we had missed them the first time. Ervin Bennett? Okay. Gloribel Castillo? Okay. With that, with one exception, Lauren Springer, which we're about to get to, that is going to bring us to the end of the list. We're getting close to 9. We can go a bit after 9. We want everybody to be heard, but now would be the time if you haven't hopped into the chat to put your name on the list, please do so now; it's time for that. In the meantime, Lauren Springer?

MS. LAUREN SPRINGER: Thank you. I'm speaking tonight on behalf of the Right to Counsel New York City Coalition. Good evening. Thank you, Jordan Dressler, and the Office of Civil Justice for the opportunity to testify today. Please accept our testimony on behalf of the Right to Counsel New York City Coalition which led and won the campaign to establish Right to Counsel for tenants facing eviction. We're proud of New York City's groundbreaking Right to Counsel legislation and applaud the City Council,
the mayor, and the Office of Civil Justice for its
dedication to making the Right to Counsel available to all
New Yorkers during this pandemic. This law has had
tremendous impact in just a few years since it passed.
People have testified tonight. 86% of tenants who had the
Right to Counsel won their case and stayed in their comes.
Landlords are suing people less and community groups are
actively using the Right to Counsel as a powerful tool to
protect and advance tenants' rights. Right to Counsel has
also helped develop a body of more just case law, lower
tenants' rents, restabilize apartments, and has forced
landlords to make repairs. As we've seen during the
COVID-19 pandemic, Right to Counsel is more important than
ever before. Hundreds of thousands of New Yorkers are
unable to pay rent and emergency federal and state laws
have added a level of complexity to eviction court
proceedings that make Housing Court even more difficult to
navigate. We know that evictions in housing instability
have a disproportionate impact on people of color,
especially women and children and color. Evictions and
housing instability also have significant impacts not just
on people's housing but on people's education, employment,
family relationships, physical and mental health, and so
much more. New York City's Right to Counsel moves us
closer towards achieving economic gender and racial
justice. So, we applaud the City for extending Right to Counsel to all Housing Court cases during the pandemic, regardless of zip code, for making Right to Counsel available to all tenants with pre-pandemic eviction warrants, regardless of income, for instituting a blanket income eligibility waiver, and for passing and implementing Local Law 54, speeding up the implementation of Right to Counsel by more than a year. We also applaud the City for enacting Local Law 53 requiring the City to work with and fund neighborhood-based organizing groups, and we are anxious to hear about its implementation. Since the onslaught of COVID-19, between March 15, 2020, and November 1, 2021, landlords, mostly large, predatory equity corporations, filed over 72,000 eviction cases against New York City families, and many more cases are still pending from before the pandemic. Our eviction protection laws are set to expire on January 15th of next year, and the Emergency Rental Assistance funds are almost all depleted. Right to Counsel has been critical to ensuring that as many of these families as possible retain their basic human right to a home. It's paramount that we focus on strengthening and expanding it. So, in order to protect New Yorkers' basic human right to housing and in a spirit of collaboration, we strongly encourage the City and the Office of Civil Justice to adopt the following
recommendations. One, increase the City's outreach and awareness. During this crisis it's more important for the City to initiate an aggressive public outreach and awareness campaign. We understand that the City's outreach plans were on hold as cases were paused, and we applaud the City's rollout of a paid media campaign this past Monday, November 15th, to raise awareness about Right to Counsel. In May 2020 the Hunter College Department of Urban Planning Studio released a report which indicates that 61% of eligible tenants in New York City's Housing Courts did not know about their right to counsel prior to arriving in court. Interviews took place between October 2019 and mid-February 2020. Unless tenants are aware of their right to counsel before they receive court papers, many could leave their homes believing they have no chance of winning a case on their own, especially if they've been unable to pay rent in this economic and public health crisis. We urge the City to ensure that the paid media campaign provides information in multiple languages across all the chosen platforms and media sources, and that these platforms and sources include local community media outlets, and that the media campaign is sustained and supported on a regular basis. We also recommend that the implementation and funding of Local Law 53 is noted above. We applaud the City for passing this legislation, but we
are concerned that it has yet to be implemented. We urge the City to implement this law immediately so that tenants know their rights and can protect their homes. We also urge that you support and join the RTC NYC Coalition in demanding that the governor and our New York State Assembly and Senate immediately pass our statewide Right to Counsel Bill. The state law improves the New York City law in a few key ways. It extends right to counsel to all New Yorkers regardless of income. As we saw during COVID we can and must make this a right to all tenants regardless of income. It covers any case that could result in a tenant losing their home. This includes Supreme Court cases, administrative hearings, appeals, and more. It requires the courts, judges, and landlords to ensure that tenants know about their right to counsel and how to use it. It also requires the courts to adjourn cases until tenants have had time to retain and consult with their RTC attorney. We also urge that they implement a uniform and systematic process for providing tenants with Right to Counsel, ensuring that cases as calendared based on the capacity of legal service providers. The Office of Civil Justice should coordinate the assignment of councilman and eviction cases with the Office of Court Administration, and OCJ should strongly advocate for OCA to calendar cases in a volume that matches the capacity of
RTC legal services organizations. OCJ must also ensure adequate funding for the RTC legal services provider so that there are enough attorneys and support staff to meet the need. The City must ensure that tenants receive full and adequate representation to prevent evictions. This requires social workers, paralegals, public benefits advocates, mental health professionals, and other service providers in addition to housing attorneys. The City should recognize these services as necessary with a holistic implementation of the Right to Counsel and fund RTC legal services at a level that enables RTC legal services organizations to use multi-role teams to provide holistic RTC representation. Finally, preserve current programs. When ARTC was first passed we presented the City with a list of principals for implementation, preserving other funding sources for legal services was and is still critical. The City must preserve all City-funded housing-related legal services programs and ensure that current funding for existing programs providing affirmative litigation, building-wide work, or population-specific legal services is not eliminated, reduced, or redirected. This includes funding for affirmative cases that deal with repairs, harassment, et cetera, for individual tenants, and groups of tenants. Extending ARTC for these cases during the pandemic made this clear. Most
families on the brink of eviction continue to face landlord harassment and live in dangerous and unhealthy conditions. These conditions often include mold, vermin, cockroaches, and other pests, which are common causes and triggers of the types of respiratory conditions that make COVID-19 especially dangerous. Thank you for taking the time to listen to me this evening.

MR. DRESSLER: I think I'm back off mute. Thank you. With that, we have come to the end of the list of speakers, and therefore the end of this hearing. Last call. If anybody wants to have the last word you can pop into the chat. Going once, going twice, okay. At 9:01 p.m. I want to say thank you to everybody for sticking it out. These nights are always long. They are always illuminating. We really appreciate the opportunity to be heard and to hear, and if you're still on this meeting it means you are very committed to the success of the Right to Counsel program, and we appreciate the support and the guidance and the insights. So, with that, I want to say thank you to all and wish you a good night. Thanks, everybody.

(Proceeding Concluded.)
CERTIFICATE

I, Gabrielle Atkinson, certify that the foregoing transcript of proceedings in the Public Hearing on OCJ's Universal Access to Legal Counsel Program, was prepared using the required transcription equipment and is a true and accurate record of the proceedings.

11/22/2021