

New York State Assembly Executive Budget Hearing on Social Services

Testimony of Velvet A. Johnson Ross, Leader, Neighbors Together

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My name is Velvet A. Johnson Ross, and I am a leader at Neighbors Together, a community-based organization located in central Brooklyn that organizes homeless and formerly homeless New Yorkers.

I would like to thank the Senate Finance Committee and Assembly Ways and Means Committee Chairs Krueger and Weinstein, respectively, as well as the other committee members for the opportunity to submit testimony regarding the proposed executive budget for social services.

I am here today to discuss the need for the Housing Access Voucher Program (A3701/S2804) to be passed and fully funded in this year's budget.

Thank you for taking the time to allow me to share my testimony. I come here today as someone who has experienced eviction and homelessness. I understand all too well what many New Yorkers are currently facing; battling an illness like COVID and/or facing eviction and becoming homeless. I was illegally evicted by my landlord who refused to remediate toxic black mold, several mice infestations and three bedbug infestations. The constant exposure to toxins and rodents made me severely ill, and after fighting and beating cancer, my health is still severely impacted to this day. Before experiencing housing insecurity, I never thought someone like me would be impacted by homelessness. I was educated with an advanced degree from a prestigious college, I had a full-time job on Madison Ave and served on my community board appointed by the Bronx Borough President.

We have a narrative of what someone who is homeless looks like, but I'm here to tell you that any one of us can be in this position. Even without the career, education or civic appointments, no one should have to live like I did, and fear being unhoused. Housing should be a human right, and good, clean, safe and affordable housing should be the standard and not an option.

Homelessness is like a domino effect; you're not just left without a domicile but also the daily impact of not knowing where you are going to sleep at night and whether it will be safe. I went to the shelter, but it was too dangerous for me to stay in because of my compromised immune system. I'm currently staying with friends and have been looking for stable housing with my voucher for over a year and a half. It is hard for me because, per my medical team, I need to be in brand new housing as I'm severely allergic to

mold and vermin. Now, where can I find a brand-new apartment building or a building less than 10 years old with a voucher for \$1,265 and a compromised immune system in the age of COVID?

The Housing Access Voucher Program would pay fair market rent, which would allow me to move into newer developments so that I would be finally able to heal and continue to pursue my dream of being a Women's Historian. HAVP is sustainable; as long as I remain eligible, I won't have to worry about the instability that I'm plagued by now. I'll no longer be at the mercy of the Human Resource Administration, Department of Homeless Services, friends and relatives who currently have the power to decide whether or not I will be on the streets again. HAVP will help people who are homeless and also those at risk of homelessness, especially right now as thousands of New Yorkers stand on the cliff of being evicted. As someone who survived an eviction and still grapples with its aftereffects, I know that HAVP will be a saving grace that staves off the trauma, pain, shame and insecurity that I still feel to this day for thousands of others.

We need \$500 million in the budget to fund the first year of HAVP. Not only would it help those who are impacted by COVID it would also help many members of Neighbors Together who are languishing with vouchers that don't pay enough to get them into permanent housing. It would also help individuals from entering shelters by keeping them housed where they are, further preventing a more severe public health crisis as we grapple with this pandemic.

We are in unusual times, and history will look back on how we reacted to these challenges. There is a quote by the late President John F. Kennedy that says, "When written in Chinese word "crisis" is composed of two characters one represents danger and the other represents opportunity." You have the opportunity to change the crisis of homelessness by voting to raise revenue to pay for critical programs like HAVP and COVID-19 Housing Relief and Recovery for All bill (A2617/S4050). Federal money will not be enough to finance these programs alone. We need at least \$2.25 billion dollars to keep people in their homes, and safely house homeless New Yorkers. I urge you to pass the Invest in Our New York platform of common-sense revenue raisers. This once-in-a-lifetime moment requires more than the usual response. We need to tax the rich to bring in sustainable revenue streams to help us not only recover from COVID but also create a just and equitable New York State where everyone has access to safe, affordable housing.

As I come to a close, the importance of my speaking today during Black History Month as the great, great granddaughter of enslaved persons in North America is not lost on me. Both sides of my family fled the South to the North to escape Jim Crow only to find redlining, redistricting, and gentrification. As their granddaughter who was able to receive an education, I am their greatest dream. However, it didn't save me from seeing that the deep racial, gendered, classist, institutional divides in housing, homelessness and eviction are still there from when my grandparents migrated from the South. As

data shows, African Americans often face barriers when attempting to move to more favorable neighborhoods. Passing HAVP will allow me to move into neighborhoods that generations of people who look like me have been locked out of. The dream of equity and equality that my grandparents had is still a dream- a dream that's been deferred for too long.

Passing the Housing Access Voucher Program would give people across New York State more flexibility and opportunity to find stable housing for their families and themselves. We need to prioritize getting the 92,000+ people living in shelters housed, and we need to do it now. History will look back and look at what we did in times of trials and hardship. I hope to look back and know that our leaders took action to pass and fund HAVP as soon as possible, because the lives of tens of thousands of homeless New Yorkers depend on it and so do generations to come.

Thank You

Velvet A. Johnson-Ross