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Courtney Bryan, Director

**Center for Court Innovation  
New York City Council  
Committee on Public Housing – Preliminary Budget Hearing  
March 12, 2021**

Good afternoon Chair Ampry-Samuel and esteemed Councilmembers. My name is Layman Lee, and I am acting director of Neighborhood Safety Initiatives. Since its inception, the Center for Court Innovation has responded to the public safety needs of New Yorkers, worked to reduce unnecessary and harmful involvement in the justice system wherever possible, and to build up communities through sustainable solutions.

This summer laid bare the long-standing inequities in access to safe and affordable housing. The threat of eviction looms large for many households, with renters in communities of color at the greatest risk of facing housing insecurity.<sup>1</sup> Access to quality, sustainable, and safe housing is a crucial element to the conversation around social justice and equity. The Center works to build resident power and address issues of safety in public housing developments, ultimately shrinking the footprint of law enforcement and resident contact with the justice system in some of New York’s most historically under-resourced neighborhoods. Funding for the Neighborhood Safety Initiative (NSI) is due to sunset in June 2022, and we hope for Council to support the continuation of these services to the communities we serve in public housing.

The Mayor’s Action Plan for Neighborhood Safety (MAP) is a comprehensive neighborhood-based strategy to increase safety through coordinated efforts to improve safety and wellbeing at 15 NYCHA developments across New York City. MAP enlists residents, City agencies, and community-based partners to help move beyond enforcement and address the factors underlying safety. By providing opportunities for work and play, health and wellbeing, and youth development, MAP promotes activated, well-maintained spaces through community and human-centered design. It also works to improve trust between neighbors with a responsive and just government. MAP’s mission is to improve community safety in places impacted by historic disinvestment by creating opportunities for residents to identify key issues underlying crime and participate in the decision-making to address these priorities.

Through NeighborhoodStat (NStat), the operational centerpiece of MAP, we harness the collective expertise of residents, government, and community partners to drive meaningful dialogue, problem-solving, and ultimately change at both the neighborhood and administrative levels. NStat aims to connect residents to social services and community resources. It also increases the security and quality of shared community space by working with residents to physically improve and maintain public spaces. NStat promotes a positive sense of ownership,

increases civic engagement, and enhances the capacity of residents to improve the public safety and wellbeing of their communities. Adopting a participatory justice model, NStat works with local organizers to provide direct investments into historically underserved communities. The program ensures that those most marginalized, especially those who have been historically left out of these conversations, have a say in improving health and wellbeing, safety and justice, economic stability, physical space, and youth development policies that affect their lives.

Last year the global COVID-19 pandemic highlighted the stark racial injustices in our cities. It also provided proof of concept for many CBOs and grassroots organizers that a local, resident-led, infrastructure is essential for creating resilient, safe, and thriving neighborhoods. COVID-19 has disproportionately impacted MAP communities. It is worth noting that 14 out of 15 MAP developments are in neighborhoods designated by NYC as being on the “hardest-hit neighborhoods” list. These areas are most impacted by COVID-19, in addition to being communities that have a high percentage of other health and socioeconomic disparities.

Because NeighborhoodStat brings together residents living in public housing who are invested in their community and are neighborhood connectors, the NStat resident teams were crucial to developing an emergency response and mutual aid relief that was launched within less than a month of the Governor’s announcement to PAUSE. Moreover, Neighborhood Safety Initiatives (NSI), a project of the Center for Court Innovation, is a key implementation partner in NeighborhoodStat – and was integral in the City’s COVID-19 response. NSI deepened the project’s commitment to investing in resident well-being and local leadership networks by launching a widely accessible and highly promoted needs assessment at the onset of the pandemic. In addition, NSI developed a resident-led essential goods delivery service, a referral system connecting residents to MAP agency partners and local supports, and a co-led virtual community resiliency training series with the Mayor’s Office of Criminal Justice.

From April to June of 2020, the needs assessment allowed us to understand the needs of NYCHA residents through 11,400 unique surveys conducted across 17 developments around the City. Through mobilization of the NeighborhoodStat resident teams and creating mutual aid networks, approximately 10,000 COVID-19 relief packages including food, drinking water, PPE, personal hygiene products, cleaning supplies, and other essential goods were delivered to 7,000 households or approximately 45,000 NYCHA residents in three months.

NSI and MOCJ also work together to produce the NeighborhoodStat Resiliency Seminars, which include regular trainings and workshops to build community capacity of NYCHA residents who actively organize for safety, wellness, economic empowerment, improved quality of life, and equitable public space. These crisis response efforts filled in the early service and communication gaps of government and city agency responses to the most vulnerable neighborhoods and public housing communities. To date, we continue our commitment to justice and local leadership by sustaining a citywide resident-led mutual support network and community organizing training series -- open to all NYC public housing residents. Indeed, 1,210 participants have attended the virtual Community Resilience Seminars on topics including the OPFV Public Safety Toolkit, DFTA, Transforming Community Public Spaces, Know Your Rights, Housing Stability, DOHMH on COVID-19, and NYC Emergency Management Planning. From April 2020 to February 2021, 1,657 residents have been referred to

the Department of Health (DOHMH) Friendship Benches (Mental Health) and Neighborhood Health Action Center teams, Human Resources Administration (HRA), Department for the Aging (DFTA), and Community Centers. Continued investment in NeighborhoodStat will ensure that the problem-solving process that has engaged over 31,000 NYCHA residents, convened 365 resident leaders of the NeighborhoodStat team, and united 22 government and community partners, can continue to drive meaningful dialogue, develop strategies and solutions beyond enforcement, and address the true factors underlying safety.

In short, NeighborhoodStat and NSI work with residents to develop new approaches and create opportunities to realize new ideas for community safety and wellbeing. The Center asks that Council urge the Administration to fully fund and baseline the NeighborhoodStat program within the Mayor's Action Plan (MAP) to ensure this important program continues.

We thank the Council for its continued partnership and will be available to answer any questions you may have.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup>Mironova, Oksana. (June 22, 2020). Race and Evictions in New York City. Community Service Society. <https://www.cssny.org/news/entry/race-evictions-new-york-city>.



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Courtney Bryan, Director

March 5, 2021

Dear Esteemed Councilmembers,

From a global pandemic to the continued violence against Black and Brown people, 2020 was a hard year for many. And, as the City still grapples with COVID, this time continues to be one of unthinkable loss and uncertainty. Despite these challenges, the Center continues to serve tens of thousands of New Yorkers in all five boroughs, providing critical programs and services to those most in need. Much of this work has been and continues to be funded by Council. To that end, I want to take this moment to thank Council for its steadfast support of our work, and request renewed support as we look ahead to FY22.

With Council's support through the innovative criminal justice programs initiative, the Center for Court Innovation has continued to operate community-based programs to serve the most vulnerable New Yorkers, while also reducing reliance on police. The vast majority of those served are youth, immigrants, low-income, LGBTQ, and people of color. Last year, funding through this initiative was reduced. We hope Council will restore this core funding to its pre-pandemic level. By doing so, we can make a greater impact in meeting the many needs your constituents.

Through Council-funded programs like the Brooklyn Felony Alternatives to Incarceration Court, Driver Accountability Program, and Bronx Project Reset, we continue to keep hundreds of people out of jail and provide them with off-ramps through meaningful supports and services. We also ask that Council renews funding for these programs in FY22 so that this important work continues unabated.

I cannot close without thanking you again for Council's enduring partnership. We have done an enormous amount with you over the years, including creating a credible plan for closing Rikers Island, implementing the Cure Violence model in multiple neighborhoods, and creating new mechanisms to divert low-level cases out of the criminal justice system. In this time of great uncertainty, renewing funding for our programs will ensure our efforts to make New York City stronger, fairer, and safer for all, are realized.

If you have questions, you can reach me at 718.496.9363 or [bryanc@courtinnovation.org](mailto:bryanc@courtinnovation.org). I look forward to speaking with you in the near future.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Courtney Bryan". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a long, sweeping underline that extends to the right.

Courtney Bryan  
Executive Director

## NYC City Council Housing Preliminary Budget Hearing Testimony

- NYC was already in the midst of an historic housing crisis when the COVID-19 pandemic hit.
- Before March 2020, many low-income New Yorkers were already living on the edge, with rent consisting of a substantial portion of their earnings. Studies have shown that among low-income rent stabilized households, the median rent to income ratio increased from 40% in 2002 to 52% in 2017.
- In 2019, 30% fell behind on rent, 20% had utilities shut off, 19% had to move in with other people, and 15% were threatened with an eviction. Most low-income renters—70%—had less than \$1000 in savings for an emergency, like an unexpected loss of income or a hospitalization.
- Right now, studies show as many as 1.2 million New York households owe up to \$2.2 billion in rent as of Feb 2021. Forty-six percent of New York State’s renters are people of color, and as we see over and over, the health, economic, and housing impacts of COVID-19 hit those communities hardest.
- The HPI funding helps Legal Service providers like Urban Justice Center provide legal support to groups of tenants who are trying to shelter in place while their landlords fail to maintain essential services and make basic repairs
- Funds our work with tenants who are experiencing landlord harassment, including threats of eviction during the pandemic
- Allows us to support public housing tenants who have experienced loss of income because of the pandemic but are having trouble getting their income recertified with NYCHA, which means they’re overpaying now and will put them at risk of eviction later
- Ability to provide legal advocacy services to tenants to resolve issues when tenants don’t want to use the court system because they lack the technology to engage in virtual proceedings and it was unsafe to do things in person
- Ensure tenants can keep up with all the shifts and changes to tenant protections throughout the pandemic, so they didn’t just self-evict because they fell behind on rent.

We ask that the City Council ensures that the funding set aside for the Housing Preservation Initiative (HPI) to ensure that the oversight of support from the Federal and State legislatures does not continue at the city level.

In the wake of COVID, an already overburdened rental landscape was suddenly plunged into almost total devastation.

Because there is no rent cancellation legislation currently enacted, estimates are that at least 1 million NYC tenants are more vulnerable to facing homelessness due to the lack of adequate rent relief funding.

The HPI funding requested is essential to maintaining a basic level of support for NYCs most vulnerable tenants and is, respectfully, at best the bare minimum compared to the abject need that is facing NY tenants today.

Thank you,

*Raven Dorantes, Esq.*

## Title Wheelchair Accessibility for us

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### Subject

- Good afternoon esteemed Council members I'd like to thank you for the opportunity to speak before your committee today. My name is Vernice Tillery, I am the parent of a 15 year old in a wheelchair. My son and I live at 54 W. 94th Street in Manhattan District 6. I'm here to speak with you about the lack of accessibility for my son to enter and exit the building we've lived in for 15 yrs. I've been requesting thru various vehicles for NYCHA our landlord to add a ramp of some type portable or permanent to the building we live in this would add to his and other tenants quality of life. I've gone to court recently and the case was dismissed because NYCHA insisted I get a transfer-move ! Uprooting Josh from his community, school and the building we feel safe in, where we call home. This is not an option, we in 54 are like a family. There is not one tenant that doesn't know Josh. We all know each other and work together diligently to keep our building up to par and safe. Making 54 W. 94th ADA compliant would not only benefit my son, it would benefit six other families in the building. At this time my son Josh cannot enter or exit the building alone he always needs assistance from myself to get in and out of the building. When he was younger I had to pull him in the wheelchair up the exterior steps in front of the building. Today he's a high school student and he needs to get in or outside of the building with out me but he can't. since he has friends and classmates to socialize with. He should be able to visit and interact with them. He has school to get back and forth from. and he can't do any of these things because 54 W. 94th St isn't wheelchair Accessable in 2021. NYCHA is a landlord of many developments and 99% of them are wheelchair accessible. The ADA Act says were we reside must be accessible yet it is not. This is the only home he knows and he will be here LONG after I'm not. He has a family to make and his whole life ahead of him. This is why this is so important to me.
- NYCHA has complied with making the inside of our apartment accessible and we have a working elevator in the building. Yet the outside is not. Every year with each new manager I speak to NYCHA about the need for a ramp. They say the building is a landmark ( preventing them from changing things ) LPC has said they install ramps on designated buildings all across NYC. LPC also said they would be happy to work with landlords. As of last year LPC has updated there rules to make this process easier, but it's entirely up to the building owner to apply. NYCHA has applied for a prior permit in 2019 for facade work on 54 W. 94th St. No permit has ever been

Thursday, February 25, 2021

placed for a ramp. To make the outside of the building accessible even though I have put in Reasonable Accommodation Request paperwork since 2017.

- I have applied to the City Council women's office in district 6 for funds to assist NYCHA with the cost of the ramp. I've looked into applying to the Manhattan Borough President's Office for Capital Grant to abate the cost NYCHA would ensue for a ramp.

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**Testimony of Stanley M. Isaacs Neighborhood Center  
Damion Samuels, Senior Director of Youth Services and Community Engagement  
FY'22 Preliminary Budget Hearing  
March 12, 2021**

I would like to thank Chair Alicka Ampry-Samuel for her leadership and the opportunity to provide testimony. I am Damion Samuels, Senior Director of Youth Services and Community Engagement at the Stanley M. Isaacs Neighborhood Center, a multi-service non-profit organization physically embedded within two New York City Housing Authority (NYCHA) developments, providing critical access to programs and social services for public housing residents.

I will focus my testimony on three principal areas:

1. Needs within the Isaacs Houses/Holmes Towers development including repairs
2. Better communication strategies to provide residents with critical updates
3. Representation and solicitation of community voice

Although conditions within NYCHA facilities have been a challenge city-wide, Isaacs Houses/Holmes Towers development stands out as one the worst. A 2018 [NY Post](#) article highlighted that HUD identified Isaacs Houses/Holmes Towers as one of the 13 worst public housing developments in the nation.<sup>1</sup> The article noted that residents had resorted to making repairs on their own and many residents reported long-term chronic repair needs. Despite the notoriety and scrutiny that accompanied this article, residents report that little has changed, noting only modest improvement over the last two years. In 2019, residents of Isaacs Houses/Holmes Towers filed suit against New York City Housing Authority (NYCHA) in Manhattan Housing court because it has failed to provide legally required safe and decent housing. The suit demanded that NYCHA take immediate action to fix rat infestations, broken elevators, busted heat and hot water systems and other issues that confront the roughly 1,100 families in the development. Considering this, we ask you to provide additional funding to NYCHA specifically earmarked for urgent repairs. We believe that prioritizing NYCHA's responsibility to provide safe and clean housing sites will engender community support and enhance the quality of life for public housing residents.

In 2020, the city launched its Get Cool Program providing Air Conditioners to vulnerable residents living in public housing. As we get closer and closer to the hot weather we are asking for the Council's support and advocacy in relaunching the Get Cool air conditioner programs for seniors and families in need, and that it is done in collaboration with community centers. Last year this was a program administered by NYCHA, Department for the Aging (DFTA), and Department of Health and Mental Hygiene (DOHMH). These A/C units became a priority for the

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<sup>1</sup> <https://nypost.com/2018/09/10/feds-rank-ues-housing-projects-among-worst-in-nation/>



many elderly and/or home bound seniors who we serve. Venturing out of the house to visit a cooling center on a sweltering day presents a clear health risk for this group. However, the program did not allow for programs like ours to add names of residents we knew to be in need until well into the summer, leaving many in need behind. Many did not receive units until nearly Fall. *Our Center purchase 70 A/C units for seniors who were left out at a cost to our program.* **We believe the Get Cool program will be essential again, this year and should be relaunched as soon as possible, and that the rollout include community centers to identify those in need.**

Finally, as our society as adjusted to the pandemic, we have all adjusted our means of communicating with our constituents. The challenges presented by social isolation impact critical messaging that NYCHA residents need to access. Critical information regarding emergencies, long term repairs and outages, food insecurity, vaccine distribution and other needs must be quickly and efficiently passed on to residents. We are requesting that the city set up more efficient communication strategies. We have identified two that we would hope you would consider:

1. Using Community Centers more intentionally to disseminate critical messaging quickly and efficiently. Like many community centers, Isaacs Center has long term relationships with community residents and have a reputation for advocating for resident's needs. NYCHA is entering a critical time with the roll out of the city's *Blueprint for Change* plan to transform public housing and infill projects at various developments happening in the middle of a pandemic. With these critical decisions looming it is essential that the voices and concerns of residents are heard before the city takes tangible next steps. **We are asking the city to fund Community Liaisons who will work within Community Centers embedded in NYCHA facilities to create a more engaged and informed community.** These Community Liaisons will be required to be current NYCHA residents and will work with their neighbors to hear their concerns and needs and communicate these challenges to NYCHA. **Our expense budget request for this purpose is \$5 million, to be divided among NYCHA-based social service providers across the City.**
2. Prioritizing the elections of a Tenant Association (TA) President at the Holmes Towers, a position that has been vacant for over a year. **A TA president is essential to galvanizing the community to participate in these important projects while also providing another conduit for information at time when the speed and efficiency of communication systems are more important than ever.**

Thank you again for the opportunity to provide testimony. I hope to continue to work closely with the Committees to better the lives of public housing residents through collaborative efforts and public and private partnerships.