



GREATER NEW YORK

Introduction and Thanks: My name is Taysha Milagros Clark-Reid, and I am the Public Policy Director, New Jersey, for Volunteers of America-Greater New York (VOA-GNY). We are a local affiliate of the national organization, Volunteers of America (VOA). I would like to thank Chair Sarlo, Vice Chair Greenstein, and members of the Senate Budget and Appropriations Committee for the opportunity to submit testimony today. I would also like to thank Governor Murphy for his steadfast commitment to New Jerseyans.

About Us: VOA-GNY is an anti-poverty organization that aims to end homelessness in the Greater New York Region through housing, health, and wealth building services. We are one of the nation's largest human service providers impacting more than 12,000 adults and children annually through 70+ programs in New York City, Northern New Jersey, and Westchester County. We are also an active nonprofit developer of supportive and affordable housing, with a robust portfolio of permanent supportive housing, affordable and senior housing properties.

VOA-GNY presently operates 13 Community Support Services (CSS) scattered sites in Northern New Jersey along with 6 residential sites and 6 Youth Services program sites, primarily assisting persons with mental and/or intellectual/developmental disabilities, and youth aging out of foster care. Presently, we serve clients in Middlesex, Passaic, Union, Bergen and Hudson Counties. Through our work in Northern New Jersey, we have been able to ascertain community needs and know intimately, as providers and constituents, the depth of the affordable housing crisis in the State.

Background: As service providers for low-income New Jerseyans, we are very familiar with the affordable housing crisis. Homelessness in New Jersey has increased by 24% in the past year across the state. Some counties have seen increases as high as 74%¹. In our scattered site programs in Middlesex, we have noted unconscionable rent increases with one complex going so far as a 30% rent increase for tenants. Rent increases like this are not just detrimental to providers like us, who cannot afford to cover such large and sudden increases but debilitating for our clients who risk housing instability and homelessness because of such increases. Relying on the courts to ascertain what rent increases are considered unconscionable requires significant monetary resources to bring a case to court; this is a cost our constituents cannot cover, and nonprofit legal providers are already stretched thin. In times when affordability protections for buildings are expiring, it is even more crucial to reaffirm our commitment to housing that meets the needs of every New Jerseyan.

New Jersey, along with every other jurisdiction in the nation, is deep in an affordable housing crisis. Data recently published in the National Low Income Housing Coalition's (NLIHC) *The Gap* report highlights that New Jersey has a deficit of over 200,000 units. This number may be greater when we account for the fact that many of New Jersey's existing affordable housing needs substantial rehab and renovations, making them presently uninhabitable or unable to pass a Housing Quality Inspection. As we seek to invest in creating affordable housing, we must also be mindful to preserve and rehab our existing ones. Our affordable housing crisis requires significant

¹ N.J. homeless population up 24%, survey says. See county-by-county numbers. - nj.com



investments, a multi-pronged, collaborative, whole-of-government approach, co-designed solutions, and a sustained commitment to developing and preserving affordable housing in the State. This gubernatorial administration and legislative body have been instrumental in upholding the needs of everyday New Jerseyans, and the recent passage of A4 affirms that. However, failure to fully invest in implementing A4 and investing in affordable housing construction, preservation, and homeless services, will make us fall further behind and even more residents experience homelessness.

FY26 Budget Recommendations: In a time where values and priorities are shifting federally, it is even more critical that we remain attuned to the needs and values of our constituents. The Governor's proposed budget diverts money from the Affordable Housing Trust Fund. This is misaligned and harmful insofar as this takes away key resources to meet New Jersey's most pressing housing needs. While we appreciate and support the need to foster families' abilities to build generational wealth and legacies through homeownership, diverting money from the Affordable Housing Trust Fund poses a threat to the infrastructure and social safety net in place to address the challenges of unstably housed and homeless constituents. Understanding that this is a balancing act, and one must juggle multiple priorities, we respectfully request not using the Affordable Housing Trust Fund to support persons who are able to maintain stable housing but rather, to add additional monies for desperately needed new affordable homes for those who might otherwise have no housing at all.

The Department of Community Affairs (DCA) has been a key pillar in addressing the State's affordable housing crisis, while also being a catch-all agency for a variety of other issues. DCA is consistently one of the most underfunded State agencies yet is consistently assigned to oversee new initiatives. Investing in DCA and its affiliates are integral parts of our social safety net is necessary and, those investments need to be commensurate with the issues it is charged with solving. For this reason, we request that the budget provide increased funding for DCA, and its affiliate the Housing and Mortgage Finance Agency, so that they may continue to do their part in addressing the needs of New Jerseyans and bring their programs to scale.

It is often stated that our budgets reflect our values and commitments. The Governor's Proposed Budget, though laudable, falls short of providing the relief and investments needed to meaningfully tackle our affordable housing crisis. We urge the Legislature to increase its fiscal commitments to housing by investing in key social safety net agencies, such as DCA and HMFA, and not raiding the Affordable Housing Trust Fund.

Closing: We are grateful for the opportunity to provide an overview of New Jersey's affordable housing crisis and ways to address it through our state budget. We look forward to working with the Legislature to continue to tackle this important issue and better serve our shared constituents. Thank you for the opportunity to testify. Should you have any questions, I can be reached at treid@voa-gny.org.



Respectfully submitted by:
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