



Testimony Submitted by Red Hook Initiative To
New York State Housing Committee Hearing
Monday, January 31st, 2022 at 2pm

Good afternoon Assemblymembers, Senators, and Chairs Cymbrowitz and Kavanaugh, our Assemblymember Marcela Mitaynes and Senator Jabari Brisport and thank you for allowing me to provide testimony today. My name is Michel'le Thomas and I am the Community Relations Manager at Red Hook Initiative (RHI). RHI is a community-based organization serving 6,500 public housing residents in Red Hook, Brooklyn each year through youth development, community building, and local hiring programs. Red Hook is home to the largest New York City Housing Authority (NYCHA) development in Brooklyn and the second largest in New York City.

I am here today to speak specifically about challenges we have been facing relating to the Emergency Rental Assistance Program (ERAP) for NYCHA residents and to urge you to ensure full funding for NYCHA residents with pending ERAP applications.

Red Hook Houses residents have been impacted particularly hard by the pandemic and are continuing to struggle with the health and economic impacts. ERAP represented hope for many residents who fell behind on rent during the pandemic.

Over the past several months, my multi-lingual team and I have helped to complete more than 100 ERAP applications for Red Hook residents. Last week, residents began coming to RHI in tears with letters from ERAP that their applications are now pending due to the legal requirement that subsidized housing residents be served last. The same week, residents received notices from NYCHA that the eviction moratorium was ending and they should pay all rent owed. The letter directed residents to file One Shot Deals through HRA, but HRA will not allow anyone to file a One Shot Deal until their ERAP has been denied. This is leaving all Red Hook NYCHA residents who applied for ERAP in a limbo and in fear that they may lose their home.

I am here on behalf of RHI and the residents we serve to ask you, the State, to address this critical need for NYCHA residents who have been left out of the ERAP benefit. RHI takes our cues from the residents of Red Hook Houses. While we are heartened that NYCHA may forgive some eviction cases, our neighborhood leaders are clear: forgiving

back rents without ensuring robust funding for public housing is not a victory. One Shot Deals are not a backup plan - as often those payments need to be paid back and are not guaranteed. We are calling on the State to fill the gap in funding for NYCHA residents who have applied for ERAP.

The ERAP program gave people a sense of relief at a time that was overwhelming and felt hopeless and now that relief has been turned into stress and fear. People right now are struggling; many don't know where their next meal is coming from. We are on the ground supporting community members and it has been extremely challenging to provide assurance to residents with these worries.

In closing, the ERAP program is meant to prevent eviction and serve low and moderate income families who have suffered due to the pandemic. We urge you to act to ensure that NYCHA residents are not left behind. There are countless historic examples of NYCHA residents being cut out of robust funding schemes. We need to let go of the idea that NYCHA can be left behind from generous state subsidies.

ERAP is just one example - we need the State to explore ways to fully fund our public housing at the same level or higher than the State is willing to fund our private developers. The state and city and federal government spends thousands more per unit in Section 8 funding, HPD capital programs, and other projects than they commit to public housing. It's time to change that, and make an equal or stronger commitment to public housing. The state should intervene and ensure that public housing is fully funded. Ensuring that NYCHA residents have access to ERAP is just one example of how we can do this.

As a supplement to our testimony, we have collected quotes below from Red Hook NYCHA residents who have pending ERAP applications:

"I applied for ERAP but have not heard from them about me being approved. I feel like my voice isn't being heard because I live in NYCHA."

- Nia Deck, Red Hook Houses resident

"I applied for ERAP to help my family and haven't heard back. I feel like NYCHA should be prioritized because many families lost income during the pandemic."

- Tameka Evans, Red Hook Houses resident

"I applied for ERAP but I feel like NYCHA residents aren't getting help because of the fact that we are low income." - Thelma Payne, Red Hook Houses resident

"I feel that NYCHA should be prioritized for this funding. NYCHA is always left out."
- Joanna Ward, Red Hook Houses resident

"I applied for ERAP and haven't heard anything back. I feel that we should be prioritized because NYCHA families are struggling."
- Carmen Jimenez, Red Hook Houses Resident

"My family applied for ERAP and haven't heard back, they are very scared right now of being evicted and losing their home."
- Rosalina Benitez, Family of Red Hook Houses resident

"We are humans and we need help right now. NYCHA should not be excluded from this benefit."
- Shirley Gilyard, NYCHA resident

"I applied for the ERAP program on September 23, 2021. I still have not received a reply, not a letter in the mail. I feel it's important for NYCHA residents to receive funds as well. We are hard working people that went through a hard time as well. Just because our rent is 30% of our income we still lost our jobs as well. "
- Brittany Williams, Red Hook Houses resident

Sincerely,

Michel'le Thomas
Community Relations Manager, Red Hook Initiative
michel'le@rhicenter.org
rhicenter.org