



03.11.24- Trinity Church Testimony - Housing & Buildings Committee - FY25 Preliminary Budget Hearings

To Chair Sanchez and Members of the Housing & Buildings Committee:

My name is Thehbia Hiwot, Managing Director of Housing and Homelessness at Trinity Church Wall Street. Thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony for this Fiscal Year 2025 preliminary budget hearing. We urge the Mayor and City Council to fund the creation and preservation of affordable and supportive housing and uphold the right to shelter.

Trinity Church Wall Street is an Episcopal Church in Lower Manhattan with a congregation of more than 1,600 parishioners, who come from all five boroughs and form an ethnically, racially, and economically diverse congregation. In addition to our ministry, we carry out our mission of faith and social justice through direct services, grantmaking, and advocacy.

Trinity has a long history of advancing social justice in alignment with our belief that every person is created in the image of God and has dignity and value. Removing barriers to and increasing the supply of affordable and supportive housing is a major priority for Trinity. In 2023, Trinity provided over \$13.9M million in grants and mission investments to support affordable housing development and address the city's homelessness crisis.

In this context and as faith leaders and fellow New Yorkers, Trinity Church is deeply concerned about the housing crisis and its acute impact on our most vulnerable residents. The median New York City rent grew 19% between 2010 and 2021, while median incomes rose only 10%. This has resulted in more than 50% of New York City renters spending over a third of their income on rent. The major driver of this increase in rent is New York's housing shortage. A recent REBNY report showed that developers' applications for multifamily residential buildings in New York City continue to decline, falling to 50% of the 20-year average and reaching just 20% of state and city goals. As a result, more than half of New York City residents struggle to afford their housing. Families with children (especially single parents) and people of color are particularly impacted by this affordability crisis.

More than 90,000 people, including more than 32,000 children, sleep in New York City's main municipal shelter system each night. This is 72% higher than a decade ago, and the highest it has been since the Great Depression, driven in part by the influx of more than 175,000 asylum seekers since spring 2022. In addition to those currently being housed in the primary shelter system, tens of thousands more asylum seekers are staying in emergency shelters operated by Health + Hospitals and hotels, including in Trinity's neighborhood. We have responded by expanding our distribution of food, clothing, and

essential items, and providing critical services such as ESL classes and a legal clinic. And, every night, thousands of unsheltered people sleep on city streets and in subways, and public spaces, many of whom suffer from mental illness and/or substance use disorders.

Further, millions of New Yorkers continue to struggle with the economic impacts of the pandemic and COVID-19 related eviction protections have expired, leading to increasing eviction rates across the city. Also, the city jail population has risen from less than 4,500 in 2020 to over 6,000, leading to more individuals needing shelter or supportive housing post-release, which is critical to reduce recidivism and increase safety. Under these stresses, Mayor Adams and Governor Hochul have advocated for a suspension of the city's right to shelter, which many, including ourselves, fear will lead to a dramatic increase in the number of individuals and families living on New York City streets.

In light of these significant challenges, we urge the council and administration, working with the state to:

- Change the city's zoning code to allow for more **commercial spaces to be converted into residential units**, with an incentive for the creation of affordable housing. Mayor Adams has indicated that office-to-residential conversions could produce as many as 20,000 new homes for 40,000 New Yorkers in the next decade and has included this as a part of his "City of Yes for Housing Opportunity" plan. Governor Hochul has committed to proposing legislation to allow New York City to offer a financial incentive for the construction of affordable housing units in conversion projects.
- Develop **new financing mechanisms and strategies** to increase the supply of deeply affordable and supportive housing particularly for vulnerable populations such as homeless youth and families, and people with criminal justice system experience, including developing housing on H+H sites, new single-room occupancy models, and legalizing accessory dwelling units
- Keep the city's commitment under NYC 15/15 to create 15,000 units of **supportive housing** by 2030. This should include attention to scatter site units by increasing the service rate to \$17,500 per unit to match the congregate care rate. And allowing stays in jail and prison of more than 90 days to count toward time spent "homeless" would enable thousands of people returning from jail or prison to access 15/15 supportive housing.
- Uphold New York's legal **right to shelter**, which stems from a 1980s interpretation of the state constitution and consent decree mandating that if someone has no place to stay, New York city must shelter them in a timely manner.
- Implement the package of bills passed by the Council last year to **improve and expand access to the city's housing voucher program**.

Trinity also supports the following state legislation and urges the council to pass resolutions of support:

- The **Faith Based Affordable Housing Act**, which would allow religious institutions to bypass local zoning laws in developing their land and create permanently affordable housing.
- The statewide **Housing Access Voucher Program**, which would serve people who do not qualify for existing rental assistance programs.