

PREVENTING HOMELESSNESS THROUGH RAPID RE-HOUSING

By Steven Haagsma

The fight against homelessness is fought on many fronts: affordable housing, eviction prevention, poverty reduction, and more. Yet these battles against homelessness are not always won, and people lose their homes and are put at risk of homelessness every day. One tool to prevent homelessness after people lose their homes is the Rapid Re-Housing and Homeless Prevention program.

This program, which is funded through the City of Buffalo's Emergency Solutions Grant (ESG), serves the chronically homeless (whether sheltered or unsheltered), victims of domestic violence, veterans, and those at risk of homelessness due to overcrowding, pending eviction, or lease non-renewal. When a Rapid Re-Housing or Homeless Prevention client is referred to HOME through Restoration Society's Coordinated Entry system, they are served by HOME's Housing Placement Specialist, BreAnn Parker. BreAnn works to secure affordable, stable, and safe housing quickly for clients by assisting with the housing search process, attending visits to potential homes, mediating between the client and landlords through the application and move-in process, and ensuring that the unit passes a habitability and lead inspection. Because long-term housing stability is the goal, BreAnn also coordinates with any other agencies the client works with to ensure that the unit will be suitable and accessible for the client in the long term.

HOME values the landlords who work with Rapid Re-Housing clients and one such landlord, Josephine Zagarella, spoke with BreAnn about her experience with the program. Ms. Zagarella has been a landlord in the City of Buffalo for over five years and loves restoring old buildings, although she wishes small-time developers were better supported. When asked how she heard about Buffalo's Rapid Re-Housing program, she said, "I [had] never heard of this program until I met BreAnn Parker and her client toured my latest renovation. It's been a great experience and I'm happy to know this program exists. She's great to work with, she walked me through the process, followed up with me. It's been great!"

Describing her experience working with BreAnn and with HOME's Rapid Re-Housing clients, Ms. Zagarella said, "It's been wonderful, the communication has been great. We are on the same page in terms of making sure the space is a good fit for the client. I'm in the business of renting out homes; I want my tenants to feel safe and secure. This is going to be their home and it's important they feel good about living there. The communication is key and we're working together to make certain we're offering a livable solution for the client/tenant. I'm a very hands-on landlord. I have a great relationship with my tenants; that's how it should be. It feels good to know you've helped a person in need, especially given the last two years. We need to pull together as a community and lend a helping hand."

With the statewide eviction moratorium lifted, more New Yorkers are facing housing instability and programs such as Rapid Re-Housing and Homeless Prevention are more essential than ever. HOME is committed to helping those at risk of homelessness and having good landlords to work with is essential in doing so. Any landlords who want to learn more about Rapid Re-Housing or any of HOME's mobility programs are encouraged to call 716-854-1400 or email info@homeny.org. ▲▲▲▲



1542 Main Street
Buffalo, NY 14209
716.854.1400
www.homeny.org

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INSIGHT



FAIR HOUSING MONTH 2022 PREVIEW



By Steven Haagsma

On April 11, 1968—exactly one week after the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr—President Lyndon B. Johnson signed into law the Civil Rights Act, a landmark piece of legislation that expanded the protections afforded to victims of discrimination in many areas, but especially in housing through Titles VIII and IX, which became known as the Fair Housing Act. We celebrate Fair Housing Month each April to recognize the importance of this historic victory and of the fair housing work that continues today.

For this year's Fair Housing Month, HOME will host educational events throughout the month, including both virtual and (for the first time since 2019) in-person events. Landlords will have multiple opportunities to learn about their fair housing responsibilities which can help them become better landlords. HOME's Education Specialist will conduct a fair housing training for

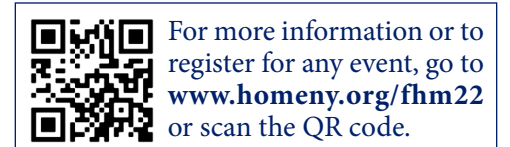
landlords in Niagara County at Tourism Research and Entrepreneurship Center (TReC) in Niagara Falls on Tuesday, April 12. The following Wednesday (April 20) will feature a landlord training webinar for property owners anywhere in Western New York. Tenants will also have the opportunity to learn about their rights and how to protect them with a virtual tenants' rights workshop on Wednesday, April 13.

More general educational opportunities will be available as well. HOME will have a Fair Housing Month display up all month at the Merriweather Library and will be holding a poetry contest on the theme of "home" throughout the month. HOME's education team will also be giving presentations at Daemen College's Diversity and Equity Summit and to a Social Work class at the University at Buffalo.

Finally, HOME will also be hosting an online panel discussion featuring several

local experts on housing to discuss issues faced by housing professionals working with underserved communities and ways to address those issues. This discussion will be recorded and made available to anyone interested in hearing more about this important topic.

As always, Fair Housing Month is a time to both reflect on past housing victories and focus on making progress today, and HOME's Fair Housing Month calendar reflects this duality. The full fair housing month calendar is available here in this newsletter and on HOME's website at homeny.org/fhm22, where you can also register for any of the webinars. We hope you will join us in celebrating this important month! ▲▲▲▲



For more information or to register for any event, go to www.homeny.org/fhm22 or scan the QR code.

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Housing Opportunities Made Equal, Inc.

59th Annual Dinner & Celebration

Friday, May 6, 2022
Templeton Landing
2 Templeton Terrace | Buffalo, NY 14202

5:00 pm - Social Hour
6:15 pm - Dinner & Program

Basket Raffle | Music | And much more!

RSVP by Friday, April 29, 2022
www.homeny.org



Annual Dinner QR Code

APRIL IS ALSO SEXUAL ASSAULT AWARENESS MONTH

By Steven Haagsma

As a fair housing organization, we are mostly focused on April as Fair Housing Month, but April is also Sexual Assault Awareness Month. In honor of April recognizing both of these important issues, we want to highlight the legal protections in housing available to survivors of sexual assault or domestic violence.

While the Fair Housing Act does not specify that sexual assault and domestic violence survivors are protected from discrimination, another law—the Violence Against Women Act (VAWA)—does. Under VAWA, no one can be discriminated against because they have been assaulted. In fact, assault survivors can claim specific protections under VAWA in situations where they live with their abuser. When a survivor has an order of protection in place, or some other legal framework protecting them from their abuser, they can request a lease bifurcation, or splitting. This means that the landlord can release the survivor from the lease while still holding the abuser accountable to the lease in order to allow the survivor to find new, safe housing. Another option is for the landlord to seek to evict the abuser while allowing the survivor to remain in the home. Either way, this housing-specific provision

of VAWA allows sexual assault and domestic violence survivors to escape from abusers who live under the same roof.

Regardless of whether the survivor and abuser have been living together, no sexual assault survivor can be forced to leave their home because of the assault. In addition to being protected from discrimination, sexual assault survivors in New York are allowed to change the locks without their landlord's consent as long as they provide a duplicate key to the landlord. This is a right available to all tenants, but can be especially crucial for survivors who need immediate protection from their abuser. While it is always best for tenants to communicate with their landlord about issues such as lock changes, sometimes safety requires immediate solutions.

For more information about Sexual Assault Awareness Month, please visit the National Sexual Violence Resource Center at www.nsvrc.org/saam. If you are in danger, call Crisis Services' 24-hour hotline at 716-834-3131 or go to crisisservices.org/rape-sexual-assault. Help is also available through the NYS National Domestic Violence and Sexual Assault Hotline (1-800-942-6906) or ECMC BRAVE (716-898-6461).

HOME'S POLICY ADVOCACY WORK IN 2022

By Minnie Kim

Stable decent housing is not a luxury item; it is a basic, universal survival need. Without a stable decent home, even the most intelligent person's physical health, mental health, and ability to focus upon their job or schoolwork will suffer. To let stable decent housing be something accessible to only the financially comfortable is immoral for any society and incompatible with a true democracy.

For the 2022 New York State legislative session, HOME is advocating for these three state housing bills to become laws in order to reduce NYS's housing instability and make NYS a healthier and more democratic community:

- **Good Cause Eviction (S3082/A5573):** This bill would require landlords to have “good cause” for evicting residential tenants or for not renewing residential leases. This bill would protect tenants from facing rent increases of more than 3% per year, and from being evicted in retaliation for requesting repairs. Landlords could still evict tenants for “good cause” reasons such as if the tenant isn't paying rent or is doing illegal or prohibited activities, or for when a landlord needs to use the unit as the primary residence for themselves or a family member.
- **Housing Access Voucher Program (S2804A/A3701A; aka “HAVP”):** The federal department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) has a Section 8 program which provides vouchers which help people afford rent, but need exceeds supply. HAVP would provide HUD-style vouchers for NYS residents who are experiencing homelessness, who are at high risk of becoming homeless, who don't qualify for Section 8 due to earning more than the Section 8 income maximum but who pay over 50% of their income on rent, or who don't qualify for Section 8 due to being undocumented. HAVP would require voucher recipients to pay 30% of their annual income towards rent and would cover the rest, up to 110% of HUD-calculated “Fair Market Rent” prices.
- **Tenant Opportunity to Purchase Act (S3157/A5971; aka “TOPA”):** This bill would give NYS tenants the legal right and framework for collectively organizing, buying, and converting their buildings into low-income cooperatives, community land trusts, or public housing when their landlord decides to sell. TOPA would also ensure permanent affordability and eviction protections for a building's tenants regardless of whether a tenant is one of the building's owners. TOPA would apply to single-unit properties owned by a corporation, to duplexes, and to multi-family housing not subsidized by federal, state, or local programs. (Properties exempted from TOPA would include: multi-family housing subsidized by federal, state, or local programs; government-owned properties; hotels; motels; convents; monasteries; extended-care facilities; college dorms; etc.) TOPA would increase the number of people who own their own home, create social housing safe from the private market's volatility, reduce real estate speculation, and ensure that NYS's housing assistance to low-income households benefits the public and builds financial self-reliance for low-income households rather than enriching only private real estate speculators.

HOME encourages NYS citizens and lawmakers to pass these bills into laws because they are needed for addressing NYS's housing crisis. According to the United States Interagency Council on Homelessness, prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, NYS's daily total of people experiencing homelessness was 91,000+. Young adults, families with young children, and veterans represent significant percentages of this total. Moreover, due to how systemic poverty interconnects with systemic racism, systemic ableism, and systemic ageism, people experiencing housing precarity or homelessness are statistically likelier to have a disability, to be older people on fixed incomes, and/or to be BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, and other People of Color). For example, recent data collected by the Homeless Alliance of Western New York reveal that only 13.5% of Erie County's residents are Black, and yet 54.3% of the thousands of people experiencing homelessness in Erie County are Black.

NYS's high incidence of homelessness reflects the severe statewide shortage of decent affordable housing. This shortage exists due to landlords who act as slumlords or who have been raising rents far faster than most wages and most household incomes.

People unaware of sociological realities often think people experiencing housing instability should “Get a job.” The sociological reality is that many people experiencing housing precarity are workers whose wages are not keeping up with costs of living. National housing guidelines say that for a home to be affordable for a household, the housing and utilities combined cannot exceed 30% of the household's income; the other 70% is needed to cover other costs of life, such as groceries, healthcare, and transportation. According to recent reporting by Partnership for the Public Good, in Buffalo, about 6 out of every 10 renters is already paying 30% or more (some as much as 50% or more) of their monthly income on rent. In other words, over 50% of Buffalo renters are already having trouble affording rent. Yet local rents continue to rise. A frequent reason that WNY-based clients seek HOME's assistance with finding new housing is because they were already struggling to afford rent, and their current landlord has just made their current home wholly unaffordable by hiking the monthly rent by \$200 or more.

Slumlords cause housing instability because, by shirking their property upkeep responsibilities, they reduce a municipality's housing stock of decent homes, make decent housing harder for renters to find, and expose renters to unsafe and unhygienic conditions which harm their physical health and mental health. HOME's Intake Specialist Mary Diaz's clients include a single mother who fled domestic violence from her husband, stayed in a shelter with her children for a time, applied to a community agency for help, and received time-sensitive financial assistance for housing costs, only to end up in a unit infested with rats and cockroaches and lacking a functioning oven and laundry facility.

The landlord has been unresponsive to the tenant's communications about the unit's problems. The agency providing the financial assistance has designed its assistance program to sever the assistance if the family moves out of this unit. The mother seeks a job that will pay enough to enable her to move her family to a decent home. For the time being, the children scream when rats or cockroaches appear in their home while the mother tries to eradicate the vermin herself, and due to lacking a car and having little money, the mother and her children alternate between walking long distances to the nearest laundromat and doing laundry by hand. The unit's conditions have caused the children prolonged distress requiring help from mental health professionals.

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Photograph by Mary Diaz's client.



FAIR HOUSING WORK EXPANDS WITH NEW FUNDING SOURCES

HOME's important housing work is funded through donations from members along with long-term partnerships with various government entities. Recently, HOME has received funding from multiple new grants.

US Department of Housing and Urban Development through the American Rescue Plan (\$350,000): funding additional discrimination investigation and enforcement capacity, housing search assistance for low-income families, fair housing education, and addressing the needs of underserved populations disproportionately impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic.

M&T Bank (\$15,000): to provide individualized, wrap-around case management and other supportive services to assist families in finding housing in high-opportunity neighborhoods through HOME's Mobility Assistance Program (MAP). Much of these funds will go directly to clients to aid with security deposits and moving expenses, allowing them to achieve their goal of securing safe, affordable housing.

Town of Cheektowaga (\$15,000): to provide residents with comprehensive services for victims of discrimination, paralegal counseling to assist in resolving landlord-tenant disputes, and fair housing materials and educational presentations.

Live Well Erie (\$350,000 over 3 years): to implement the Affordable Housing Ecosystem program, a 3-year collaborative partnership led by Erie County Social Services Commissioner Marie Cannon that seeks to build the affordable housing ecosystem in Buffalo & Erie County by engaging equitable technological solutions; utilizing data to expose disparities; prioritizing housing development and homeownership for BIPOC and other populations; and pursuing inclusive housing policy.

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Diaz observes that her client's situation illustrates how slumlords harm renters and entire communities: “Until the mother finds employment enabling her to afford reasonably habitable, healthy, and safe housing, she will be forced to be the victim of unscrupulous slumlords who take advantage of the system and the tenants. Slumlords' neglect of their properties not only gravely affects tenants' lives but also the appeal, beauty, and dignity of the neighborhoods where their properties are, causing a domino effect of poverty and despair that eventually touches everyone in the city.”

Diaz's client's situation demonstrates the need for Good Cause, HAVP, and TOPA. Slumlords currently face little accountability and enforcement from existing legal frameworks and housing assistance program structures. Programs which force renters to stay in the same unit to continue receiving assistance are effectively rewarding slumlords for shirking property upkeep. Slumlords also often evict tenants who request repairs because, without a legal accountability framework highly accessible to low-income households, slumlords find evicting tenants more convenient than making repairs. If Good Cause, HAVP, and TOPA were laws, Diaz's client could insist that her landlord make repairs without fear of retaliatory eviction, or could apply for an HAVP voucher enabling her to move her family, and TOPA would give her a higher chance of finding decent affordable housing.

Ethical, responsible landlords who avoid predatory, profiteering behaviors need not fear these three bills. Rather, responsible and community-oriented landlords should welcome these bills. While the Good Cause bill will limit landlords' eviction powers and rent-raising powers, fair-minded and thoughtful landlords are aware that decent affordable housing is a survival need and not a luxury item, and therefore already only evict tenants for good cause reasons and already refrain from implementing steep rent hikes. HAVP will help many tenant households keep up with rent payments in a timely manner. TOPA will enable landlords to leave behind legacies of having helped people achieve the American dream of homeownership. These three bills will, once they become law, make NYS a more democratic and equitable place.

Social justice advocates and HOME members, please email “jkim@homeny.org” for recommendations on how to advocate for these bills.

ANGELICA RODRIGUEZ DEVELOPMENT OFFICER

Before joining HOME, I had the opportunity to work at the Buffalo History Museum, Buffalo Zoo, Gateway Longview, and most recently, at Beyond van Gogh.

The thing that excites me the most about working for nonprofits is helping the organizations achieve their promises to the local community, and what better promise than HOME's to advocate for a community free of housing discrimination and social inequity in Western New York.

In my off time, I'm a massive fan of video games (I blame my older brothers) and trying new local restaurants, but you're guaranteed to find me at one of the Olmsted Parks with a coffee in one hand and a book in the other during the warmer weather.

OLIVIA GUTHRIE INVESTIGATIONS COORDINATOR

Before coming to HOME, I worked in the medical field as an Endoscopy Technician. I primarily assisted gastroenterologists during endoscopic procedures. I was able to work for a great medical practice for almost four years while I was completing my undergraduate degree in Legal Studies. Upon completion of school, I knew I wanted to work for an organization like HOME.

I am interested in fair housing and social justice issues because I felt that throughout my upbringing, I was given so many opportunities, and it was not until my adult life that I realized not everybody has them. Focusing on helping the disadvantaged allows for a very rewarding career—we use our resources to level the playing field and to ensure that equality does not get ignored. It is very important to me that my job is not just to receive a paycheck—I value the ability to feel that when I went into work on any given day, that I made a difference either for an individual or in my community. Social justice is something that I have been and will always be passionate about; it is truly gratifying to work with people that share the same values and want to make a difference in the same ways that I do.

My hobbies outside of work include reading, spending time with friends and family, working out, and volunteering within my community. I am interested in politics as well, both locally and federally. I also love to shop at my local stores and travel when I can!