

Press Release
For Immediate Release

**LEGAL SERVICE PROVIDERS, ELECTED OFFICIALS, AND COMMUNITY
RESIDENTS CALL ON COURT ADMINISTRATION TO REOPEN HARLEM
HOUSING COURT**

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New York, NY – Today, a group of legal service providers and elected officials representing Harlem issued a [letter](#) calling on the Office of Court Administration to reopen the Harlem Community Justice Center. The signees include: Housing Conservation Coordinators, Manhattan Legal Services, Mobilization for Justice, Neighborhood Defender Services of Harlem, New York Legal Assistance Group, The Legal Aid Society, NYS State Senator Cordell Cleare, NYS Assembly Member Eddie Gibbs, and NYC Council Member Diana Ayala. For 20 years, the Harlem Community Justice Center served as NYC's largest civil community court, with a housing and small claims court with jurisdiction over upper Manhattan. The community court was founded with a neighborhood-based approach to resolving housing issues, creating collaboration between the court, service providers, landlords, and community residents.

The Rules of the City of New York state the Harlem court's jurisdiction: "An action or proceeding involving premises located in postal ZIP codes 10035 and 10037, and the Taft Houses and the Jefferson Houses, shall be noticed and filed in the Harlem courthouse¹". Despite no legislative changes to 208.43 in the Rules of the City of New York, the Office of Court Administration has scheduled Harlem cases in Part U at 111 Centre Street since March 2020. Part U's relocation to 111 Centre Street is a violation of the Rules of the City of New York and it is unclear if a Judge presiding over Part U from 111 Centre Street has jurisdiction over Harlem cases.

The Office of Court Administration's decision to require Harlem residents to appear in person has placed an undue burden on litigants in the Harlem court jurisdiction, who must now travel to 111 Centre Street to answer and appear on their case. We are concerned that this will increase the rate at which Harlem residents do not appear for their case and default, risking eviction. Requiring litigants to appear at 111 Centre Street also denies litigants the ability to access on-site services from the Harlem courthouse's Help Center.

"For over 20 years, Harlem residents have relied on the Harlem Community Justice Center as a community-based venue for justice," said **Rosalind Black, Housing Director at Manhattan Legal Services**. "But with its doors now closed, vulnerable residents are being forced to travel far downtown to defend eviction proceedings. Residents are also being denied the critical legal help services available in the Justice Center which focuses on achieving 'fairness and systemic equity in housing.' The Office of Court Administration must do the right thing, reopen the Harlem Community Justice Center, and retain its Help Center so community members can once again avail themselves of an opportunity for justice."

"The Office of Court Administration must reopen the doors of the Harlem Community Justice Center and restore our client's ability to rightfully appear in their neighborhood community-based court. To close HCJC is to deny access to justice for families, the elderly and disabled in some of the most vulnerable communities in Manhattan," said **Jason Wu, Attorney-in-Charge of The Legal Aid Society's Harlem Community Law Office**.

As this pandemic continues to have a devastating effect on many of our East Harlem neighbors, it is imperative we do all we can to ensure we decrease the burdens surrounding families during this time of unprecedented eviction cases," said **Deputy Speaker Diana Ayala**. "The Harlem Court House not only provides a convenient location to handle housing challenges but is also used as a space to provide critical resources to ensure tenants remain in their homes. We urge OCA to re-open the Harlem Community Justice Center."

"NYLAG strongly urges the Office of Court Administration to reopen the Harlem Community Justice Center (HCJC) to ensure Harlem residents have access to vital legal services within their community," said **Sirrah Harris, director of outreach and access to justice programs at New York Legal Assistance Group (NYLAG)**. "HCJC served as a legal access point for a neighborhood with limited community-based legal resources. Before the pandemic, NYLAG regularly worked with HCJC staff to bring our Mobile Legal Help Center to HCJC and connect community members with an array of legal services. Residents may have come to HCJC with a housing court case, but through the Mobile Legal Help Center, were able to access holistic legal services to address their other needs in areas such as family law, public benefits, and immigration. With the closure of HCJC, this and other community access-to-justice resources are no longer available."

"Residents of Taft Houses have been illegally ordered to appear in housing court downtown since March 2020. We have the right to appear in court at the Harlem Community Justice Center and access the services in that court house," said **Beverly Macfarlane, Resident Association President of Taft Houses**, a NYCHA development in HCJC's court jurisdiction.

"Neighborhood Defender Service of Harlem's clients and neighbors in the Northern Manhattan community have long relied on the accessibility and community-oriented nature of the Harlem Community Justice Center, and NDS has long partnered with OCA staff and the community resources available at HCJC ensure the unique needs of the residents under its jurisdiction are met. The relationships built among HCJC's stakeholders have led to regular legal clinics, direct judicial referrals to legal services providers working in the immediate community, and connection to additional forms of support to obtain the best outcome for many of the most vulnerable tenants. These benefits cannot be replicated in a downtown courthouse, and we strongly encourage OCA to reopen HCJC," said **Emily Ponder Williams, Managing Attorney - Civil Defense Practice, Neighborhood Defender Service of Harlem.**

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