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*****FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE*****

***Legal Aid Calls on NYC Dept of Finance to Save Historic
Bedford-Stuyvesant Mansion, Headquarters of the Brooklyn
Chapter of the United Order of Tents, the Oldest Black
Women's Benevolent Society in the US***

(NEW YORK, NY) - The Legal Aid Society called on the New York City Department of Finance (DOF) to save the historic Victorian mansion at 87 MacDonough Street in Bedford-Stuyvesant, which has served as the operational headquarters for the Brooklyn Chapter of the [United Order of Tents](#), the oldest Black women's benevolent society in the United States.

The United Order of Tents is a women's benevolent society that was formed in 1848 to provide aid to those escaping slavery via the Underground Railroad. The organization was officially chartered in 1883 by Anetta M. Lane and Harriet R. Taylor, two formerly enslaved women, in Norfolk, Virginia. Since 1945, the organization's Brooklyn Chapter has owned and operated its Bedford-Stuyvesant headquarters, which is now at risk of shuttering unless the DOF grants their application for exemption from real property tax.

The organization is a 501(c)(3) not-for-profit and has been recognized by the U.S. Internal Revenue Service (IRS) as tax exempt. Despite the federal tax exemption, the DOF has denied the United Order of the Tents' exemption from real property tax because the agency erroneously believes the building at 87 MacDonough Street to be vacant, even after Legal Aid attorneys established otherwise.

For 77 years, the United Order of Tents' Brooklyn headquarters has served as a central hub from which they have provided support to local communities by tending to the sick, feeding the poor,

caring for the elderly, and burying the deceased. Over the last two years, the building has fallen into some disrepair as a result of mandatory stay-at-home and social distancing orders during the COVID-19 pandemic which forced members of the organization to meet virtually to avoid the spread of the Coronavirus, hampering their ability to care for the mansion's needs.

The Brooklyn Chapter plans to seek grants for historic preservation that would enable rehabilitation of the premises, but cannot do so if property taxes are being levied against a not-for-profit entity.

“It is imperative that the DOF grants our client’s application for exemption from real property tax,” said **Jacques David, senior staff attorney in the Community Development Project at The Legal Aid Society.** “If the United Order of Tents were to lose their Brooklyn headquarters, it would be an even greater loss to the community since the Tents would be unable to continue their work of providing mutual aid to the residents of Bedford-Stuyvesant. It would also be detrimental to the work of preserving African American cultural heritage in New York City.”

Essie Gregory, President of the United Order of Tents, Brooklyn, said: “The United Order of Tents has been a beacon of light in Bedford-Stuyvesant for more than 75 years. That light has flickered at times, but it has never been extinguished! There are many challenges ahead as my sisters and I work to revitalize our organization so that it can meet the present-day needs of our community. But, we are not new to challenging circumstances or hardship; our organization was founded in the crucible of slavery and thrived during the Jim Crow era. We are working tirelessly so that our organization remains a ‘tent of refuge’ for decades to come. That is why the Department of Finance must approve our application for real property tax exemption.”

The United Order of Tents is an organization with significant African American heritage. The premises constitute a prominent site of African American history and culture, similar to the African Burial Ground, Weeksville Cultural Heritage Center, the Langston Hughes House, Louis Armstrong House, and the Audre Lord Residence.

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The Legal Aid Society exists for one simple yet powerful reason: to ensure that New Yorkers are not denied their right to equal justice because of poverty. For over 145 years, we have protected, defended, and advocated for those who have struggled in silence for far too long. Every day, in every borough, The Legal Aid Society changes the lives of our clients and helps improve our communities. www.legalaidnyc.org