

THE LEGAL AID SOCIETY

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26 New York City Council Members Call on Adams Administration for \$195 Million in Increased Funding for Public Defenders & Housing Right to Counsel in the City's Fiscal Year 2024 Budget

(NEW YORK, NY) – 26 New York City Council members, in a recently issued [letter](#), called on the Adams Administration to [appropriate \\$195 million in increased funding](#) in the City's Fiscal Year 2024 Budget for local public defender organizations and housing Right to Counsel providers.

If unaddressed, insufficient funding levels, wage inequality, and rising costs will cause harm to New Yorkers who rely on these legally mandated legal services. In addition to funding, widespread contracting issues, including late contract registration, delayed payments, and lack of cost-of-living adjustments, have led to organizational instability.

To ensure that low-income New Yorkers in need of legal representation have access, New York City Council Members have called on Mayor Adams to support a budget increase for criminal defense and housing Right to Counsel providers, as well as an overhaul of the contracting and payment process. While more funding is necessary to fully fund these programs, this request is a critical first step in addressing the economic crisis facing these organizations.

The letter states:

Our city prides itself on being a leader in the fight against injustice and human rights for all. Supporting a baseline budget increase for criminal defense and Right to Counsel providers, in addition to changes to contract flexibility, is an opportunity to ensure that low-income New Yorkers in need of legal representation have that access.

“Public defenders and Right to Counsel providers play a central role in our legal system, providing low-income New Yorkers the due process and zealous representation that they deserve,” said **Twyla Carter, CEO and Attorney-in-Chief of The Legal Aid Society**. “When our organizations are unfunded, it's our clients, Black and Latinx New Yorkers, who suffer the consequences. The Legal Aid Society lauds the City Council for standing with us and the communities we represent for increased funding in the City's Fiscal Year 2024 budget.”

“When public defense is undervalued, it undervalues the New Yorkers who rely on these services to protect and defend their rights,” said **Justine Olderman, Executive Director of The Bronx Defenders**. “We commend the Council for showing leadership and declaring that New York City will not turn its back on the thousands of New Yorkers struggling to survive.”

“Right to Counsel providers uphold the rights of New Yorkers as skyrocketing evictions threaten the livelihoods and futures of families across our city,” said **Lisa Rivera, president and CEO of New York Legal Assistance Group (NYLAG)**. “There is an urgent need for funding that matches the demand for these services, and a functional contracting process, so that New Yorkers whose rights are most threatened—our Black and Latinx communities experiencing poverty—receive vital legal representation when facing eviction. We thank the New York City Council for calling for increased funding in the Fiscal Year 2024 budget to support the Right to Counsel program so that more New Yorkers can stay in their homes.”

“New York's public defenders are the first and often the last line of defense for low-income New Yorkers facing eviction, job loss, food insecurity, incarceration, family separation, and deportation,” said **Alice Fontier, Managing Director of Neighborhood Defender Service of Harlem**. “With the social safety net for Black and Latine New Yorkers becoming more frayed every day, the administration cannot afford not to adequately fund its legal service providers.”

“New Yorkers facing incarceration, the loss of their homes, and other serious harms in the legal system deserve high-quality and zealous representation regardless of their ability to pay,” said **Lisa Schreibersdorf, Executive Director of Brooklyn Defender Services**. “When the organizations providing these critical and mandated legal services are underfunded and undervalued, the people we represent suffer. We thank the City Council for showing it values the rights of the people ensnared in these systems by advocating for increased funding for our work in this year's city budget.”

“New York City's public defenders represent tens of thousands of low-income residents facing criminal charges each year,” said **Lori Zeno, Executive Director of Queens Defenders**. “This essential role is provided by highly dedicated professionals who protect the rights of the most vulnerable in a city that chronically undervalues their skills, education, and abilities through insufficiently funded contracts. We applaud the New York City Council for calling for increased funding in the Fiscal Year 2024 budget and for standing with defenders and the thousands of individuals we represent each year.”

The affordable housing crisis will only deepen if low-income New Yorkers facing eviction are unable to access counsel through a more robustly supported Right to Counsel program. We continue to be committed to partner with the City of New York and the City Council to ensure that the rights enshrined by the right to counsel law are protected and able to be exercised,” said **Jessica Rose, Executive Director of Brooklyn Legal Services Corporation A**. “We applaud the New York City Council for its call for increases in the Fiscal Year 2024 budget to support the Right to Counsel program.”

“This year, Mayor Adams boosted the pay of police officers by more than 25 percent. A fifth-year police officer will now make more than \$50,000 more per year than a public defender five years out of law school,” said **Stan Germán, Executive Director of New York County Defender Services**. “New York City public defenders have reached a crisis point where the continued and intentional underfunding of our offices is having a disastrous impact on our court system and its administration of justice. This is nothing short of a constitutional crisis. We are grateful to the City Council for advocating for increased funding to avert this crisis and ensure that every New Yorker receives the high-quality legal representation that they deserve.”

“At a time when thousands of low-income New Yorkers are fighting unscrupulous landlords and struggling to keep up with soaring rents, NYC’s Right to Counsel program provides a life raft to families, helping to keep a roof over their heads,” said **Raun Rasmussen, executive director of Legal Services NYC**. “But in order to make sure this vital program is accessible to all New Yorkers, the City must provide additional funding to help providers staff up and meet the growing demand for free legal help. We commend the Speaker and the City Council for recognizing how truly vital this program is and for demanding the administration keep its promise of a Right to Counsel for all.”

“Eviction proceedings, by law, move swiftly through the NYS court system. Without adequate funding for legal services, tenants are forced to proceed without legal representation, unsure why they were denied those resources while a neighbor might have been afforded access to them. These same tenants often give up valuable rights and defenses, which the Right to Counsel was designed to prevent,” said **Lynn Horowitz, Managing Attorney of the Housing Practice at Housing Conservation Coordinators**. “Tenant attorneys who have fought for years for the right to counsel have no choice but to turn away eligible tenants, contributing to unprecedented levels of burnout and attrition amongst RTC staff. While the City Council has recognized the critical need for the right to counsel in housing court, the funding must match the reality of the volume of cases, lest we leave tenants questioning why only some deserve the right.”

“The housing crisis for New York City renters is at an inflection point, and tenants need all the support they can find. We appreciate that the Speaker and the City Council are committed to ensuring a robust, appropriately funded Right to Counsel program, which has been underfunded for far too long,” said **Tiffany Liston, Executive Director of Mobilization for Justice**. “The program has a proven track record of success as the vast majority of tenants served by Right to Counsel legal services providers avoid eviction. This critical, complicated, and demanding work must be fully funded to ensure that legal services providers may continue to deliver robust protection to low-income New Yorkers facing eviction and homelessness.”

Background

As the cost of living in New York City continues to rise, thousands more New Yorkers will be threatened by eviction, job loss, food insecurity, incarceration, family separation, and deportation. New York City’s leading legal service organizations are often the first line of defense for New Yorkers struggling to survive.

Yet, these organizations have faced years of chronic underfunding, contracting issues, and unfulfilled commitments to provide pay parity and supplements to meet the demands of historic legislative reforms, such as discovery. These failures have led to widespread staff vacancies and delayed investments in critical infrastructure, like technology.

The City’s contracting process has also compounded these issues. Through late contract registration, payment delays, and failed cost-of-living adjustments, the City has hindered public defenders from addressing attrition rates, meet their legal obligations through discovery reform, and invest in new technologies or systems upgrades that have made continuity of high-quality representation extremely difficult to maintain.

Ultimately, if left unaddressed this year, not only will staff attrition levels continue to rise, but low-income New Yorkers will be further marginalized and disconnected from the critical services these organizations provide to keep them in their homes, with their families, and in their communities; services that ensure true community safety.

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