

**Testimony before the
New York City Council Committee on Higher
Education by
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Good morning and Happy New Year.

Chairperson Inez Barron and members of the Committee on Higher Education, thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony before you on the critical issue of support for City University of New York students experiencing housing insecurity and homelessness.

My name is Denise Maybank and I am honored to serve as the Interim Vice Chancellor for Student Affairs and Enrollment Management for the City University of New York. I had the privilege of coming before you, during the first few days of my tenure, regarding mental health and related services and now return to address a related and equally important area of concern in the lives of CUNY students.

I am accompanied today by Sunday Coward who, serves as the University Dean of Special Programs; she will offer insights associated with services that have been provided through our programs formally organized under the Single Stop umbrella and now being expanded to the other colleges throughout the system; I will also depend on her for responses to questions regarding services rendered prior to my joining the university some 70 days ago.

As the largest urban university in the nation, The City University of New York is described as a “transformative engine of social mobility that is a critical component of the lifeblood of New York

City (www.cuny.edu/about).” An integral part of the University’s mission is the provision of services necessary to support the accomplishment of the academic goals of each student.

During my first few weeks in this position, I embarked on discussion with the senior student affairs officers regarding the place in which we need to be to respond to the critical “beyond the classroom” needs of our students; not only because of the impact of the pandemic, but also because our students deserve optimal circumstances in which to attain their goals and we are best positioned to support them in having that experience. I am, and we are, committed to our students not merely surviving - but thriving through the CUNY experience.

THE DATA

You may be aware of the *City University of New York #Real College Survey*¹, conducted during the 2018-19 academic year by the Hope Center at Temple University, with funding from the Jewish Foundation for Education of Women and support from CUNY’s Office of Institutional Research & Assessment (OIRA), to assess the rates and experiences of food insecurity, housing instability, and homelessness among CUNY students.

The results of this survey informed us that, of the 22,000 students responding, 55% reported experiencing housing instability and 14% reported being homeless. Among those of us who work closely with students, this reality is certainly evident among so many of our students who come to CUNY, against the odds, in the interest of improving circumstances and life.

¹ Hope Center for College, Community and Justice. City University for New York #RealCollege Survey, 2019 https://hope4college.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/03/HOPE_realcollege_CUNY_report_final_webversion.pdf

Rates of housing insecurity and homelessness were found to be higher among community college students than among those attending senior colleges; these rates were also found to be greatest among African American or Black students.

Since 2007, CUNY has benefited from the work of Dr. Nick Freudenberg and the Healthy CUNY initiative. This past fall, *A Guide to Surviving and Thriving at CUNY*² was issued to offer students access to resources and information to assist them in addressing academic, health, economic and social challenges compounded by the pandemic. Based on the data presented in the guide, issues associated with housing instability are identified by CUNY students among the reasons for their decreased ability to do their school work. Specifically, 27%, of the approximately 2000 students responding to the survey, reported experiencing changes in living arrangements, and 8% indicated feeling unsafe at home as distractors from their academics. From the information provided in the Guide:

“In the spring 2020 survey on the Effects of COVID-19 on CUNY students, about 50% of students reported that they have some worries about losing current housing due to coronavirus. Additionally, about 54% of students who had to withdraw from classes last semester said it was because they need to focus on basic needs like housing and food.”

² Healthy CUNY COVID-19 Work Group. Guide to Surviving and Thriving at CUNY. CUNY School of Public Health, 2020 <http://www.healthycuny.org/survivingandthriving>

MEETING THE NEEDS

CUNY provides housing and housing related services through student affairs offices on the campuses and coordinated under the University Associate Director of Student and Residence Life in the Central Office.

CUNY has campus-sponsored residence halls associated with eight of the campuses: Baruch, City College, College of Staten Island, Hunter, Graduate Center, John Jay, Lehman, and Queens College. Although the residential facilities may differ in design and management, each has staff affiliated with the campus to support student residents through programming, advising, and respond to student needs. Information regarding off-campus housing options, resources and referrals is available centrally and through the websites of each of the campuses. This information includes housing locators and guides, tenant rights information and community resources.

In 2016, CUNY entered into partnership with the Administration of Children Services (ACS) to provide housing at its residence halls for students through the Fostering College Success Initiative (FCSI), also known as the “Dorm Project”. FCSI is a college residential support program for youth in care attending CUNY. Students in the program receive year-round housing and financial support to cover the cost of CUNY attendance after the application of financial aid awards. Wrap-around support services, including tutoring, coaching, career supports, are provided through a sub-contract ACS has with New York Foundling (NYF). In addition to providing housing, CUNY residence hall staff coordinate with NYF staff to provide a supportive environment for FCSI students. Staff at the CUNY Central Office provide student enrollment and academic data to ACS. Since the inception of the program, 297 FCSI students have been housed

at residence halls affiliated with City College, College of Staten Island, John Jay College, Queens College, and, most recently, Hunter College.

HOUSING DURING COVID

As we grappled with the realities of COVID-19 that beset us in March, residence halls across CUNY closed to plan for the anticipated use as housing for COVID-19 patients. With the need to de- densify our residence hall population, the Summit at Queens College served as a consolidation residence hall for students without other housing options.

A total of 2279 residents evacuated the nine locations across CUNY, leaving 136 residents remaining within their respective halls. Ninety (90) students relocated to the Summit Apartments at Queens College, joining its 120 remaining students. Residents at the Summit were provided three meals a day, seven days a week, on site; students received a hot meal option as well as a snack. Extra security guards were hired to handle lockouts, package distribution, and minor tasks throughout the days and nights Summit staff continued to run the daily office operations so that the student experience would not have any interruptions. Maintenance staff also reported to work daily to keep the building sanitized and safe for the students; additional student staff were hired to work as members of the evening/weekend sanitization team to ensure the building was being sanitized every three (3) hours from 8am to 11pm, seven days a week, including holidays. Equipped with the PPE necessary to keep them safe, we empowered CUNY students to help other CUNY students while earning additional income during a period of great economic distress.

There were 117 students in the Dorm Project as of March 2020, 40 of whom were relocated to or remained at the Summit. The remainder of students were relocated to community placements

determined by ACS. As residence halls reopened in the fall 2020, in dialogue with ACS, CUNY identified additional space to accommodate FCSI students who wished to return to a residence hall living arrangement. Currently, a total of 110 beds are reserved for FCSI students at two locations: the Summit at Queens College (52 beds) and the Hunter College 79th Street Apartments (58 beds).

Although the residence halls did not collect or keep information about where the students went after they evacuated, the general consensus is that most students returned home or went to stay with relatives. In many instances, students remained in contact with staff in the halls and continued to be supported through emergency grants and food pantry services.

MOVING FORWARD

What are we doing as we move forward? The senior student affairs officers of the 25 colleges have discussed the need to step into this space, making certain we have a coordinated way of addressing the needs of our students and ensuring that all students know where to go when they need assistance to stay on course.

Although we no longer contract with Single Stop USA for services, the full compliment of associated services continue to be provided at the community colleges and John Jay College; this model is being extended to other colleges in the system to provide continuity of services for students across the system. As students transfer among CUNY colleges, they should not lose time in identifying the resources necessary to assure their safety and success. More information regarding these coordinated services will be provided by my colleague.

Partnerships with agencies, organizations and entities providing the services that support and sustain our students and their families allow us to focus on our expertise in student success and wellness, while assuring that student needs are holistically met. As an example, we are reinvigorating the relationship and connection with our partners from the Legal Aid Society of New York. Students stand in need of legal advice regarding unfair and illegal practice by landlords as they seek to navigate challenging economic circumstances that may place them at risk of housing insecurity. With extension of the eviction moratorium protecting tenants from eviction and new eviction filings until May 2021, we seek to keep our students fully apprised of the rules of engagement, informed of their rights and responsibilities and able to respond with appropriate representation when necessary – our Legal Aid Society partners across the city make this possible.

We are exploring ways to track and maintain contact with students we determine to be homeless. At the campus level, staff may become aware of the housing need of a student and may be able to provide a short-term solution through a grant or referral; however, we want to support our students through longer term, more sustainable solutions to address housing instability and homelessness. Identifying the economic and social service resources beyond the university in each borough becomes a mandate for student affairs. Building a network of providers able to support CUNY students in the areas of their greatest vulnerabilities is an extension of our role in transforming lives. We are also in early discussions with one community-based organization about a pilot program to provide housing with wraparound services for a co-hort of homeless students.

Our plan over the course of the next year is to seed and develop the CUNY Students Thriving Think Tank. This initiative will bring together the researchers who examine the issues that impede the success of college age and college student populations, along with the practitioners who serve students across the CUNY campuses for data-informed, solution-focused research and response development. This will be a shared space for developing shared understanding and for creating innovative responses to the needs of urban college student populations – undergraduate, graduate and professional. Issues to be addressed include the impact of racial and social injustice, mental health concerns, food insecurity and of course housing instability and homelessness. In creating a scholar-practitioner experience we seek to move research to prompt action. As the CUNY Students Thriving Think Tank develops, we look forward to sharing the direction and outcomes with you.

CONCLUSION

Thank you, Chairperson Barron and members of the Higher Education Committee, for your interest in, and attention to this most pressing issue. I trust we have provided information responsive to your inquiry and useful in your deliberations. We stand committed to assuring CUNY is the place of thriving for our students, while they are enrolled and beyond. Following testimony by my colleague, Sunday Coward, we are available for any questions.

Good morning, Chairperson Barron and committee members. Thank you for inviting us to speak, today. As Vice Chancellor Maybank stated in her remarks, CUNY is providing referral services to students who indicate that they are experiencing food and housing insecurity.

CUNY Food Pantries are currently operating at all of our Senior and Community Colleges. CUNY students are able to access the food pantries at all of our CUNY institutions, regardless of their college of attendance.

This year, more than 8,000 students have visited the CUNY's food pantries where they have received grocery bags, gift cards, and grocery cards. Students who are unable to visit the campus received direct cash transfers.

Using City Council funds, we were able to provide \$20,000 to each Community College's food pantry.

CUNY's community colleges and John Jay College continue to provide a holistic set of wraparound services, formerly provided by Single Stop USA. These services include:

Benefits Screening

Program staff meet with students and complete a screening that allows the student to see available services. If eligible, the staff guides the students through the process of applying for public benefits including, Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF); and Women, Infants and Children (WIC).

Case Management

Staff members work with students to identify issues and barriers that may prevent them from doing well, academically, and then, connect students to campus resources, coordinate with other service providers, and monitor the student's services.

Clothing Donation/Assistance Program

Programs provide students with clothing for themselves and their families, hosts clothing pop-up shops and collaborate with CUNY Edge in seeking professional attire for employment through their Dress for Success Program.

Emergency Funds

Staff conduct an assessment to determine student eligibility for financial assistance and are able to provide students with emergency funds for housing, telephone bills, medical bills, transportation, textbooks, and food.

Feminine Hygiene Products

Programs, at times, receive donations from their campus wellness/health centers of feminine hygiene products to provide to students.

Financial Counseling

The New York Legal Assistance Group (NYLAG), provides virtual financial counseling to students.

Food Pantry

Staff conducts a full needs assessment with each student for food items and, at some locations, ready-to-eat meals. The office also oversees the food purchasing process and tracks spending.

Health Care Enrollment

Staff conducts a full assessment with each student and assists the student in applying for health insurance.

Health and Wellness

The office provides sexual education information to students, as well as, condoms, pregnancy tests, and sanitary products. Staff also refers students to the campus wellness/health centers for these services if not provided directly by the program.

Housing Services

Program staff provides referrals to students to address their housing needs. Staff refers students to shelters, rental assistance programs, public housing, and programs that can assist students facing eviction.

Internal/External Referrals

The program staff provides free referrals that can help address students' needs. The staff refers students to NYC area programs to address childcare, housing, financial assistance, domestic violence, and other resources available to them. Within CUNY, students are referred to counseling centers, career services, wellness centers, etc.

Legal Counseling

Legal Aid Society provides in-person legal counseling to students.

Outreach Services

Staff participates in numerous events to promote the program's services. These events include Admissions Seminars, New Student Orientations and Student Activities Fairs, Financial Aid Awareness Events, Health and Wellness events, classroom presentations, and tabling in high student traffic areas.

Services for Student Parents

Program staff provides referrals to student parents based on individual need.

Tax Preparation

The IRS trains program staff to conduct intake for students who would like to file their taxes. The staff screens students to ensure that they meet the eligibility criteria and to ensure

that they have all of the necessary documents. Then, a certified tax preparer then prepares, reviews and submits the student's Federal and State taxes.

In a Spring 2020 Education Trust report entitled, *“Coronavirus & Educational Equity: Supporting College Students through the Pandemic,”* 56% of low-income students reported skipping a meal or reducing their daily meal amounts and only 32% of poor students indicated that they would be able to afford basic expenses, including food.

In response to the needs of our students, the programs have created their own partnerships with internal and external organizations and currently provide services beyond what Single Stop USA’s provided including benefits screening, financial counseling, tax preparation assistance, and legal services.

Overall, our Student Affairs liaisons report an increase in students requesting food and housing assistance. CUNY staff continue to provide housing referrals to The Door, The Bowery, The Church Avenue Merchant Block Association (CAMBA), Catholic Charities, Part of the Solution (POTS), and other agencies. Because many charities will not assist students denied by HRA, our staff members have established relationships with several community agencies that provide housing assistance services, such as One Shot deals to them.

Our campus liaisons report spending a lot of time assisting students as they navigate illegal housing eviction threats and additional scare tactics from landlords – even with an eviction moratorium in place. Through staff advocacy, CUNY students receive additional education about their housing and legal rights.

CUNY continues to support students who need housing assistance by providing HRA application assistance, emergency grants, hotel rooms, and direct links to housing rights, NYC HRA Civil Justice, Housing Court, and the Tenant Prevention Task Force.

Using existing resources and program services, CUNY remains committed to providing students with wraparound services that will ensure their success.

Thank you.

Sunday F. Coward
University Dean, Special Programs



**New York City Council Higher Education Committee
Hearing on Housing Insecurity Among CUNY Students
Submitted by Carina V. Santos Taveras, Homeless Student and Disability Rights Advocate with both
CUNY Coalition for Students with Disabilities and Young Invincibles
January 14, 2021**

Good afternoon. My name is Carina V. Santos Taveras and I am a Young Advocate with Young Invincibles. I want to thank Councilmember Barron as well as members of the committee for the opportunity to provide testimony today on how COVID-19 has impacted higher education. I am a Bronx native and daughter to Dominican immigrants. I come from a background where opportunities for higher learning were never presented to me because I was a low-income minority child with a disability. Despite the many systemic barriers I faced, I still made it to college and graduated with honors from Hunter College in 2019. There I studied Africana Studies and Puerto Rican/Latino and Community Leadership Studies. Although, I graduated from college in the Spring of 2019, the trauma that I endured as a homeless college student made it almost impossible for this accomplishment to be deferred. I had professors who encouraged me to drop out of school while not having any financial assistance to cover tuition. Struggling with the anxiety of collapsing in class due to starvation, the stress of keeping up my GPA in order to keep my scholarships to pay for school and dorm fees, and not knowing whether I would have safe and stable housing after graduation took a mental toll on me. In my final semester at Hunter College, I spent much of my time studying in the emergency room as I had many seizures triggered due to stress and the barriers I faced alone, including the lack of meals as Hunter College did not have a food pantry during this time. I was not allowed to access the food pantry at John Jay or Lehman College, as I did not belong to that school.

Struggling with homelessness and food insecurity as a college student truly compromises your ability to function in class and maintain a high GPA, both of which are crucial for students who do not get financial aid like myself and relied heavily on scholarship support. The reality is that more needs to be done to support homeless college students especially those who do not fit the NYC Homeless categories for priority housing! I know this because as a homeless college student I never got any support from my campus. I was often turned away and shamed for being homeless, and once I graduated the Hunter doors were closed completely to me as I could no longer utilize the showers at the Hunter campus. My graduation ceremony was on May 29, 2019 at Madison Square Garden. Hillary Clinton was my Commencement speaker. That should have been an amazing moment, where I should have celebrated my hard work and accomplishment. But I did not. That moment was tainted because I had to rush back to the Hunter dorms to meet the deadline Hunter gave me to move out. Otherwise, I would be charged \$150 that I could not afford. Unlike the other students on my floor who had friends and families helping them move and pack, I was by myself. So, I had to rush out the door of Madison Square Garden. I will never forget the date, May 30th, 2019, that is a day after my graduation ceremony and the official day that I became homeless. I managed to meet my deadline and gave my key back to the school. I spent my first night sleeping on the 4 line. After I realized it was not safe to sleep in the trains, I decided to go into the shelter system and that is where I began a traumatizing journey to acquire stable and permanent housing that never happened.

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My journey began at the Franklin Women's Intake Shelter in the Bronx, then I was move to Catherine Street Family Respite Shelter in Manhattan. Where I was assigned a case manager that did not speak English and cost me a job interview. I would think the shelter system would encourage clients to seek employment but that was not the case for me. I requested my case manager to give me an overnight pass so that I could spend the night at friend's house after she agreed to help me with my resume, provide me clothes and Metro card to be able to attend my interview the next day. You probably think these are all things that the shelter can provide but you would be wrong. That is why I reached out for help outside of the shelter. I asked my case manager for an overnight to prepare for my interview and she said no despite providing documentation. As a result, I missed my interview as I had no interview clothing or metro cards. In addition to not providing support for employment, the Catherine shelter failed to provide accommodations for my seizures despite providing documentation. Because I kept insisting the shelter meet my accommodation needs their solution was to transport me in the middle of the night at 2AM while, providing no knowledge as to where I was being taken to. That experience was tremendously traumatizing, as it felt like I was being kidnapped and was not given time to collect my belongings. Once I arrived at the destination at 5AM, I learned that I was transported to Van Siclen Women's Shelter located at 710 Hendrix Street in Brooklyn, miles away from my doctors in the Bronx. This shelter in particular caters to severely mentally ill women and substance users. Just to be clear, I am not a substantive user, nor do I have any severe mental illness. I simply suffer from seizures and require a safe and stable environment which this shelter was not appropriate placement for. In addition, this shelter has been in the news for its cruelty towards homeless clients. My first night there two fights broke out and I was not even provided toiletries or a pillow as a new intake.ⁱ

After two weeks of insisting to meet my case manager at the Van Siclen Women's Shelter and not being served I was transported once more to the Susan's Place Shelter in the Bronx. At this point I had obtained a paid temporary internship which was an amazing opportunity. But that would also be my downfall. I was told after my 90 day in shelter that because of my full time 15 an hour internship I was not eligible for the CITYFEPS housing voucher. I also was not eligible for the 2010E housing packet because I do not have any severe mental illness or a history of substance abuse. In addition, I had my food stamps suspended and my Medicaid cancelled. It was the most traumatizing experience to learn that my internship and the retaliation I **endured** for reporting my case manager was the reason why I had my food stamps and Medicaid suspended and I was not eligible for the CITYFEPS program all while still being homeless. Can you imagine that? Having a minimum wage temporary job where you are trying work and do better, but the shelter provides no support and because of this minimum wage job you are not eligible for housing assistance despite being homeless and living in a shelter. After I learned that the shelter system was not going to help me gain permanent, safe, and stable housing I left. Because I could no longer tolerate putting my life in danger and having my Adults with Disability Act (ADA) rights violated. Despite providing documentation of my seizure history and letters from my neurologist the Susan's Place shelter refused to provide any accommodations that would reduce my seizures. For the first time in my life, I had a seizure in public, and I was by myself. Every time I think about that moment, I cannot stop myself from crying. Because if I had that seizure while crossing the street, I probably would not be alive today. Once I enter a seizure episode I cannot hear or see a moving car coming my way, as I lose consciousness. Fortunately, I

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collapsed on the concrete sidewalk, fell headfirst and only walked away with a few scars on my head. That incident could have been prevented had the shelter system cared to follow ADA protocols. To further emphasize my point of how homeless people with disabilities constantly have their rights violated in the shelter system, I was not the only epileptic at the Susan's Place shelter that had their seizures triggered by the carelessness of staff. This whole journey into the shelter system trying to gain stable housing all could have been avoided had I had support while I was still an undergrad in college. If my school made any efforts to provide immediate counseling assistance for job readiness and safe transitional housing for college students who are graduating, I probably would not have had to experience all the trauma, violence, and seizure episodes I faced in the shelter system.

The reality is from my experience the way that the New York City shelter system is designed to work as a revolving door for everyone who does not fit the categories for priority housing. Who are the people in the categories that get housing? Families, substance abusers, Domestic violence survivors, and the mentally ill always get housing. Everyone who does not fit those categories are forced to either be street-homeless which is much safer than the shelter to be honest or become warehouse. If you are wondering what does warehousing mean that is when you live in a shelter because you cannot afford rent but, you are also not eligible for housing assistance, so you become warehoused. This pandemic has made the homeless crisis among college students' a vulnerable population far worse than it was before as the schools are close, many shelters do not accommodate college student's needs, there are less job opportunities and room for rents are no longer affordable. If we continue to ignore college students and the young-single working poor class, while leave things as they are and excluding, we will see another massive wave of homelessness among college students and young working adults just like in 2008.

I thank the committee for allowing me to share my story and shed some light on the harsh realities for students and young working single adults in the homeless shelter system of NYC.

ⁱ <https://www.nydailynews.com/new-york/queens/residents-complain-poor-treatment-brooklyn-homeless-shelter-article-1.1835338>

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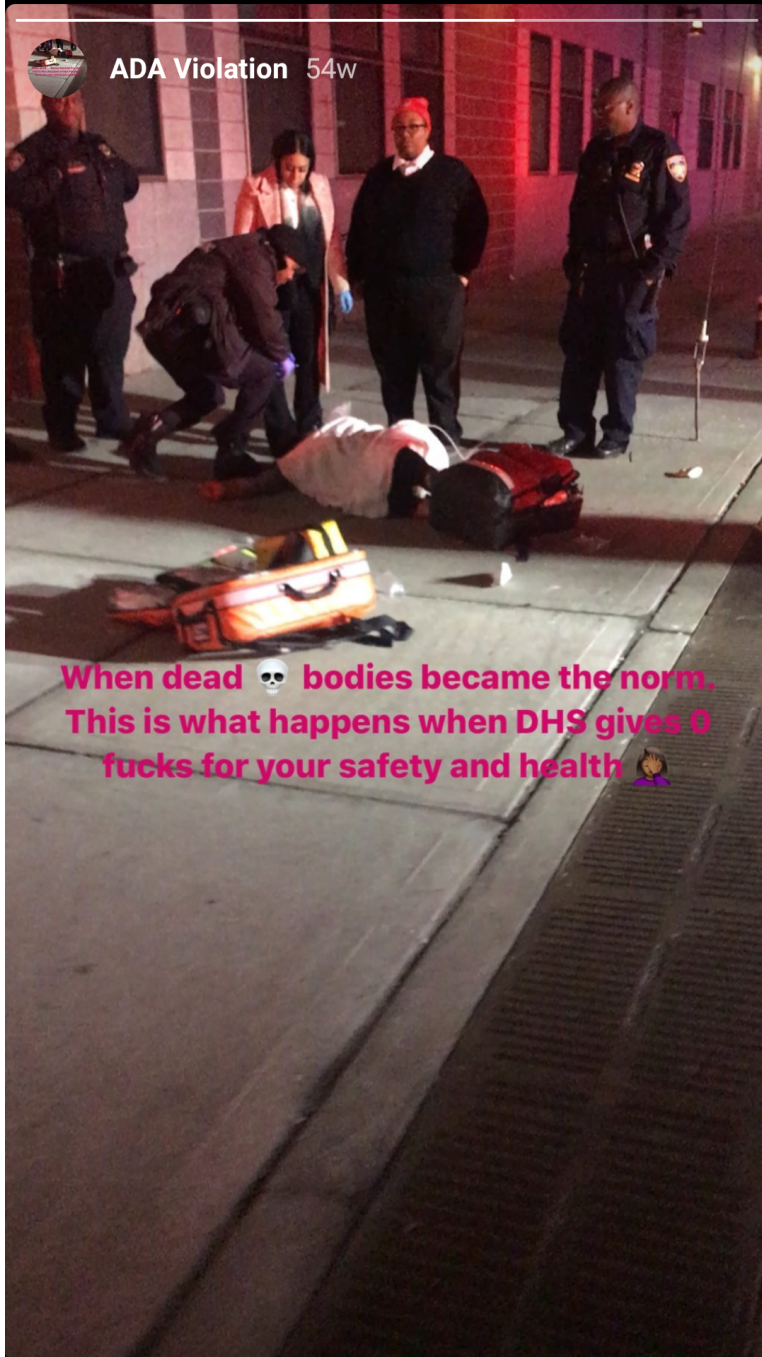
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48%



ADA Violation 54w



When dead 🦴 bodies became the norm.
This is what happens when DHS gives 0
fucks for your safety and health 🙄



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**New York City Council Committee on Higher Education
Oversight Hearing on Housing Insecurity Among Students at CUNY
Submitted by Melanie Kruevelis, Senior Manager of Policy and Advocacy
Thursday, January 14, 2021**

Good morning. My name is Melanie Kruevelis, and I am the Senior Manager of Policy and Advocacy at Young Invincibles. Young Invincibles is a policy and advocacy non-profit dedicated to elevating young adults in the political process and expanding economic opportunities for our generation. I want to thank the members of the Committee on Higher Education for holding today's urgent hearing on the homelessness crisis facing New York's college students. I want to particularly thank Committee Chair Inez Barron for her tireless commitment to supporting CUNY students.

CUNY had a homelessness crisis even before the COVID-19 pandemic began. A 2019 survey from the Hope Center found that 14 percent of CUNY undergraduates experienced homelessness in a given year. In our own focus groups across the city, we heard about the barriers unhoused students face when trying to earn a degree from CUNY — from the lack of truly affordable housing, to a homelessness and housing system that is not designed with college students in mind. And while many of the challenges outlined by students stem from decades of disinvestment in our public higher education system, we also heard about the ways the policies at CUNY harm students experiencing homelessness. One Hunter College graduate told us about losing her dorm housing the day of her graduation — and becoming homeless the same day as earning her degree.

COVID-19, of course, has made the college student homelessness crisis even more dire. An April 2020 survey of more than 2,000 CUNY students found that nearly *half* are worried about losing their housing during the pandemic. The researchers also found that housing insecurity is strongly associated with anxiety and depression — with serious impacts on students' ability to persist and graduate from college. These findings should be ringing alarms for anyone concerned about New York City's recovery from COVID-19. We know what CUNY means for working-class New Yorkers: About 75 percent of CUNY freshmen are NYC DOE graduates, and the majority of CUNY students come from households making less than \$30,000 a year.¹ The City University of New York can be a driver for an equitable recovery, connecting New Yorkers who've lost work during the pandemic with education, job training, and a pathway to stability. But if we don't get serious about meeting CUNY students' most basic needs, we will leave behind thousands of low-income, Black, brown, and immigrant New Yorkers — the very families who have been most harmed by this pandemic.

¹ Partnering for Education Success in NYC: DOE and CUNY. Summer 2014.
<https://philanthropynewyork.org/sites/default/files/Partnering%20for%20Educational%20Success%20in%20NYC.pdf>



What can be done to address the basic-needs crisis facing CUNY students? It will take proactive leadership at the campus and city level, and a serious push on the state to reverse decades of austerity budgeting for CUNY. We have seen CUNY and the City Council take critical steps during this pandemic to support students experiencing profound instability: earlier in the pandemic, the Council's Food Insecurity Program, a new pilot program that connects eligible CUNY students with \$400 cafeteria vouchers each semester, was reworked once campuses closed in the pandemic, and provided students with mailed checks instead. We also saw CUNY change policies to allow students to visit any CUNY campus food pantry, regardless of the CUNY college they attend, and the creation of the Chancellor's emergency grant program to provide students with one-time cash assistance during the pandemic.

But we've also learned critical lessons throughout the course of the pandemic, and know there is much more work to be done to support the growing number of college students facing homelessness and hunger. As we begin yet another COVID-19 semester, we urge the following:

Recommendations for CUNY

- **Make it easier for students to continue to receive emergency aid through individual campus grant programs.** The December stimulus legislation provides a new round of COVID-19 relief funding to CUNY, including funding earmarked for emergency aid to students. Given how long we went without stimulus support from the federal government during the pandemic, it is entirely understandable that students who have already received emergency aid may need that support again. CUNY colleges must develop a policy that outlines its approach to students requesting multiple rounds of emergency aid funding. Institutions must inform students of that policy in all communication about applying for emergency aid, and on the aid application itself. We also continue to hear from students about complicated applications that create another barrier to receiving aid from their institution. As this additional funding arrives to CUNY's colleges, we urge campus leadership to reevaluate and simplify their emergency grant applications. The non-profit [SchoolHouse Connection authored a 2019 brief](#) on best practices for distributing emergency grants to students experiencing homelessness. We urge CUNY colleges to align their grant distribution with this guidance.
- **Convene a taskforce on student homelessness to develop policies that will support unhoused students, and build a campus culture that destigmatizes homelessness.** As more students experience homelessness and basic needs insecurity, CUNY should convene a group of students, financial aid advisors, service providers, and advocates to reevaluate policies and practices that make it harder for unhoused students to persist in college.

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- **Reenvision existing campus supports, such as food pantries, as hubs for students to receive support with public assistance and housing applications.**

Unhoused students are more likely to experience hunger, or have trouble affording MetroCards. Building off of successes with Single Stop offices, CUNY should reimagine its pantries as one-stop shops for students to get support applying for public assistance, such as SNAP. A 2018 survey from HealthyCUNY found that just [under 6 percent of CUNY undergraduates](#) receive SNAP benefits. The survey's researchers note that many more CUNY students are likely to be eligible for SNAP benefits, based on their income. Connecting eligible students to these existing benefits is a critical step in helping students stabilize themselves during this crisis.

Recommendations for City Council:

- **Convene leaders from CUNY, the Department of Homeless Services (DHS), the Department of Housing Preservation and Development (HPD), and the Human Resources Administration (HRA) to improve coordination of support and service delivery for college students facing homelessness.** CUNY should enter an agreement with these three agencies to prioritize college students experiencing homelessness in available housing and public assistance programs.

Recommendations for State legislature and Governor Cuomo:

- **Create on-campus liaisons to support unhoused students at every public college in New York.** States like California, Maine, and Washington State have passed legislation, creating liaisons specifically tasked with supporting students experiencing homelessness. These liaisons work to improve campus policies and practices to support students, including financial aid policies that can block unhoused students from college success. They can also collect data on how many students are experiencing homelessness — a critical need as campuses reckon with increased homelessness and financial insecurity among its students.²
- **Provide students experiencing homelessness with priority enrollment in classes and dorm housing.** California and Tennessee have passed statewide legislation requiring colleges give unhoused students first priority in campus housing, particularly housing that is open year-round. New York should also pass legislation granting unhoused students prioritization with class enrollment and on-campus housing.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify, and I look forward to your questions.

² Additional information on these on-campus liaisons can be found here: <https://www.schoolhouseconnection.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/01/Tips-for-Homeless-Higher-Education-Liaisons.pdf>



**New York City Council Committee on Higher Education
Oversight Hearing on Housing Insecurity Among Students at CUNY
Submitted by Zaret Cortorreal, Senior, Lehman College
Thursday, January 14, 2021**

Good morning. My name is Zaret Cortorreal, and I am a Young Advocate with Young Invincibles. I was born and raised in the Dominican Republic. I came to the United States in 2015. I had always wanted to attend college in the US because I understand its importance for my future and well-being. I started school at Borough of Manhattan Community College and am now a senior at Lehman College, studying accounting, with a planned graduation in Spring 2021.

Housing insecurity and homelessness is very real among college students, even before COVID-19. I'm sure it's even worse now given the economic crisis this pandemic has created. Unfortunately, I found myself dealing with housing insecurity while at CUNY. In 2019, I had to reduce my hours from my full-time job to accommodate my full course load of 15 hours. That reduction in hours meant I couldn't afford my rent. I don't have any relatives here, or enough savings to move to a more affordable apartment. I reached out to Single Stop at BMCC, but they did not have a program that would help me with my situation. I applied for a school emergency grant and got no response. I shared my situation with my professors and they connected me to the Office of Student Affairs where I was able to receive food support. However, they could do nothing about housing and I had no choice but to move into a shelter in the Bronx.

As you can imagine, this was an incredibly difficult decision. When the pandemic began, living in the shelter as a full-time student was challenging. The shelter I lived in did not provide the support and resources necessary for students to continue their studies, and some of the shelter's policies made it hard for me to continue my education. For example, the shelter I lived in did not allow residents to use laptops in the shelter, or access WiFi. When classes went online during the pandemic, it became hard for me to keep up with school work, and I was stressed about constantly needing to find places to do my school work. I am grateful that I had my own laptop, as the shelter had a computer lab that was limited to only one hour of use daily. I also was limited in terms of the extracurricular activities that I could participate in, as I had a 10pm curfew. I would often be doing schoolwork in the evenings and would have to ask for late passes which shelter staff were reluctant to give.

YOUNG INVINCIBLES

About a year ago, I became pregnant. As a result of my condition, in March, I was finally able to be placed temporarily in a dorm at Lehman College until August. This was only made possible with the help of Timothy Hunter, the former CUNY USS President. He heard about my situation from another student Carina Taveras, a formerly homeless student that helped connect me to resources like food. It was only because I was pregnant, homeless, and had a good academic standard that I obtained this housing. In August, I had to move out of the dorm. I now can only afford to rent a shared room with a stranger. But this is better than going back to the shelter.

The New York City shelter system is terrible, beyond what I have already shared. While I was living in a shelter, I was forcibly moved three times. When they move you, there is no advance notice, and I was even moved at 3am one morning. The city must do better to house homeless people across the city.

Even before the pandemic, obtaining affordable housing in New York City is incredibly challenging with numerous restrictions that prevent full-time students from renting low-income apartments. Surprisingly, being a student parent with a newborn does not automatically qualify me for housing. With the onset of the pandemic, it is even more difficult to find an apartment due to the fact that not every office is open or willing to show the apartment. Affordable housing provides developers with a tax credit for housing low-income residents. However, they do not accept full-time students. The city should change this restriction to allow students to obtain housing.

Another major issue is that many landlords do not accept city housing vouchers and that the voucher amounts are too low to actually afford a place to rent. I experienced this when I was looking for an apartment before the pandemic. Due to my housing status, I received a CityFHEPS voucher to help me pay for an apartment. I saw many opportunities to rent, but landlords did not want to rent to me because I had a CityFHEPS voucher or the voucher was not enough. Many landlords don't accept the vouchers because the city has a reputation of not paying them on time. By the time I moved into the dorm room at Lehman College, my CityFHEPS voucher expired. I tried to renew it so that I could use it to find permanent housing after living in the dorm, but I was told by HRA that I couldn't because I was not living in a shelter anymore. If I wanted to receive the voucher again, I'd have to move back into the shelter. Unfortunately, the only way that I would be guaranteed housing is if I spent three years in a shelter which would then allow me to qualify for Section 8 housing.



Based on my experience, I recommend that CUNY better support homeless students and prioritize them for free, on-campus housing. Homeless students should receive more help with their basic needs, such as taking away the “Section 42” clause that limits renting to full-time students. CUNY should work with the New York City Department of Homeless Services (DHS), NYC Housing Authority (NYCHA), and the Department of Housing Preservation and Development (HPD) to help make housing more affordable for CUNY students, and make sure students living in the city’s shelters are supported. I also think it would be helpful for CUNY to track homeless students to help them get the support that they need to complete their education. In addition, more accommodations for students in shelters is needed so that they have access to the technology and internet needed to continue school. Lastly, it is important to increase access to food pantries to all students, including those who are homeless.

Thank you for the opportunity to share my story in order to help more homeless students obtain the housing, resources, and support that they need to graduate from college.

Testimony from Professor Hugo Fernandez from CUNY

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“Oversight: Housing Insecurity Among Students at the City University of New York”

New York City Council’s *Committee on Higher Education*

Thursday, January 14, 2021 at 10:00 am via Zoom in Virtual Room 3

Good morning, Honorable Chair Inez D. Barron and Honorable Members of the Committee on Higher Education,

Happy New Year! Thank you for the opportunity to speak to you about the issue of housing insecurity among students at the City University of New York. I am an associate professor of Fine Arts in the Humanities Department at LaGuardia Community College. I am also an elected member of the Executive Committee (EC) of the CUNY University Faculty Senate. My colleague, Professor Kimora, from John Jay College of Criminal Justice and another member of the EC at CUNY, cannot be with us today, but she sends her regards to you all. Professor Kimora and I advise the University Student Senate, so we are very familiar with housing insecurity issues among students at the City University of New York.

In March, 2019, the Hope Center, in conjunction with the Jewish Federation for Education of Women, Dr. Nicholas Freudenberg, Healthy CUNY and the Office of Institutional Research and Assessment at the City University of New York, published the document entitled “City University of New York #RealCollege Survey”. The #RealCollege survey is the nation’s largest annual assessment of basic needs security among college students. This report describes the results of the #RealCollege survey administered in the fall of 2018 at all the undergraduate campuses in the City University of New York (CUNY) system.

As you and I know, insufficient housing undermines the educational experience and academic success at our 25 campuses within CUNY. Researchers in the Survey clearly indicate that “housing insecurity and homelessness have a particularly strong, statistically significant relationship with college completion rates, persistence and credit attainment. Researchers also associate basic needs insecurity with self-reports of poor physical health, symptoms of depression, and higher perceived stress.”

For the purpose of this testimony, we need to understand the context of the housing insecurity problem among CUNY Survey respondents. Housing insecurity includes the inability to pay rent or utilities, or the need to move frequently. According to the Survey, fifty-five percent of the CUNY survey respondents did experience housing insecurity in 2018. This is a tremendous number of students. As you and I recall, there are 275,000 CUNY students attending 25 campuses. Our enrollments were down this fall, 2020 semester, partially due to the pandemic, but I mention these numbers to put the housing insecurity

issue in perspective. A great number of our students are suffering. If one student was suffering housing insecurity, you and I would be concerned. The researchers in the Survey go on to state that the most commonly reported challenges were experiencing a rent or mortgage increase (30%), not paying the full amount of their rent or mortgage (26%), and not paying the full cost of utilities (20%). Rates of housing insecurity are higher at community colleges compared to senior colleges (63% vs. 52%, Appendix E).

Homelessness is also considered in the Survey. In the context of the research, homelessness “means that a person does not have a stable place to live.” Unfortunately, homelessness affects 14% of CUNY survey respondents (Figure 4). Three percent of those respondents self-identify as homeless; 11% experience homelessness (e.g. living under conditions indicating housing insecurity), but do not self-identify as homeless. The vast majority of students who experience homelessness temporarily stayed with a relative or friend, or couch surfed. Rates of homelessness are higher at community colleges compared to senior colleges (18% vs. 13%, Appendix E).

Professor Kimora and I believe that is important that you consider the following recommendations to alleviate housing insecurity among students at CUNY:

- 1) Encourage more students to access public assistance. For example, only 8% of CUNY students who experience homelessness receive housing assistance.
- 2) Initiate a systemic response to housing insecurity. You and I can do this by collaborating with Ms. Juvanie Piquant, a CUNY Student Trustee and Chair of the University Student Senate (USS) and the elected student representatives from all campuses of the University Student Senate.
- 3) Work to diminish the stigma of housing insecurity.

Housing insecurity is bound to be much more severe since we are in the midst of the pandemic. Please stay in touch with us so we can supply the research you need to help our CUNY students. We know you know the importance of educating a future generation of leaders for the City of New York and beyond.

Thank you for your time. I hope that you are well and safe.

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Testimony for New York City Council on Housing Insecurity

Hello, my name is Saaif Alam and I am testifying behalf of all CUNY students who are facing Housing Insecurity. Last year was the downfall of our economy due to COVID 19. According to recent data (2019) 55% of CUNY students face Housing Insecurity and 14 % of CUNY students faced homelessness. The number of Housing Insecurity has increased dramatically for 2020 since CUNY students had to leave their dorms and others faced evictions. Last summer, I was part of the Grant Committee and witnessed many students were in need of grants to pay off their rent. Also, CUNY has raised money and the government contributed some federal funds, but it is not enough to support CUNY students who faced Housing Insecurity.

We have many International Students and Out of State students who live in dorms. Both International and Out of State students pay more from their tuition and Housing Costs. Students have expressed frustration that they have to leave their dorms and have difficulties finding a place to stay. Students study in CUNY to earn an affordable and high-quality education, but removing and relocating International and Out of State students can cause them to not properly concentrate on their studies. Also, this could result them to not remain on track for graduation.

Last year I reviewed 850 Grant applications and many of the applicants requested grants to cover their costs. I have been reading applications and students have expressed that they were not able to enroll in CUNY since their landlords have been pressuring them to pay rent. They expressed frustration that they lost jobs and could not pay their rent. Some students who wanted grants lived with their family but their loved ones do not have enough funds to pay off the rent. Students were able to receive a \$200 Grant to cover their expenses , but they are in still for more funds.

During the Pandemic the Federal Government provided the Cares Act Grant and raised money to support our CUNY students. The federal government provided \$118 million of Cares Act Funding to CUNY. Each CUNY students can receive up to \$2000 of Cares Act Grant depending on their income. Students from all CUNY campuses were able to raise up to a total \$17 million to support students who faced Housing and Food Insecurity. Students were able to receive up to \$500 Grant from Emergency Funding. However, the funds CUNY students received from the Cares Act Grant for Spring 2020 and Emergency Funding for Fall 2020 is not enough to cover all of their monthly rent expenses. Many of our CUNY students are still facing financial constraints to pay their housing expenses to their loss of employment. Students still need financial support for their housing expenses in 2021 since we are taking classes in Distance Learning mode.

I urge the City Council lobby the Mayor and our City Contropoller to provide \$34 million to CUNY, so students can receive up to \$1000 of Grant to support their Housing Expenses for the Spring 2021 semester. Our Governor also needs to do more to address the problem our CUNY students are

Saaif Alam

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facing. I also urge the City Council to demand Governor Cuomo to lobby the Biden and Harris administration to provide additional \$118 million of Cares Act Funding to CUNY to support CUNY students to pay off their expenses including remaining Housing costs while taking classes in Distance Learning for 2021.

My name is Sara Susana Ortiz, and I am a second-year student finishing my master's degree in International Migration Studies at the Graduate Center at the City University of New York. I felt it my moral obligation to submit my testimony today in imploring the members of the committee to prioritize housing insecurity among CUNY students, which has affected me and those I love and care about on a profoundly personal level. This situation has so affected my life, that I have made the decision to make it my life's work to ensure that families across NYC and the CUNY-wide system are protected.

I have a pristine rental history and am actually good friends with my former landlord whom I am still renting a property from in Hawaii for over a decade now. I am a renter who has set up automatic payments a week prior to the end of the month so that my landlord was sure to receive my monthly payments in advance of their due date. I am a renter (and voter) in a privately owned and managed pre-war (built in 1912) residential building in Washington Heights, Manhattan. On June 10th of 2019, I reached out by e-mail to our current landlord for the first time to inform them of a pest issue that had come to my attention. They have yet to address the problem now, over a year and a half and countless correspondences later (54 pages to be exact), which is why we have taken the drastic measure to withhold our rent until the issue that is making me and my family sick is eradicated. Never mind that I lost my job due to the COVID-19 pandemic when the restaurant I was working at as a server laid off its 113 employees.

After a constant flood of 311 complaints (most of which never have been addressed and have become worse) and reaching out to the Department of Health and Mental Hygiene, Department of Buildings Tenant Protection Unit, The Mayor's Office to Protect Tenants, the Office of the NYC Public Advocate, I have yet to receive any response, support or legal counsel as me and my family continue to be exposed to toxic pests (nests of pigeons) in our ceiling. Our landlord's response on June 3rd, 2020 was to nail plywood planks onto the façade of my building, essentially trapping the pigeons/pests in their nests, an egregious violation not only of the Warranty of Habitability guaranteed by the Housing Stability and Tenant Protection Act of 2019 but also in not notifying the 30-some units in the building of construction on the front of the building, were in flagrant non-compliance with the [NYC Administrative Code](#): §28-104.8.4 Tenant Protection Plan.

Our landlord has continued to knowingly subject our health, property, and lives to complete destruction. You should know that they've been blaming DOB and the City for delays for a year and a half now. I highly doubt that any work order takes a year to approve, especially if the lives and health of occupants of a residential building are at risk. I don't say this lightly since as we've been quarantined in our homes for months now, I have been reaching out to my fellow neighbors as a support system and have been horrified to find out that there is now a pattern of asthma and upper respiratory illness that I strongly suspect has been caused by a culmination of negligence in addressing widespread mold, bacteria, allergin and virus-spreading mold spores contained in pigeon droppings, pests (mice, roaches, flies and fleas). I am most troubled to find out that a former neighbor just across the hall died under suspicious circumstances of maintenance negligence related to pests and lack of heating one winter. I am currently

investigating the cause of this death. While all of this is completely unacceptable, not to mention illegal, especially in light of being in the midst of a global health pandemic, what's more terrifying is that this corporate landlord is cutting every corner possible to save the most amount of money. This means by the end of this month, our family owes over \$30,000 in back rent and legal fees and this corporate slumlord is suing us for non-payment of rent that I have on record that I refuse to pay until the issue is rectified. This landlord, who owns over 40 units across 23 zip codes in NYC has knowingly trapped pests inside a on a building that is structurally unsound, and thus created a public health hazard, not to mention a fire hazard (we've been refused installation of a single fire extinguisher, fire escape plan or sprinkler system) WITH FAMILIES INSIDE ALL 30 UNITS.

I implore your committee to acknowledge that environmental racism is real, and has had a pernicious effect on working class communities of color across NYC. It is no accident that these communities are disproportionally impacted by pre-existing illnesses such as asthma, making us more susceptible to contracting COVID, but also the tragic statistics have laid bare the reality that working class communities of color across NYC are also at higher risk for death due to COVID. The real-estate industrial complex of New York City has had its hand in the pocket of politics for far too long, with lethal consequences for our families. I will not stop until we can together till the soil of justice and finish what has been started, an autopsy of the intersectionality of public health and housing insecurity across New York City. I assure you that once I am finished with my in-depth study of housing insecurity among CUNY students, I will not have been the only one affected by this issue. Our health, property, and very lives, as renters and as CUNY students, depend on your action or inaction.