

Clergy and Community Leaders Urge Governor Hochul to Guarantee the Right to Counsel for ALL New York State Tenants

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Albany, NY – Today, members of the **New York State Council of Churches** and the **Right to Counsel coalition** held a press conference and [delivered a letter](#) – signed on by more than 40 congregations and Faith Leaders across the state – urging Governor Hochul to support statewide Right to Counsel legislation ([A7570](#) / [S6678](#)), sign it into law, and ensure that it is adequately funded. Introduced in May 2021 by Assembly Member Latoya Joyner and Senator Rachel May, the statewide Right to Counsel legislation ([A7570](#) / [S6678](#)), strengthens Right to Counsel in NYC and guarantees tenants across New York State the right to a lawyer when facing an eviction. In the wake of the expiration of the pandemic-related eviction protections, Right to Counsel is desperately needed – with 1.2 million households behind on rent, 92,000 New Yorkers facing homelessness, and [landlords actively trying to evict more than 240,000 tenants statewide](#), tenants need the Right to Counsel, so they can fight evictions and remain safe and securely housed. Right to Counsel has proven to be an immensely powerful tool at stopping evictions. In 2017, NYC became the first city to guarantee tenants facing eviction the right to a lawyer, inspiring a Right to Counsel movement across the country. More than 10 U.S. cities now have Right to Counsel and last year, three states, [Washington State, Connecticut, and Maryland](#) passed Right to Counsel legislation. Given the ever-worsening eviction crisis, now is the time for New York State to step up – The May/Joyner bill is the most effective, most expansive Right to Counsel legislation introduced in the U.S. to date, and would significantly strengthen protections for tenants in NYC and expand the right to every tenant across the state.

“In the wake of the pandemic, nothing could be more important than preventing the eviction of thousands of families from their homes. As a faith leader, I believe in the dignity of every person. As an American, I believe in the right to legal representation when facing eviction. Nearly every landlord has legal counsel. Nearly every tenant does not. How is that fair? Evicting tenant families sets them up for a cascading series of problems with homelessness, illness, loss of employment and more. And we will all pay for that in lost lives, emergency room visits, already overcrowded shelters and the loss of support services for families and individuals with special needs. Our country was founded on the principle of ‘No taxation without representation.’ Now we need to stand up for hundreds of thousands of New Yorkers and declare ‘No eviction without representation.’” – **The Reverend Jim Ketcham, New York State Council of Churches**

This critical legislation would guarantee ALL tenants across New York State the right to a lawyer when facing an eviction. The legislation would establish Right to Counsel as a RIGHT and:

- Covers every tenant across the state, regardless of income.
- Covers any legal proceeding that could result in a tenant losing their home.
- Requires that tenants be represented throughout their entire case, not just when they show up in court. This includes legal advice, advocacy, and assistance.
- Requires the State to contract with non-profit legal services organizations to provide Right to Counsel and with non-profit community based organizations to provide tenants’ rights education and tenant organizing.

“Before the pandemic, landlords filed over 8,000 eviction cases a year against tenants in Rochester City Court and less than 1 in 5 of tenants were represented,” says **Ryan Acuff from the City-Wide Tenant Union of**

Rochester, NY. “This bill will finally give tenants the legal representation they need and deserve and in turn stabilize the lives of thousands of families.”

“The right to counsel for tenants who face eviction advances racial and economic justice, levels the playing field in court, averts homelessness and its devastating consequences, and provides a fighting chance for tenants to defend their homes and remain in their communities,” says **Andrew Scherer, Professor and Policy Director of the Impact Center for Public Interest Law, New York Law School.** “New York City led the way by establishing the right to counsel in 2017, and twelve other municipalities and three states have followed. Now is the time for New York State to step up – the May/Joyner bill is the most effective, most expansive right to counsel legislation introduced in the U.S. to date – it will extend the right to tenants throughout the state, expand the right for NYC tenants, cover all types of proceedings that lead to eviction, support community organizing, and place obligations on the courts and landlords to assure that tenants are aware of and able to avail themselves of the right.”

“It’s important for tenants everywhere in New York State to have RTC because they will be protected from eviction. There will be less homeless and people will have less mental illness and will be more healthy by living in their homes instead of the street” - **Marie Laroche, Tenant Leader, Flatbush Tenant Coalition**

Right to Counsel is also a moral issue. Eviction proceedings are complex and violent processes that are nearly impossible to navigate alone. Evictions disrupt children’s education, tear apart entire communities, and have other traumatic consequences. Right to Counsel is also about racial justice. Evictions disproportionately impact Black and brown tenants, with women facing the greatest burdens.

“It’s not right that tenants face eviction alone. I know first hand the fear and anxiety evictions cause. Our fight for Right to Counsel in NYC has stopped thousands of evictions, helped tenants organize and stopped landlords from suing tenants,” says **Randy Dillard, CASA Leader and RTCNYC Coalition Steering Committee Member.** “I’m proud to have fought for it and won it. But we can’t stop there. It’s not right that this right only exists in NYC and not for tenants across the state. It’s not right that it doesn’t exist for all tenants. NY tenants need this. We are proud to fight for the Right to Counsel alongside our faith leaders and are calling on our elected officials to pass it now.”

“The tenants of Syracuse and across the state deserve to have the right to counsel,” says **Palmer Harvey, Founder of the Syracuse Tenant Union.** “For far too long, the imbalance of legal representation in housing court between tenant and landlord has been allowed to exist for cities like Syracuse. The time is now to act and pass the Right to Counsel bill.”

“It is unjust and immoral to allow New Yorkers to be pushed out of their homes. Landlords have already sued more than 240,000 tenants (and counting) statewide and cases are moving through the courts. But evictions don’t have to happen and New York State can, and must, do more to protect tenants,” says **Malika Conner, Director of Organizing with the Right to Counsel Coalition.** “Right to Counsel is incredibly effective at stopping evictions. Having Right to Counsel protects tenants’ rights and emboldens tenants to fight to keep their homes. Our state bill ([A7570](#) / [S6678](#)) will not only significantly strengthen protections for tenants in NYC and expand the right to every tenant across the state, but also put stronger requirements on the courts to uphold tenants’ right to legal representation. As the eviction crisis continues to ravage communities across New York State, tenants need Right to Counsel now more than ever, and we’re proud to stand with Faith Leaders today to urge the legislature and the Governor to pass and sign this legislation into law. ”

“It is important for tenants all across New York State to have Right to Counsel because not everyone can afford to pay a lawyer to represent them. A lot of us tenants don’t understand the whole process of getting evicted

and we end up signing away our rights because no one explained our rights to us. It's especially important for those of us who can't speak English." - **Beverly Rivers, Tenant Leader, Flatbush Tenant Coalition**

*The **New York State Council of Churches** is comprised of eight partner Denominations. Each denomination sends representation to our Executive Committee and provides financial support. Other denominations which are members of the National Council of Churches may also have representation to the Council. We provide tools for community organizing and legislative actions for faith-based organizations, certify and support Protestant Chaplains serving NY State agencies and offer education opportunities, and help faith communities analyze their property and figure out how to use it for affordable housing.*

*The statewide Right to Counsel legislation ("Right to Counsel for ALL") has been endorsed by more than 70 tenant organizing, legal services, and advocacy groups across the state. The legislation is part of our **Housing Courts Must Change! (HCMC) Campaign**, a statewide campaign launched by the Right to Counsel NYC Coalition in 2020 to transform the courts from an "eviction machine" to a place that upholds tenants' rights, holds landlords accountable, and enables tenants to remain in their homes.*

*The **Right to Counsel NYC Coalition (RTCNYC)** is a tenant-led coalition that formed in 2014 to change Housing Courts, prevent displacement, and stop the eviction crisis that threatens our families, our homes, and our neighborhoods. RTCNYC is made up of tenants, organizers, advocates, legal services organizations and more! In 2017, after a three-year grassroots campaign, the Coalition won the Right to Counsel, making New York the first city in the country to establish a Right to Counsel for low-income tenants facing eviction. Now, in coalition with our upstate partners, the Coalition is excited to fight for Right to Counsel statewide and create an eviction free New York!*

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