RE: Passage of Right to Counsel legislation to guarantee the right to a FREE lawyer for ALL tenants facing eviction in New York State

Dear Governor Hochul, Speaker Carl Heastie and Senate Majority Leader Stewart-Cousins:

We write to urge you to prioritize Statewide Right to Counsel legislation (Joyner-A1493/May-S2721) and to work with tenants, advocates, legal services providers, and faith leaders in the Right to Counsel Coalition to ensure passage of this bill into law in the FY 2024 budget.

Collectively, we represent congregations and faith based organizations across New York State. Everyday, we have seen the people we serve struggle to stay in their homes. So many people were put in an economically precarious position because of the pandemic, and there are now over 270,000 New Yorkers facing active eviction across the state. Meanwhile, nearly all landlords have lawyers in eviction cases, while most tenants do not. This creates a power imbalance in the courts that favors landlords. Without representation, tenants face severe barriers to staying safe and secure in their homes, maintaining their mental and physical health, ensuring their children can stay in school and remaining in New York State.

We are honored to be working on permanent and transformative solutions to this devastating eviction and displacement crisis. Statewide Right to Counsel legislation would ensure that every tenant in New York State has the right to a lawyer when facing an eviction 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.

New York State’s eviction crisis will only get worse if we don’t enact permanent solutions that strengthen tenants’ rights and empower tenants to fight for their homes. Passing statewide Right to Counsel would do just that. Right to Counsel is proven to prevent displacement – 84 percent of tenants in New York City who had a Right to Counsel lawyer won their case and the seven U.S. cities that passed Right to Counsel as of 2021 have seen up to a 77 percent reduction in evictions. We also know that keeping people in their homes is vastly less expensive than the state having to pick up care for people who become homeless. In fact, Statewide Right to Counsel will save our state an estimated $3-6 for every dollar invested!

We urge you to ensure this legislation is prioritized in the Fiscal Year 2024 Budget. Please contact Katy Lasell (katy@righttocounselnyc.org), Campaign Organizer, with any questions you may have. We look forward to your response and are excited to work with you to get this done.

Sincerely,

1. Reverend James Fairbanks
2. Reverend Dr. Hiram Ratliff, Senior Pastor, New Tabernacle Baptist Church
3. Árelis Figueroa, Master of Divinity, Religious Organizer with Kairos Center
4. Reverend Julie Johnson Staples, Transition Minister, Judson Memorial Church
5. Reverend Dr. Joe Albert Bush, Sr., Minister, Walker Memorial Baptist Church
6. Reverend Joe Paparone, Lead Organizer, Labor-Religion Coalition of New York State
7. Reverend Steven Smith, Pastor, Queensbury United Methodist Church
8. Mary Rinaldi, Director Of Operations, Faith Family Church
9. Reverend K Karpen, Senior Pastor, St. Paul and St. Andrew United Methodist Church
10. Donna Stone, Chaplain, Linden Plaza Tenants
11. Reverend Patrick Dupont, Minister for Outreach, Asbury First United Methodist Church
12. Reverend Dr. Stephen Cady II, Senior Minister, Asbury First United Methodist Church
13. Lilly Trafficante, Chaplain
14. Sister Joan Agro, Leadership Team, Sisters of St. Dominic
15. Reverend Frank Morales, Episcopal Diocese of New York
16. Dennis Brennan, Executive Lead Pastor, LIFEhouse Community of Faith
17. Reverend Ruthellen Hoyle, Retired Clergy
18. Reverend Richelle Goff, Pastor, Fairport United Methodist Church
19. Pastor Mike Mullin, Minister for Discipleship and Youth, Asbury First United Methodist Church
20. Rabbi Guy Austrian, Fort Tryon Jewish Center
21. Reverend Paul Gongloff, Pastor, Covenant United Methodist Church
22. Bishop Raymond Rivera, Founder & President, Latino Pastoral Action Center, Inc. & Senior Pastor, Sanctuary Church
23. Lamont Jackson, CEO/President, Rhema Fellowship Ministries
24. Sister Danielle Bonetti, CSJ, Province Justice Coordinator, Sisters of St. Joseph of Carondelet, Albany Province
25. Reverend Ibrahim Pedriñán, President, Albany Central Federation of Labor, AFL-CIO
26. Reverend Laura Bachmann, Pastor, Gates Presbyterian Church
27. Pastor Naomi Sorwar-Randall, Upstate New York Synod, ELCA
28. Reverend Ivy Gauvin, Pastor, Bethel Lutheran Church
29. Pastor Timothy Hoyer, ELCA Pastor, Gloria Dei Lutheran Church
30. Rabbi Joshua Strom, Congregation B’hai Yisrael
31. Louis D Rodriguez, Chaplain, New York State Chaplain Task Force
32. Reverend Jeffrey Courter, Interim Pastor, Forest Hills Presbyterian Church
33. Reverend Heather Kirk-Davidoff, Senior Minister, Westminster Presbyterian Church
34. Reverend Dr. Miriam Shelton, Retired, Presbytery of New York City
35. Dennis McDonald, Clergy - Upper Room Inclusive Catholic Community
36. Reverend Peter Cook, Executive Director, New York State Council of Churches
37. Rashida Tyler, Deputy Executive Director, New York State Council of Churches
38. Onleilove Chika Alston, Apostle, Prophetic Whirlwind Ministries
39. Fred Boehrer, Executive Director, FOCUS Churches of Albany, Inc.
40. Alyce Peace Queen Johnson-Morton, Retired Bishop
41. Gloria Lavine, Elder at Prince’s Bay Reformed Church and Staten Island Council of Churches