

**Testimony of Catherine Trapani, Executive Director, Homeless Services United, Inc.**

**Before the NYC Council Committee on Courts and Legal Services**

**September 26, 2016**

Good morning, my name is Catherine Trapani, Executive Director of Homeless Services United (HSU). HSU is a coalition of over 50 non-profit agencies serving homeless and at-risk adults and families in New York City.  HSU provides advocacy, information, and training to member agencies to expand their capacity to deliver high-quality services.  HSU advocates for expansion of affordable housing and prevention services and for immediate access to safe, decent, emergency and transitional housing, outreach and drop-in services for homeless New Yorkers.

Homeless Services United’s member agencies operate hundreds of programs including shelters, drop-in centers, food pantries, HomeBase, and outreach and prevention services. Each day, HSU member programs work with thousands of homeless families and individuals, preventing shelter entry whenever possible and working to end homelessness through counseling, social services, health care, legal services, and public benefits assistance, among many other supports.

Homeless Services United strongly supports Into. 214-A which would grant the right to counsel to low-income New Yorkers facing eviction. According to the Independent Budget Office, eviction was the leading cause for homelessness amongst families. For those who know the facts about housing court, this is not a surprising statistic. Tenants who cannot afford attorneys are at a great disadvantage. All too often when faced with an eviction notice tenants are unaware of their rights, available defenses or even basic information on the court process and what to expect. Without an attorney to represent their interests, many people simply cannot begin to defend themselves and lose their homes even in cases where other remedies should have been available. Landlords are represented by counsel 90% of the time while tenants are forced to navigate the courts on their own in at least 75% of cases.

Unrepresented tenants are at the mercy of unscrupulous landlords who withhold vital services, illegally increase rents or refuse to renew leases all in an effort to take advantage of forces of gentrification that can lead to higher profits. In such cases even rent paying tenants or tenants who withhold rent due to lack of services like heat and hot water are at risk of displacement simply because they cannot afford an attorney to defend them.

The impact of evictions on communities is devastating. Children miss school, parents miss work, neighbors are displaced and poor people get pushed further and further towards the margins until there is no place left to go. As a result, the shelter system is overwhelmed with the number of people coming through the doors every night. The City must do everything it can to stem the tide of preventable evictions and help low-income New Yorkers remain stably housed.

Establishing a right to counsel would make a tremendous difference for people in those situations. Thanks to the recent expansion of civil legal services last year evictions are down 18%. That’s an excellent start but we can do even more. Ensuring that everyone has access to an attorney is critical to protect tenants from predatory landlords, unlawful evictions and homelessness.