



Testimony on the Future of Neighborhood
and Rural Preservation Programs

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**New York State Committee on Housing
January 21, 2005**

MFY Legal Services is one of the oldest community legal services organizations in New York City, assisting low income tenants and tenant organizations for more than forty years. MFY staff attorneys are experts in landlord and tenant law, including the rights of low income tenants, tenants with mental disabilities, and tenants of Single Room Occupancy (SRO) housing.

When MFY opened the doors to its first neighborhood office in 1963, the apartment buildings, tenements and SRO hotels of Manhattan's east side provided affordable housing to tens of thousands of low-income families and individuals. After three decades of runaway gentrification, households with median incomes can barely afford a rent-stabilized apartment, with market-rate housing completely out of reach. For low income New Yorkers, the situation has become desperate.

The Neighborhood Preservation (NPP) grant that MFY receives to support its housing work prevents the displacement of low income tenants on the east side of Manhattan. We work to help tenants in private housing, public housing, and subsidized housing. In addition, the NPP funding helps support the work of our East Side SRO Law Project, which offers expertise in the area of SRO tenants rights to the most vulnerable segment of New York's tenant population. The NPP grant supports our attorneys and makes them available to provide advice, technical assistance, and representation to tenants in eviction actions.

The NPP grant enabled us to serve tenants threatened with eviction on the east side of Manhattan, including much of the Lower East Side and Chinatown, two neighborhoods where the pressures faced by low income and working class tenants are particularly intense. This grant also allowed us to help many tenants on the rest of the east side, all the way up to 97th Street. We have represented many tenants (often elderly and often on fixed incomes) who were facing eviction through termination of long-term tenancies. MFY's NPP service area has a substantially lower vacancy rate than the city, county or state average, and the area is home to more than 70,000 people living below the federal poverty level. While some of our clients face the insistent pressure of gentrification, others face the pitfalls of aging in place. But regardless of the neighborhood, the age, or household structure of our clients, they all share the desperate need to keep the affordable apartments due to a lack of alternative housing, and an equally desperate need for legal assistance.

The kinds of services MFY was able to provide with this funding range from community education forums, tenant advice, tenant assistance (such as help writing letters for repairs, straightening out arrears, negotiating with landlords and city agencies) and litigation. Because of the high financial value of apartments in Manhattan, landlords have a huge incentive to bring litigation against long-term regulated tenants. This kind of litigation, where the landlords seek to reclaim the apartment regardless of whether rent is owed, is called a holdover action. The current climate in New York City real estate has brought about a tremendous increase in these kinds of cases in the areas we serve, to the point where holdovers large dominate our caseload. These cases are usually very complicated and require a high level of attorney expertise. As legal services attorneys, it is very difficult for us to turn these cases away since the lack of representation for the tenant greatly increases the risk of loss of the home.

I was asked to describe to this committee what effect the cuts to the NPP funding have had and will have. Simply put, the services that I have just described will not be available to the people in this city who desperately need them. This year, we did not lay off any staff. The only reason for this is the fundraising campaign of our board. But we simply cannot absorb the deficit on a permanent basis without loss of staff.

I also wish I could tell you that the cut simply means that we will be able to provide services at exactly half the level we had been, since the funding was cut in half. I don't think any agency can promise you such a thing when the amount of the remaining grant has grown so small. Again, the work that we do is neighborhood-based. Our staff develops familiarity with the communities we serve, and learns of the common problems that tenants are facing. With our funding cut in half, not only will our services be diminished by half, but they may be only half as effective.

Funding for civil legal services is scarcer than ever at this time. As I mentioned before, it is painful for us in legal services to turn away all the people that we cannot serve right now, but that is what we have to do, making difficult choices between tenants, knowing that all of them desperately need our assistance. It is unconscionable that the few resources that are provided for low income tenants in this city are being slashed.

Unlike some of the small community organizations that come before this committee today, I am not here to tell you that MFY Legal Services itself will be closing its doors. Unfortunately, though, we will be forced to turn away more and more tenants, including those aging and on fixed incomes, desperate for the help that the NPP funding enabled us to provide.

Thank you for your time