



Preserving SRO Housing Prevents Homelessness

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My name is Adele Bartlett and I am the Supervising Attorney of the East Side SRO Law Project of MFY Legal Services. I would like to first thank the Manhattan Delegation and the Council for restoring funding for our program to the budget in its counter proposal. We hope that, as in years past, the strong support and determination of this delegation has ensured the continued existence of this vital service for many of the most vulnerable tenants in New York City.

MFY has been providing high quality legal representation, education and assistance to low income New Yorkers since 1963. MFY has housed the East Side SRO Law Project since its inception over 20 years ago. We also are home to the Mental Health Law Project, a city-wide project providing civil legal services to consumers of mental health services, and the Adult Home Advocacy Project, protecting the basic rights of tenants in adult home facilities throughout the city. MFY's Workplace Justice Project, also city-wide, provides help to low income people with unemployment issues, unfair labor practice and discrimination complaints. Our Neighborhood Preservation Project includes the SRO Project and provides anti-eviction assistance and representation to low income tenants in Manhattan south of 110th Street on the west side, and in the entire east side. MFY is also home to a newly created Pro Bono Adoption Project, where private volunteer attorneys are linked with foster care parents seeking to adopt children in their care. This program takes aim at the large and shameful backlog of unprocessed adoption applications for children languishing in the foster care system.

The SRO Law Project works toward two purposes: To represent individuals and groups of SRO tenants in order to avoid eviction and obtain repairs and services, and also to protect the dwindling supply of Single Room Occupancy housing in the city. Because of this dual purpose, the special legal aspects of SRO laws and protections, and the characteristics of SRO tenants, we approach our work somewhat differently from the typical legal services office.

SRO Tenants

Single Room Occupancy units are found in hotels, rooming houses, and lodging houses. The quality of the units may vary greatly, but these tenants are overwhelmingly elderly and poor. They almost never have family connections or support. They are often veterans and often either retired, on a fixed income, disabled or working at low-wage jobs such as vendors, messengers or waiters. Sometimes their only job is bottle and can redemption. In addition to being alone, elderly and poor, many of our clients suffer from mental disabilities or illnesses. In general, they are a static population that is not getting any richer, any healthier or any less vulnerable.

The Single Room Occupancy units where our clients live are, of course, disappearing. The units range from the residential hotels on the Upper West Side, to the east side rooming houses, midtown hotels, down to the lodging houses remaining on the newly-fashionable Bowery. The relevant aspect of all the SROs, however, is that they truly are, as you have heard before, the housing of last resort. Although SROs are sometimes considered the least desirable housing, they are usually the most affordable. For most of our clients, they are literally the *only* affordable housing available.

It is well documented that when tenants are evicted from traditional apartments, they frequently fall back on family or other support to avoid homelessness for a time. “Doubling up” or moving in with a family member acts as a buffer before homelessness. SRO tenants almost never have this option available. They are the one population that usually transitions directly from housed to homeless after an eviction takes place. Not only are they the most likely to become homeless, they often are the most fragile and likely to suffer terrible, life-altering damage from homelessness.

Why the SRO Law Projects Are Necessary

Because of the nature of the housing and the nature of the client population the East Side SRO Law Project approaches its work differently from general legal services projects.

We see every case as threatening the loss of vital housing. Because any one eviction means the loss of a permanent affordable housing unit, we have to take greater care and often must accept cases that would be turned away in a standard legal services housing triage process. We have to make sure that even the simplest non-payment case is resolved with the tenant in place. We also must always be aware of the tremendous incentive that exists for the owner to remove a permanent rent stabilized SRO tenant. The reversion of a single room back to transient use may mean tens of thousands of dollars a year in profit to the owner.

We work with entire building populations. Nearly all of the East Side SRO tenants share common facilities, such as bathrooms, and television rooms. When repairs and maintenance are neglected, all the tenants of the building suffer. Also, landlords pursue strategies on a building-wide basis, seeking to force tenants to leave, prevent the acquisition of tenancy rights, and evade the relevant laws. It’s incredibly important, when dealing with one or a few tenants, to try and leverage that into helping all the tenants of a building. So organizing tenant meetings, H.P. actions and even rent strikes are integral to SRO work. A traditional legal services project would not, and often could not, do that.

We are specialists in laws and regulations governing SRO housing. In order to try and stave off the disappearance of SRO units, the City has enacted specific laws and regulations. How a tenant in an SRO unit acquires permanent tenant (and rent stabilized) status is not commonly understood by attorneys in general. Only the SRO Law Projects have expertise and experience in helping tenants to oppose an owner’s application for a Certificate of No Harassment, which by law must be granted by HPD before alterations can be done in a building where SRO units exist.

We are specialists in the regulations and guidelines affecting SRO rents. Each year the Rent Guidelines Board determines whether to permit increases in SRO units. When they grant such increases, as they did last year, they have traditionally also imposed a limitation, or proviso, making only certain SROs subject to the increase. We handled many, many cases this past year regarding improper rent increases, and were able to provide education and information to many tenants, and groups of tenants (and landlords) about the RGB proviso and how it affects rents.

Once again, we look to you to correct the Mayor’s terrible decision to eliminate funding for all the legal services projects. The de-funding of the SRO Law Projects is not only inhumane but fiscally unsound. The cost of housing a homeless person and the cost of hospitalization brought on by the conditions of homelessness far outweigh the cost per tenant of funding our program. We know that the Manhattan City Council delegation is well aware of this. And we urge you to use all your powers to prevent the Mayor from balancing the city budget at the expense of vital services to the poorest and most vulnerable New Yorkers.

Last year the funding for the East Side SRO Law Project was \$290,975. In our application and letters to you we seek a twenty percent increase in that funding amount. As you no doubt recall, MFY Legal Services has had a substantial increase in expenses this past year. Our goal is to continue to provide the highest levels and quality of legal assistance possible to SRO tenants in this City. The basic funding grant to the SRO Law Projects has not increased in quite a few years. Without some increase, we cannot possibly maintain the same levels of staffing and services that our clients need and deserve.

Thank you for your time and attention.