



New York State Senate and Assembly Joint Budget Hearing on Human Services

Testimony Submitted by Stephen Piasecki, Supportive Housing Network of New York

January 31, 2024

Thank you, Chair Weinstein and Chair Krueger. I'm here to discuss the status of the ongoing effort to address the state's homelessness and housing crises, and where we need to increase our investments in the coming fiscal year.

My name is Stephen Piasecki, the State Policy Manager at the Supportive Housing Network of New York.

The Network is a membership organization that represents more than 200 nonprofits that develop and operate supportive housing. The Network was established in 1988 alongside the birth of the supportive housing movement. Thanks in part to our advocacy, the state is now home to approximately 58,000 supportive units

We are New York's only supportive housing membership organization, and as such, we serve as a voice for the provider community, which has created the nation's largest, best-managed, and most innovative supportive housing stock.

Supportive housing is a critical tool in the fight against homelessness, which is increasingly urgent, as the number of unhoused people in our state continues to rise. According to the [U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development](#), there was a 39.1% annual increase in people experiencing homelessness, with 103,200 total people without a permanent place to sleep on a given night in 2023. This increase builds on top of double-digit annual percentage increases for the last fifteen years.

Of course, we fully support the state's efforts to increase the amount of supportive and affordable housing, but today we want to also focus on the preservation of the existing portfolio, centered on the first efforts to provide supportive services

through the New York State Supportive Housing Program (NYSSHP). This program touches over 20,000 units of supportive housing including more than 10,000 through a direct contract with New York City Department of Homeless Services. In 2023, with essentially the same per unit budget available as in 1987, NYSSHP is the sole services funding source for 9,000 households in supportive housing. At the time, NYSSHP saved much of the state's affordable housing stock-SROs, YM and YWCAs and many others from oblivion. This salvation was not permanent.

Unfortunately, NYSSHP has been left behind. NYSSHP provides annual service funding of just \$2,736 for individuals and \$3,672 for families, virtually the same per unit rate as when it began.

Compare that to the Empire State Supportive Housing Initiative (ESSHI). In 2016, the state made this historic commitment to fund 20,000 more much-needed units of supportive housing statewide over a 15-year period. ESSHI embedded important lessons learned during the evolution of supportive housing in New York, allocating up to \$25,000 per unit to cover both social services and rental assistance.

The solution is obvious: Convert the 9,000 at-risk NYSSHP units to ESSHI through a five-year, phased-in approach that will eventually create fiscal parity among supportive housing units across New York. This proposal would modernize an antiquated funding model, delivering results for thousands of tenants and overstretched staff. We have also identified that about 7,000 of the 9,000 units that depend solely on NYSSHP to fund services, lack a dedicated source of rental assistance.

The conversion of NYSSHP to ESSHI would cost an additional \$32 million in FY 2024-25 – an incredibly small portion of the multibillion-dollar annual state budget that will more than pay for itself over time by avoiding the high cost of adding to New York's homelessness population.

Systemic underfunding of NYSSHP has put vulnerable individuals and families – disproportionately Black people and people of color with disabling conditions: often more than one. They have survived domestic violence, served in our military, returned from incarceration, cope with trauma. A significant proportion struggle with complex mental health challenges and the often-deadly consequences caused by the increase of fentanyl in the illicit drug supply. Chronic underfunding has also

exacerbated an already significant staffing shortage, as supportive housing programs are unable to compete with higher wages available at big box stores and fast-food restaurants. Across our sector, supportive housing staff vacancies hover between 20 and 30%. Low wages and related staffing issues have left one NYSSHP-funded residence for survivors of domestic violence with a single case manager for 56 adults and children.

Preservation

Supportive Housing that is chronically underfunded faces abnormal wear and tear, including deferred maintenance. This led to the creation of the Supportive Housing Preservation capital funding under NYS Homes and Community Renewal. Currently, NYSSHP-funded programs are struggling to access this funding to make repairs and upgrades to existing, mostly state-funded older buildings— many of which are decades, if not centuries, old. In fact, only one residence has received funding to date, almost a year after HCR released the terms sheet. Both tenants and staff pay the price of leaky roofs, faulty elevators, and outdated facilities that are not handicapped accessible.

Without this conversion from NYSSHP to ESSHI rates, the long term operating and services budgets for buildings that should be top priority for preservation are untenable. We need to do more to ensure that existing supportive housing – especially the ‘first generation NYSSHP’ does not fall by the wayside, so that all our new construction adds to the existing portfolio instead of replacing it.

The Network, along with 146 organizations, sent a letter to Governor. These organizations represent 70% of the NYSSHP portfolio statewide along with critical allies working on housing, health and homelessness issues in New York and nationally. Unfortunately, the Governor missed this chance to save NYSSHP.

We also include with our testimony a selection of recent press specifically focused on this request.

Finally, it is imperative that the state ensures that existing supportive housing is well run and well maintained as it embarks on expanding supportive and affordable housing. A reputation for quality housing is vital in efforts to work with communities on new development.

Cost of Living Adjustment

For too long, supportive housing staff and their fellow human services colleagues have gone without meaningful cost of living adjustments (COLAs) to their salaries, eroding their purchasing power and the promise that their careers can support a stable living for themselves and their families. While we appreciate the previous years' COLAs and Governor Hochul recognizing the COLA in the SFY 2024-25 executive budget, her 1.5% proposal falls short of inflation and will continue to leave our staff behind. The Network, along with a large coalition of human services advocates, is calling for a 3.2% COLA, which represents an annual Consumer Price Index increase from July 2023.

The COLA statute is also expiring and must be added back, with language that is more inclusive of all State-contracted human services programs, including the New York State Supportive Housing Program (NYSSHP) under OTDA, independent living centers, NYS Commission for the Blind programs, transportation services, and many others. We ask the Legislature to pass S7793/A8437 and S1291/A4046 because a COLA implemented in every State-funded human services contract is a significant step to address the historic underfunding and lack of investment in our sector.

Housing Access Voucher Program

The Network supports the Housing Access Vouchers Program (HAVP) as a critical tool to keep New Yorkers stably housed and address rising homelessness. Its passage and funding at \$250 million would be immediately impactful in many areas of the state without sufficient rental assistance.

Fiscal Cliff Task Force

Supportive housing tenants and staff alike are impacted by fiscal cliffs in public benefit programs, leaving them suddenly cut off from essential benefits or creating perverse incentives to limit opportunities for income growth. The Network supports the creation of a fiscal cliff task force (S0780/A08431) to study the impact of fiscal cliffs in the State's public assistance programs and make pertinent recommendations.

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OPINION

Preserve, improve housing for vulnerable
New Yorkers (Guest Opinion by Ben
Lockwood)



Ben Lockwood is president and CEO of Housing Visions Unlimited. (Marie Morelli|mmorelli@syracuse.com)

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By Ben Lockwood | Housing Visions Unlimited LLC

Benjamin Lockwood is president and CEO of [Housing Visions Unlimited Inc.](#), a Syracuse nonprofit that develops, constructs, and manages real estate projects that revitalize communities.

The stories of two formerly homeless local women are both heartbreaking and painfully familiar.

Briselida fled domestic violence, while Tammy struggled with substance abuse and a traumatic brain injury — all challenges that, statistically speaking, increase the likelihood of becoming unhoused. Thankfully, however, after years of fear and uncertainty, Briselida and Tammy were able to find stability and the chance to build new lives at Ethel T. Chamberlain Women’s Residence and Shelter, which provides a mix of permanent supportive housing units and temporary shelter beds.

The transition to supportive housing was not easy. Both women arrived lonely and scared. But the staff and services at Ethel T. Chamberlain, a joint effort between Housing Visions and the Salvation Army Syracuse Area Services — including case management, crisis counseling, mental health treatment and more — established a strong foundation from Day One and helped them move forward.

“I could breathe again,” Tammy said. Briselida echoed that sentiment, adding: “I started to feel the motivation to try something new.”

Briselida is now enrolled in the SUNY Syracuse Educational Opportunity Center (EOC) Medical Billing & Coding program, while Tammy has achieved and maintained her sobriety and improved her memory.

These success stories wouldn't be possible without the Empire State Supportive Housing Initiative (ESSHI), a program created in 2016 that provides both rental subsidies and supportive services for formerly unhoused New Yorkers. Supportive housing, which combines quality units with on-site services, has proven to be one of the most effective tools available to combat chronic homelessness.

Unfortunately, ESSHI is not universal. Thousands of units across the state are funded by the nearly four-decade-old New York State Supportive Housing Program (NYSSHP), which hasn't seen a significant increase in state resources since its creation. NYSSHP pays just a quarter of what ESSHI pays for services and doesn't cover any rental assistance.

As a result of the chronic underfunding of NYSSHP, 9,000 supportive housing units statewide are at risk of coming offline. In the face of an affordability crisis, rising homelessness, an influx of deadly synthetic opioids and an increase in mental health needs, New York cannot afford to lose a single unit.

There is an easy fix at hand: The governor and legislative leaders should include in this year's state budget a five-year plan to convert the 9,000 NYSSHP units to ESSHI. The cost of this conversion — a modest \$32 million in the first year — is a very small slice of the more than \$220 billion New York spends annually. But the positive impact on the lives of vulnerable New Yorkers would be significant.

NYSSHP currently provides an annual rate of \$2,736 per individual and \$3,672 per family, while ESSHI offers up to \$25,000 per unit annually for social services and rental assistance.

Programs funded solely through NYSSHP not only face limitations in the services they can provide but also in the salary level they can offer to employees, leading to high staff turnover and unfilled vacancies. Also, not having any rental assistance creates additional and unnecessary burdens for both providers and potential tenants.

Housing Visions, a mission-driven nonprofit develops, constructs, owns and operates affordable housing across Upstate New York. Its properties rely on both NYSSHP and ESSHI funding, providing first-hand experience of the discrepancies between the two programs.

Ethel T. Chamberlain House, which provides 15 emergency shelter beds in addition to the 16 units of permanent supportive housing, is proof that ESSHI works. It is a stepping-stone to self-sufficiency, funding not only critical services and adequate staff, but also move-in kits with essentials for formerly homeless residents who often have very little or even nothing when they arrive.

Briselida and Tammy have become integral members of the Ethel community. Briselida, who speaks fluent Spanish, often translates for other residents and those staying in the emergency shelter. Tammy is always one of the first to raise her hand to help and assists a fellow tenants who may be elderly and or in need of help.

Every formerly homeless New Yorker deserves the opportunity to experience what Briselida and Tammy have at the Ethel. It's up to the governor and state lawmakers to make that possible by saving the 9,000

at-risk NYSSHP units, converting them to ESSHI and ensuring some of our most vulnerable neighbors get the support and stability they need.

DAILY FREEMAN

Guest Column: A simple state change will bring equity to supportive housing in Kingston



RUPCO Chief Executive Officer Kevin O'Connor speaks in front of 33 Franklin Street Wednesday, March 8, 2023. (Tania Barricklo/Daily Freeman)

By [GUEST](#)

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By Kevin O'Connor, CEO of RUPCO

The 40 residents of The Stuyvesant in the Stockade District have a lot of needs. To be eligible to live in the historic building that was converted to supportive housing, individuals must be either formerly homeless and coping with a disabling condition, or elderly. Some are both. As a result, they require assistance with everything from managing their physical and behavioral care to activities of daily living to transportation to making end-of-life plans. For more than a decade, a single caseworker has handled all these needs and more – because The Stuyvesant is supported by a chronically underfunded state program that hasn't seen a significant increase since its creation some 40 years ago.

Allison, who prefers her last name not be disclosed, is The Stuyvesant residents' lifeline. She refuses to leave them, turning down promotions and a bigger paycheck to stay by their side. Though Allison's fierce loyalty and work ethic are laudatory, having a single case manager handle an entire building of vulnerable

and aging adults is clearly not sustainable. But hiring more staff is not possible, because The Stuyvesant is funded through the antiquated New York State Supportive Housing Program (NYSSHP).

Meanwhile, across town at Landmark Place, another RUPCO supportive housing residence with 35 formerly homeless and elderly individuals, there are two case managers – one a behavioral specialist, the other a licensed practical nurse – plus 24-hour front desk staff, and two part-time bus drivers.

What's the difference? Landmark Place is funded by the 2016 Empire State Supportive Housing Initiative (ESSHI), which pays up to \$25,000 per unit to cover both services and rental assistance, compared to NYSSHP's \$2,736 with no dedicated rental assistance Statewide, some 9,000 supportive housing units supported solely by NYSSHP. Their tenants are in the same boat as The Stuyvesant's residents.

A logical and cost-effective solution exists. The governor and state lawmakers must include a plan in the upcoming state budget to convert the 9,000 endangered NYSSHP units to ESSHI. The first year of a five-year phased-in conversion approach would cost just \$32 million. That's a small fraction of the annual multibillion-dollar state budget, but an investment that would more than pay for itself over time by avoiding the high cost of adding to the homeless population. It would protect 9,000 desperately needed deeply affordable housing from going offline, protecting 9,000 of our most marginalized neighbors from potentially becoming homeless yet again. And Allison could have a less-than-Herculean workload.

At a time when New York is facing multiple crises – affordability, mental health, deadly opioids – it cannot afford to lose a single unit of supportive housing, which has been proven to be one of the most effective tools to combat chronic homelessness. Some of The Stuyvesant's residents, if unable to age in place, likely would eventually require nursing home care – at a significant cost to the state.

The lack of an increase in NYSSHP rates has left nonprofits like ours scrambling to find alternate funding sources to make ends meet. But even through fundraising and grants, which take time and energy to secure, many nonprofits have been forced to do more with less. That includes being unable to offer competitive salaries to our hardworking staff, which makes it difficult to retain our workforce and contributes to a labor shortage exacerbated by the COVID crisis. The Stuyvesant's residents deserve the same benefits their Landmark counterparts have. I'd like to hire another case manager to share Allison's load – and a behavior specialist, and bus drivers, and front desk staff. The entire population of a single building shouldn't have to depend on the health and well-being of just one person. I don't want to think about what we'd do without her.

The truth is that not every nonprofit has an Allison, and the state shouldn't perpetuate such an unbalanced and untenable system. The governor and state lawmakers need to do the right thing this budget season by converting the at-risk NYSSHP units to ESSHI. Everyone – supportive housing tenants and staff alike – will be better off for it.

Kevin O'Connor is CEO of affordable housing agency RUPCO.

Equal funding for supportive housing



Robert Blake, 43, a resident of Haven apartments who was formerly homeless, enters his apartment, Tuesday, Dec. 8, 2015, Bronx, N.Y. Facing a swell in homelessness, the city is embarking on investing in “supportive housing” like Haven, where homeless and mentally ill residents have their own apartments with comprehensive on-site services. (AP Photo/Bebeto Matthews)



By [TORI LYON](#)

January 6, 2024 at 5:00 a.m.

A stark state funding inequity is holding back New York nonprofits from doing our best to reduce homelessness.

New York City and State can be applauded for their pioneering roles in championing [supportive housing](#) as a proven path to stability for individuals and families. Yet a stubborn blind spot remains as legislators grossly underfund one of the oldest programs in the state— creating barriers to the housing outcomes we all seek.

[The New York State Supportive Housing Program](#), known as NYSSHP, was created in the 1980s as the first statewide initiative to provide individuals experiencing homelessness with housing and onsite counseling to get back on their feet.

The supportive housing model — where a tenant pays one-third of their income for an apartment with access to those services — is widely recognized for its success in keeping people housed. Yet the dollars allocated to NYSSHP have barely budged — currently \$2,736 for individuals and \$3,672 for families annually. In a seemingly parallel universe, state supportive housing units funded by the [Empire State Supportive Housing Initiative](#) (ESSHI), now in its sixth year, receive \$25,000 annually. Moreover, the city's [NYC 15/15](#) supportive housing program sites receive \$30,000 per unit.

The result of this gap is that nonprofits receiving NYSSHP funding must dip into their general coffers to meet industry-wide standards of care and cover the basics of safety and maintenance in older buildings. A \$200,000 boiler replacement doesn't fund itself.

We here at [Jericho Project](#) are a nonprofit that owns and manages nine supportive housing residences in New York City — three of which are solely NYSSHP funded — and we have invested \$9 million in maintenance alone for those three.

To rectify this inequity, the state could spend a relatively modest \$32 million in the next year as a first step in a five-year approach converting 9,000 severely underfunded NYSSHP contracts to ESSHI levels.

Why the discrepancy to begin with? In part, it's due to the evolution of the NYSSHP program which began providing housing and services for a broad swath of people, including those who had fallen on hard times but not necessarily due to mental health or substance abuse issues. Today, as our industry follows a "housing first" approach — getting people into the stability of permanent housing before tackling these kinds of challenges — we support residents with vastly greater needs than originally funded.

Jericho compensates our staff equally. Yet due to funding inequities, our social workers at NYSSHP sites carry a caseload that is 40% greater than their peers in NYC 15/15 — an average 25:1 ratio compared to 15:1.

In considering this, think about a school classroom. The smaller class size allows a teacher to focus on students' learning styles and special needs; the overflowing one results in overtime, burnout and less individual attention paid to each child. It's also true in a supportive housing program.

Jericho was founded 40 years ago by community and faith leaders whose ethos of compassion for aging, street bound New Yorkers inspires our work today. Our extraordinary staff are the lifeblood of our mission, delivering vital services to 2,000 individuals and families annually, and running nine supportive housing residences where tenants have the dignity of their own lease and key. And it really works: 95% of our residents maintain stable housing.

Regardless of a building's age, we create a holistic environment of support with onsite counseling and access to medical, mental health, employment and recreational services. We talk with clients about their hopes and dreams, often for the first time in their lives.

At the heart of our work are everyday heroes like Sabrina Lopez, our managing program director, who sleeps with her phone by her bed in case of emergency. She says, “many of our tenants have very difficult histories and find themselves on lonely, unprotected paths. But with our trauma-informed and nonjudgmental care, they discover that they belong.”

For some, the trauma began with the loss of a parent or abuse. For veterans, it might be hidden wounds of war. For LGBTQ young adults, being ostracized by their families. Trauma does not distinguish between NYSSHP or ESSHI or NYC 15/15.

That’s why we deliver the highest level of services to all our clients. But it comes at a price. By subsidizing those services with Jericho’s general funds, we are also strangling the opportunity we have to channel them into meaningful growth and the ability to reduce the pain and change the lives of more New Yorkers.

We entreat Gov. Hochul and the Legislature as they prepare to work on the state budget for the coming year, to please reaffirm our great state’s leadership in meeting the needs of our most vulnerable neighbors.

Lyon is the CEO of Jericho Project.

CITY LIMITS

CITY VIEWS: OPINIONS AND ANALYSIS

Opinion: A Simple State Budget Fix Could Save Supportive Housing **By Nicole Branca.**

Published November 16, 2023

“For many nonprofit building owners like us, it is not a question of if we will be able to keep these buildings as supportive housing; rather, it is a question of how long we can afford to.”



A supportive housing apartment in Manhattan.

When Caesar escaped an abusive domestic relationship with his three children in 2020, he and his family desperately needed two things: A safe, affordable place to call home and services to help rebuild their lives after years of abuse and trauma.

After bouncing between three different homeless shelters, they found all of that—and more—at a New Destiny building funded by a state program, the Empire State Supportive Housing Initiative (ESSHI).

Thanks to ESSHI, Caesar, 43, and his kids—Tristan, 17; Brandon, 14; and Bella, 12—have an apartment of their own with security to keep them safe and on-site trauma-informed staff to provide them with services like mental health counseling, therapeutic activities, financial coaching, and a variety of classes and events that are helping them build a new community and begin to heal from the double trauma of abuse and homelessness.

They are all hard at work and already flourishing. Caesar recently enrolled in university, and the kids are thriving in school. Every domestic violence victim in New York should have this kind of success story. And supportive housing, which is designed to help families like Caesar's, should be an essential tool in making those stories possible.

But sadly, many supportive housing buildings are not able to reach their full potential in the way that those that receive ESSHI funding can. And it has nothing to do with the work of the passionate staff who work tirelessly to make those outcomes happen. It is because thousands of properties are stuck in an outdated funding model, known as the New York State Supportive Housing Program (NYSSHP), which hasn't seen a significant increase in financial support since its inception more than three decades ago.

Many NYSSHP buildings are one crisis away from going irreversibly into the red, and most supportive housing providers cannot continue to afford to pay for the buildings' costs via mostly philanthropic contributions. For many nonprofit building owners like us, it is not a question of if we will be able to keep these buildings as [supportive housing](#); rather, it is a question of how long we can afford to.

The situation is dire. NYSSHP provides no rental subsidy and annual service funding of just \$2,736 for individuals and \$3,672 for families, compared to ESSHI's annual rate of \$25,000 per household. With few exceptions since the NYSSHP program began in 1987, all cost-of-living adjustments to staff salaries have had to be self-funded by nonprofits without reimbursement, increasing the financial burden on us in perpetuity. Vulnerable tenants still struggling with the emotional, mental, and financial impacts of domestic abuse, as well as underpaid social services staff, are most impacted by this significant funding disparity.

A simple solution exists: The governor and state lawmakers can convert the 9,000 antiquated NYSSHP units into ESSHI units and create fiscal equity in the supportive housing system. The cost to the state is a rounding error, given its annual budget of \$229 billion. That's a small price to pay to protect thousands of New York's most vulnerable households while shoring up investment in these buildings by keeping them affordable to low-income New Yorkers.

At New Destiny, NYSSHP provides, on average, just \$86,000 per building annually. That barely covers the salary and benefits of one staff person, leaving us to fundraise for the entire security staff and enough case managers to meet the various needs of our survivors and their children. This is an impossible feat that always leaves both us and our residents significantly understaffed and less secure.

According to the most recent statistics, [39 percent of families](#) using the NYC Department of Homeless Services shelter system identify domestic violence as the cause of their homelessness. It is the number one reason for family homelessness in New York City. How can we begin to meet this need for housing and services if we're spending all our time and resources fundraising to support the families we've already housed?

We've seen the power of the ESSHI model in action with Caesar and his family, as well as with countless other inspiring domestic violence survivors with whom we have had the privilege of working over the years as they chart successful new chapters in their lives.

Every New Yorker in a similar situation deserves the chance to experience the benefits a fully funded supportive housing program can bring. The path to making that possible is clear: It is incumbent on the governor and state lawmakers to bring NYSSHP in line with ESSHI in next year's budget.

Nicole Branca is executive director at New Destiny Housing Corporation, a New York City nonprofit founded in 1994 to provide permanent housing and services to survivors of domestic violence and their children.

TIMES UNION

[OPINION](#)

Editorial: Unequal support

One state supportive housing initiative receives much more funding than another. Why?

By [Times Union Editorial Board](#) Updated
Nov 15, 2023 10:54 a.m.

Ask any social services nonprofit and chances are they'll tell you that their agency is underfunded — that the government money they're receiving is unequal to the needs of the community. But in the eyes of the state, some programs are more unequal than others, and the disparity is a head-scratcher.

Consider these two supportive housing initiatives: the Empire State Supportive Housing Initiative and the New York State Supportive Housing Program. Both have similar missions and serve a similar clientele. But programs funded through ESSHI get much more state money than programs under NYSSHP. NYSSHP programs receive annual state funding of \$2,736 per individual and \$3,672 per family. ESSHI programs get about [\\$12,500 per housing unit](#) for services. That makes NYSSHP-funded facilities the poor relation, scrambling for donations to cover operating costs and straining to offer salaries that let them compete with local entry-level jobs. NYSSHP workers have even been left out of cost-of-living adjustments for human services workers.

This underfunding leads to staff turnover, unfilled positions and gaps in services and programming. Supportive housing — affordable housing that also makes services available to people who may need extra help to achieve full independence — has been a lifeline for New Yorkers dealing with mental health issues or addiction, those who are living with HIV or AIDS, victims of domestic violence, disabled veterans, and those with intellectual or developmental disabilities, among others. It's a successful model

for helping vulnerable people get on their feet and stay there, and clients shouldn't have to care which alphabet-soup initiative is funding the nonprofit that's helping them.

Some NYSSHP-funded program operators are asking for change. They [want to move](#) their most jeopardized programs — ones that don't receive funding from other government sources — under the ESSHI umbrella. That's a reasonable ask. But it's not the only option the state should consider.

Here's another thing the two programs have in common: ESSHI rates are the same as when the initiative was founded since 2016. And NYSSHP rates are nearly the same as when *it* was founded some 35 years ago. Since Gov. Kathy Hochul and lawmakers have pledged to address New York's dual crises of affordable housing and a shortage of mental health and addiction services, they could make progress on both by increasing state aid for all supportive housing initiatives. At the minimum, a significant funding boost for the NYSSHP should be included in next year's budget.

It's also worth asking: What if these programs merged?

There are differences in their missions and their clientele, but those differences are arguably minor compared with the programs' similarities. A merger could be a path to resolving their funding inequities, and eliminating bureaucratic redundancy might also make the programs more cost-efficient. ESSHI is a multi-agency effort administered by the Office of Mental Health; NYSSHP falls under the Office of Temporary and Disability Assistance.

State leaders apparently believe so much in supportive housing that they created multiple initiatives to sustain it. Now they need to care enough to make those programs work for everyone. Restructure the programs or increase their funding — but one way or another, make it equitable.

Organizations ask Hochul for more supportive housing funds

Network of housing groups send letter calling for increased money for 9,000 units across New York

By **Molly Burke**

Updated Nov 9, 2023 10:07 a.m.



■ALBANY — A group of 94 organizations are asking Gov. Kathy Hochul for \$32 million in next year’s state budget to increase funding and ease staffing problems for 9,000 supportive housing units.

The Supportive Housing Network of New York said that underfunding threatens the viability of 9,000 units that are funded solely through the New York State Supportive Housing Program (NYSSHP), which they argue has not received a significant increase in funding since the program began more than 30 years ago.

NYSSHP, which currently receives \$40 million in funding, provides housing for adults and families who are experiencing homelessness or are at risk of falling into that status. Upon receiving stable housing from a nonprofit, they pay monthly rent and have no substantial restrictions on their tenancy beyond what would be expected of any other renter.

“As the state struggles with (the) affordable housing, mental health, opioid and homelessness crises along with an influx of migrants, the loss of even a single unit of supportive housing is something we simply cannot afford,” said Pascale Leone, executive director of the network.

NYSSHP, which has 20,000 total supportive housing units, currently provides an annual rate of \$2,736 per individual and \$3,672 per family and does not have dedicated rental assistance for most tenants, the network said.

At the same time, the Empire State Supportive Housing Initiative (ESSHI) was launched in 2016 and provides an additional 20,000 supportive housing units in the state, with up to \$25,000 offered per unit annually for social services and rental assistance.

The organizations are asking for a five-year plan to move the 9,000 “at-risk” units under the ESSHI, where they would receive more funding. The other 11,000 units under NYSSHP receive additional funding from federal, state and local programs.

The cost of the first year of that plan would add an additional \$32 million to the next budget; the costs for the following four years is unclear.

Low wages make jobs in supportive housing organizations hard to fill, the network said, and the existing workforce “is increasingly stretched beyond its limits and asked to do more with less.”

The organizations noted supportive housing is used by a disproportionate number of people of color, domestic violence survivors, military veterans, formerly incarcerated people and those with mental health or addiction issues.

Hochul announced Wednesday that 27 new apartments across four Binghamton sites would be used as supportive housing, with the units being operated under ESSHI.

Commentary: Supportive housing keeps people off the streets

The New York State Supportive Housing Program is still receiving about the same level of state financial support that it got in 1987.

By Kevin O'Connor
March 12, 2023

A Code Blue flag flies outside Joseph's House & Shelter on Thursday, Jan. 28, 2016 in Troy, N.Y. (Lori Van Buren / Times Union)Lori Van Buren

As I look back, on the eve of my retirement after more than three decades spent helping the most vulnerable homeless New Yorkers live in health and dignity, a clear arc emerges.

During this period, I witnessed both the [beginning of widespread homelessness](#) in this state and the birth of the best means of ending it: supportive housing.

Early on, I was aware of the Franciscan friars in New York City who raised private funds to buy and renovate a dilapidated single-room occupancy hotel to provide permanent housing for formally institutionalized homeless individuals. The friars coaxed mental health professionals to provide on-site services, which allowed residents to stay safely housed.

At the time, this model was a cutting-edge experiment. It has since evolved considerably, and countless studies [have shown](#) it is the most [widely accepted](#) and powerful tool available to combat chronic homelessness that also [saves taxpayer dollars](#).

Today, New York is a global leader in creating supportive housing. But as additional investments have been made in this important model, the very first state-funded program – now known as the New York State Supportive Housing Program (NYSSHP) – has been left behind and is still receiving about the same level of financial support it received in 1987.

As a result, the nonprofits that run NYSSHP-funded programs – including Joseph’s House and Shelter, which I have directed since 2013 – are struggling to stay afloat, putting the stability and housing of more than 20,000 formerly homeless residents across the state in jeopardy.

If Gov. Kathy Hochul and the Legislature fail to right that wrong in this year’s state budget and significantly increase NYSSHP funding, much of the progress we have made over the past 30 years will be undone.

State lawmakers clearly understand the need to appropriately fund supportive housing. In 2016, they created the [Empire State Supportive Housing Initiative](#), the largest commitment of its kind in history, which pays five times more in service funding than NYSSHP. But the state never brought the original NYSSHP initiative in line with the new and improved one, so housing programs that began under the NYSSHP umbrella remain chronically underfunded and struggle to sustain themselves.

That’s why NYSSHP-funded programs find it nearly impossible to pay their staff living wages, exacerbating an ongoing labor shortage in the nonprofit and human services sectors. Providers can’t even compete with Walmart wages despite the unbelievably challenging nature of their work. As a result, residences are understaffed, and the remaining staff must pick up the slack, burning out earlier.

Adding insult to injury, the lackluster 2.5 percent cost-of-living increase for human services workers that was proposed in the governor’s executive budget doesn’t even cover the workers paid through NYSSHP.

At Joseph’s House & Shelter, we provide housing and services to more than 200 tenants a year; they have prolonged histories of homelessness and have coped with persistent mental health and substance abuse disabilities. Up until now, our programs have seen a 90 percent annual housing retention rate. That is in jeopardy due to the low NYSSHP funding rates, which impact our ability to adequately compensate our staff. What was once a stable and sustainable primary career is now a secondary job for many of our employees, who need multiple paychecks to support themselves and their families.

The program and operating income that Joseph’s House receives through NYSSHP covers just 71 percent of our costs, with more than three-quarters of that aid going to

support our workforce. The organization needs to raise more than \$165,000 in additional private funds each year just to keep one of our NYSSHSP-funded supportive housing programs afloat. This is not a sustainable model.

Supportive housing is about justice. It's about treating people with dignity and not judging them. It's about compassion and recognizing that any one of us could be similarly afflicted. We have a responsibility as a community to take care of everyone among us. Supportive housing is a proven model that works. It's time for the governor and state lawmakers to provide it with the sustainable, 21st-century funding it requires.

Kevin O'Connor is executive director of Joseph's House & Shelter in Troy. He is retiring this spring.

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By Kevin O'Connor

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Maria Sharp

Special to the USA TODAY Network

I spent a decade of my professional career working for the YWCA of Rochester & Monroe County, providing housing and supportive services to some of the most vulnerable women and children in our community.

It was a labor of love, but it was also very challenging – both on a personal and financial level. Helping people in crisis is a high-stress, high-trauma environment, and though no one working in this field does it for the money, the fact is that most of us are grossly underpaid.

Last September, I left YWCA to take another job. It was a difficult decision. I stayed as long as I did because I knew in my heart that my efforts — and that of my colleagues — were making a difference in people's lives. In the end, I had to put my family first. I could not continue to live paycheck to paycheck to support myself and my child while doing this very challenging work.

The YWCA is unable to offer competitive salary and benefits packages in large part because a critical funding stream on which it relies, the New York State Supportive Housing Program, has not significantly increased since its creation 30 years ago. As a result, nearly 20,000 units across the state are teetering on the edge of unsustainability — just as the Hochul administration has proposed dramatically increasing affordable housing production.

Kathlyn Gardens is a 12-unit supportive housing community, also in the City of Rochester. It is a supportive residence run by the YWCA with services funded exclusively by NYSSHP.

NYSSHP provides between \$2,600 and \$3,500 a year for single formerly homeless adults and families with children, respectively. Comparatively, the Empire State Supportive Housing Initiative, created in 2016 as the largest commitment in supporting housing in history, pays about five times those rates — \$12,500 per unit — for the same services.

This year's state budget must raise NYSSHP rates up to the level of ESHHI if there is to be any hope of truly solving the twin homelessness and affordable housing crisis. Supportive housing is

a proven tool for keeping chronically unhoused individuals off the streets and setting them up for long-term success. If we don't preserve the units we currently have while creating new ones, we will be playing a continuous and never-ending game of catch-up.

And supportive housing can't possibly succeed without the service component, which relies on human capital. Without the essential workers putting in long hours in difficult conditions, residents receive neither the time nor attention they need to stay housed.

During my final years with the YWCA, we saw close to a 50% staff turnover. As director, I was also providing support and direct services because while we were dramatically understaffed, we had people who needed us and contracts to fill. I continued to provide direct services while being expected to manage administrative duties, produce positive outcomes and support my team.

Vermont Manor is a 16-unit supportive housing community in the City of Rochester. It is a supportive residence run by the YWCA with services funded exclusively by NYSSHP.

We have difficulty filling vacant positions in the human services field because the reality is that fast food restaurants and big box stores pay more, on average, for less emotionally demanding work. Supportive housing workers funded by NYSSHP grants are one paycheck away from being in the same shoes as the formerly homeless people we serve. Many of us rely on public assistance to get by. Early on in my career, I applied for a position in leadership but was forced to turn down the raise, because accepting it would have left me ineligible for Medicaid and childcare subsidies — coverage my family desperately needed.

I know I am not alone among my colleagues in human services, particularly those who work in supportive housing, in struggling to make ends meet. We want to be able to keep doing the work that we know makes a real difference in people's lives. Unless the state makes the necessary investment in the programs we serve, it won't be financially possible for many of us to continue along this path — and New York's most vulnerable residents will suffer as a result.

Maria Sharp is a veteran Rochester-area supportive services and human services professional.

