

SUPPORTIVE HOUSING TENANT ROUNDTABLES MEMO

2025

A MESSAGE FROM THE MODERATORS

Supportive housing works. For thousands of New Yorkers, it has been a critical foundation for healing, rebuilding, and reclaiming their lives after experiencing homelessness and other traumatic life events. But to ensure supportive housing continues to deliver on its promise, we must listen – really listen – to the people who live there.

Too often, decisions about policies and funding are made without the insight of those most impacted. That's why, last year, we teamed up to convene a series of statewide tenant roundtables. More than 100 tenants from over 50 organizations across the state participated. They brought candor, courage, and deep lived experience and expertise to conversations about what's working, what's not, and what needs to change.

Their message was clear: supportive housing can be transformative—but only when it's adequately funded, safely operated, and sufficiently staffed. We heard stories that were heartbreaking and uplifting. Tenants described feeling unsafe in their buildings – often due to the absence of 24/7 security, or overburdened staff, and mismatched placements. One tenant shared that 55 residents had access to just one case manager. Others spoke of being placed in shared apartments with strangers – many of such arrangements put their mental health and recovery at risk.

Yet alongside the challenges, we heard incredible stories of resilience. Many tenants credited supportive housing with saving their lives. They emphasized how much it matters to have staff who are not only trained but deeply empathetic – people who listen without judgment, and in some cases, have lived through similar struggles themselves.

The insights shared in these roundtables are not just feedback. They are a roadmap of where we need to go next. At a time when providers face mounting pressures—aging buildings, staff turnover and burnout, delayed payments, and looming federal cuts—these tenant perspectives must inform our next steps. Recent increases in state and city funding are promising, but dollars alone won't solve the problem. How we invest – and whether those investments reflect what tenants say they need – will determine the future of supportive housing in New York.

We are profoundly grateful to every tenant who shared their truth with us. Your voices are helping shape a stronger, more compassionate and responsive system—one that promotes dignity, safety, and equity. We look forward to continuing this conversation and ensuring your experiences lead the way.

With deep gratitude,

Kenny M. Alvarez, Housing Justice Advocate & Former Supportive Housing Tenant

Pascale Leone, Supportive Housing Network of NY

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Supportive Housing Network of New York (the Network) hosted a series of five roundtable discussions with tenants living in supportive housing to gather valuable first-hand insights into their experiences. From December 2023 to August 2024, over 100 tenants participated from over 50 organizations across four geographic regions: New York City (2 roundtables), Albany, Rochester, and Long Island. Conversations were centered around themes of tenant satisfaction, safety and well-being, service provision, workforce challenges, and referral and placement processes.

This memo serves to summarize the key findings from these conversations and elevate tenant voices, inform policy and program decisions, and drive meaningful change that will result in increased safety, accessible services, and a long-term model grounded in sustainability and tenant satisfaction.

Key Findings Statewide

- Supportive housing provides stability, but varies in quality
- Safety and security are major concerns
- Shared roommate housing is not working
- There are unmet service needs for tenants with highly acute needs
- The workforce is understaffed, unsupported, many lack empathy and cultural astuteness, and there is a lack of peer workforce pipelines
- Tenant leadership councils are key to tenant satisfaction and safety
- Caring, competent staff leads to satisfied tenants

Geographic Specific Findings

- In New York City, the application and referral process is overcomplicated and burdensome and the scattered site model surfaced unique challenges
- Upstate is experiencing severe understaffing
- Long Island tenants were overrepresented in the challenges with shared housing and also discussed the challenges of living on a fixed income

Recommendations Themes

- Move away from shared roommate housing
- Increase substance use and harm reduction support
- Simplify application and referral process in NYC
- Embed more services and programs on-site
- Support the supportive housing workforce
- Strengthen pathways for peer workforce training opportunities for tenants
- Foster the creation of more tenant advisory committees

Methodology

The roundtables engaged over 100 tenants from over 50 organizations across four geographic regions. Key participant demographics included:

- Gender Identity: 40% identified as female, 58% as male, 1% as agender, and 1% as transgender
- Age: Ranged between 27-83 years of age. Median age was 59
- Race/Ethnicity: 57% Black/Black Hispanic, 28% white, 10% Hispanic/Latina/e/o/x, 2% Asian, 2% Mixed/Multi-racial and 1% Indigenous/Native American
- Sexual Orientation: 1% -Bi-sexual, 5% -Gay, 82%-Heterosexual, 5%-Lesbian, 2%-Other, 1%-PanSexual, 1%-Queer, 1%-Transgender
- Housing Type: 64% lived in a congregate setting, 36% in scattered-site
- Shared Housing, incl. SROs: 37% of respondents (n=78) lived in a shared housing arrangement including SROs
- Disability Status: 79% self-identified as having a disability

This report synthesizes the key themes, regional differences, and tenant-driven recommendations from the roundtables. It is our hope that by addressing concerns raised during these discussions and investing in the tenant-driven solutions the roundtable participants proposed, we can ensure that supportive housing can continue to promote stability, safety, and long-term success for all its residents.

KEY THEMES STATEWIDE

Not all supportive housing is created equal, and tenants' testimony of their experiences showcased this. Tenants' experience across geography and housing setting varied, but there were many strong, consistent themes across the board.

1. SUPPORTIVE HOUSING PROVIDES STABILITY, BUT VARIES IN QUALITY

Across the state, tenants made it clear that supportive housing is a vital resource. While nearly all tenants expressed deep gratitude for supportive housing, their experiences varied widely based on location, building conditions, unit type and the quality and availability of support services. Across all discussions, tenants expressed deep gratitude for supportive housing saving their lives, especially as an alternative to homelessness or shelters. However, there was a distinction between being grateful and being satisfied. Many tenants were grateful for housing but dissatisfied with current conditions and services. **Statewide, 68% of tenants said they were satisfied with supportive housing, 20% were unsatisfied, and 12% were neither satisfied nor unsatisfied.**

For many tenants, supportive housing represented the first time in their lives that they had a stable place to live. Those in well-run housing programs with strong case management and local supports reported high levels of satisfaction and credited their housing with helping them regain control over their lives. Specifically, supportive housing provided:

- A sense of permanence: Simply having a reliable, safe place to live removed the daily stressors of being unhoused or housing insecure.
- Improved health and recovery: Stable housing allowed tenants to focus on physical and behavioral health needs and their own personal growth.
- Rebuilding life skills: Some tenants successfully transitioned to full-time employment and/or pursued education opportunities – attributing their progress to the support provided by their case managers.
- A structured environment with support: Tenants found that staff engagement, community-building activities, and vocational support helped them stay on track

“My life coach knows me, and I know her. She’s a fantastic person... I’ve been retrained on how to be a tenant, someone with responsibility.” (Rochester)

“Before supportive housing, I was in and out of shelters and prison. Now, I have stability and a future.” (NYC)

“I’m very satisfied. I’ve been in the same place for 18 years. Supportive housing helped me stay grounded.” (NYC)

Despite its stabilizing impact, the quality of supportive housing varies significantly depending on location, management, and available resources. Some tenants described serious deficiencies that negatively affected their health, safety, and ability to thrive.

“The landlords who own our building should be more involved. The rugs need to be changed, and the building needs a paint job.” (Long Island – Scattered Site Tenant)

“They are slow on fixing anything. My building’s front door has been broken for months.” (NYC)

2. SAFETY & SECURITY ARE MAJOR CONCERNS

Concerns about safety in supportive housing reflect broader public sentiment across New York State—and particularly in New York City—where anxieties about public safety have become increasingly pronounced in recent years. These fears were echoed by tenants across regions and housing settings, making safety the most frequently raised issue. Tenants across settings and regions expressed a decreased sense of safety and well-being in supportive housing, with long-term tenants voicing that they felt less safe than ever before.

Key contributing factors to feeling unsafe were an increase in tenants displaying threatening behavior and rising active drug use in buildings and its domino effect causing others to relapse. Tenants reported inadequate security measures—broken front doors, a lack of security cameras, and staff not responding effectively to safety issues. Many noted that some people take advantage of the hours when building security is not present. The decreased sense of safety was also understood to be a large contributing factor to staff burnout and turnover.

“I’ve never felt so unsafe (as I have) the last couple years.” (NYC)

“90% of conversations I hear from people at our resident committee meetings are concerned with safety in their buildings.” (NYC)

“My roommate has violent outbursts and threatens me.” (Long Island)

3. SHARED ROOMMATE HOUSING IS NOT WORKING

The issue of shared roommate housing was identified as a top concern for tenants. While some shared housing settings like Single Room Occupancy (SRO) housing can foster community and skill-building for some tenants, in shared scattered site apartments, complete strangers are forced to live together as roommates. Tenants have no ability to request who they would like to live with. One person referred to their roommate situation as “torture.” Another mentioned feeling the need for security cameras in the shared living areas. With an increasing number of tenants needing access to daily living skills but not receiving enough support, there are increased incidences and imbalanced daily living skills amongst roommates.

Some tenants stated that they were roomed with individuals who were still actively using while they were in recovery, others had experiences with fires in the kitchen and living in fear of their apartment burning down, many had general concerns around hygiene and cleanliness, many observed frequent unpredictable and disruptive behavior or consistent threatening remarks and felt the need to call 911. Still others were matched with roommates with much higher levels of need, forcing them to become de facto case managers. Tenants in these shared situations expressed the highest level of dissatisfaction and expressed hopes to find new, alternative living situations.

“I’m constantly being threatened in my own home and it’s making my mental health worse.” (Long Island)

“They moved me in with a roommate with no living skills and left it up to me to teach that. It’s not my job. I understand and am sympathetic to the cause. I help as much as I can, but I have my own life.” (NYC)

4. UNMET SERVICE NEEDS FOR TENANTS WITH HIGHLY ACUTE NEEDS

Tenants felt that supportive housing often lacks the necessary services to adequately support the individuals they accept. Many pointed out that if the housing is going to accept people with specific sets of needs, there should be the staff with that appropriate expertise, but this is often not the case. There was a strong call for a higher level of care for many tenants. While tenants recognized the importance of everyone having a place to live and the importance of not discriminating, they also expressed that they were often significantly impacted by neighbors with acute needs. Tenants repeatedly mentioned the need for a more thorough and nuanced screening process. Long-term tenants shared that they have noticed an increase in the severity of need and felt that there had been a shift in screening procedures.

“Supportive housing needs more wrap around services to push toward self-sufficiency so people have options to help address their root issues.” (NYC)

“If you place someone with a severe psychiatric condition, make sure there’s staff equipped to support them.” (Albany)

“They used to screen people. Now they let anyone in, and it’s making places unsafe.” (NYC)

Major Uptick of Active Substance Use: Tenants described a crisis of increased active substance use and noted the use of deadlier substances. They brought up the absence of services and programming to address the substance use, which results in tragic overdoses in their residences and communities. They also referenced the negative impacts of active use in shared spaces.

“People are actively freely using with no regard to how it may affect my sobriety, which causes me to struggle.” (NYC)

“These case managers need to get more in touch with the addiction piece and help folks with their meds and treatment for addictive behaviors.” (Rochester)

5. A WORKFORCE IN CRISIS

Supportive Housing is understaffed: Participants noted the shortage of staff working in their residences, with unmanageably high caseloads for a single case manager. An upstate tenant stated their building has one case manager for all 55 tenants; another had not had a case manager for two months, and another said they had not been able to reach their case manager for months.

Many tenants noted the extremely high rates of turnover, which leads to lack of trust between tenants and staff and can retraumatize individuals when they have to re-tell their stories to new staff. Some tenants were left feeling like they have no choice but to serve as their own advocates because they cannot rely on their case managers. Others mentioned having to train new staff.

“In the last year I’ve been through four case managers and since moving in, I’ve been through six. I know the turnover is so high because they don’t have enough people to do the jobs.” (Albany)

“One person for 50 tenants isn’t enough.” (Albany)

“The workforce is short staffed: case managers and security. We need additional training to address burnout. My site has 65 people, but the staff time is taken up by a few individuals so a lot of them slip through the cracks.” (NYC)

The workforce is unsupported: Tenants empathized with overworked, underpaid staff. Tenants recognized that they may well be living in nicer apartments than their case managers and that tenants and staff alike utilize many of the same social services. They also noted that staff are often young, new to the field, and are overwhelmed. They felt that staff are clearly not receiving the training required to provide needed services. They called out the need for trainings/increased skills in conflict mediation/de-escalation, Narcan administration, harm reduction and overdose prevention, as well as understanding of mental health conditions and that these trainings should be provided to all staff working in supportive housing, including front-desk, porters and security staff.

“I think we need better resources for people who do this work. I think they need to be better paid. They put their lives at risk to take us places... I want to see better resources for them. I want to see better training and preparation for them.” (Rochester)

Lack of empathy, cultural astuteness: Tenants also noted a lack of cultural sensitivity and compassion in the workforce, stating that some case managers are “book smart,” but are unable to understand tenants’ experience and “can’t speak the language.” Others mentioned that the staff are lacking empathy and only see tenants’ labels, unable to see past their experiences of homelessness and/or disabilities.

“We need people who have love and compassion. You can do your job but have love and compassion that we are human beings with disabilities.” (Albany)

“Some of us used to be directors, or even had degrees, but one situation flipped our lives. Now we’re here. The staff who get that—that this work is a calling—those are the ones who really help us heal.” (NYC)

Lack of pathways to peer workforce pipelines: Tenants noted that due to high staff turnover they end up training their own case managers on processes and procedures to help them, when they could be doing that work themselves. Tenants take on tasks such as assisting staff, working as leaders in their communities, serving on tenant advisory committees, and acting as “mayors” of their buildings. Tenants take on this work uncompensated and unrecognized, filling critical gaps in services. More pathways for employment are needed for tenants who wish to enter the supportive housing workforce.

“We need more peer advocacy and recovery coaching. They burnout less. They identify better and can relate their experience to perform their duties.” (NYC)

“I’m certified in harm reduction, needle distribution, but it means nothing if I can’t get my feet somewhere where I need to be.” (Albany)

6. TENANT LEADERSHIP COUNCILS ARE KEY TO TENANT SATISFACTION AND SAFETY

Tenant advisors and advocates reported that their presence helped create thriving communities, enhancing safety and a sense of community. One tenant advisory board member noted that they were able to reduce reported thefts. Others reported that staff mentioned feeling safer with their partnership. Those who spoke positively about their experience praised advisory boards which they said contributed to their positive experience.

“I have a tenant association and people were stealing, taking from the old, and we stopped it from a tenant association. It really works. It brings people together. 99.9% will have successful tenant association.” (NYC)

“Having a tenant association or resident association is a big major thing in solving problems.” (NYC)

“Tenants are afraid to speak up, but when we do, things change.” (Rochester)

7. CARING, COMPETENT STAFF = SATISFIED TENANTS

While there was overwhelming discussion of the workforce crisis, many tenants also noted their immense gratitude for supportive housing and specifically the staff. Some tenants said they felt that their provider was always on top of their safety, and was available to help with whatever assistance they needed. Others credited drug counselors or other staff with helping them achieve and maintain their sobriety.

“The workers are always on top of things. If you need help with social security, you feel sick and need help, if you’re using, they’re there to help you.” (NYC)

“I’m grateful, my caseworker is the best. I can call her in the middle of the night and she will respond.” (Albany)

KEY THEMES - NEW YORK CITY

Present in the New York City roundtables were discussions specific to the application and referral process and the scattered site model:

OVERBURDENSOME APPLICATION AND REFERRAL PROCESS

In New York City, tenants expressed that the application and referral process is overly burdensome and lengthy, with the 2010e form being time-consuming and in need of simplification. They also highlighted the difficulty of obtaining the necessary documentation, and the challenge of keeping materials organized while living in a shelter. One person mentioned that shelter staff lost files, while others noted the struggle of having to carry their documents with them at all times. Some also mentioned that shelter staff often had difficulty completing the application. Once the application is approved, the wait time to receive a referral to an apartment is far too long, and many reported that their borough preference is often ignored. Many tenants shared their frustration with having to repeat this process multiple times as approvals expired.

“The application is huge and should be simplified. We have to go through this process over and over again. We lose our patience and are looked at like a diagnosis for getting frustrated.” (NYC)

“You have a folder with everything in there from day one in the system. Shelter staff lose files so you have to keep everything on you.” (NYC)

SCATTERED SITE MODEL HAS UNIQUE CHALLENGES

Supportive housing typically follows two models: congregate (single-site) residences with onsite staff, and scattered-site housing, where private market units are rented and services are delivered to tenants at home.

Some tenants living in scattered site housing mentioned lack of staffing at residences and having no one at the residence to help when emergencies arise. They noted a poor quality in housing and challenges with getting someone to complete repairs. Additionally, they spoke about the isolation of being the only supportive tenant in a building.

“I’m my only person from my whole program in my building. I don’t have an ally in my building. My packages get stolen, my groceries get stolen. It was a sobering experience when I figured out it was because I was the only supportive housing tenant in that building.” (NYC)

KEY THEMES – UPSTATE

Upstate tenants seemed to be experiencing an even more severe understaffing at residences. Tenants mentioned caseloads being so high that there was only one staff member for an entire building. It was repeatedly mentioned that residences did not have any staff – facilities or security – on-site after 5pm, when emergencies are most likely to arise. Many noted that there was no one to turn to for help (although again, in these situations many tenants are filling in the gaps and supporting their fellow tenants).

“Caseloads are so high there’s only one person who can’t do it all alone.” (Albany)

“I ain’t have a case manager in 2 months... I’m getting stressed with my addiction. I think that’s sad.” (Rochester)

KEY THEMES – LONG ISLAND

Tenants in Long Island were overrepresented in the challenges with shared housing and also discussed the challenges of living on a fixed income while allocating 30% of their income towards rent. They expressed concerns about the risks of losing benefits if they seek additional income and work. Many noted that 30% of their income is an excessive burden, especially given the limited benefits they rely on and the steep annual increases in the cost of living. Several tenants called for flexible work policies, allowing them to earn more without losing benefits.

“It would give us a stronger foothold in society if you could work and not affect your benefits.”

“Most of us are on SSI. The government should allow us to work part-time without penalties.”

IDENTIFIED RECOMMENDATIONS

The above themes resulted in the seven key recommendations below.

Move Away from {Scattered-site} Shared Housing: The model of shared housing is not working. Only individual units provide the safety and comfort tenants require for long-term stability and success.

Increase harm reduction and support for people who use substances: Tenants and staff are bearing the brunt of the overdose crisis. Substance use services and harm reduction strategies should be integrated into all supportive housing. Substance use should be assessed starting at intake to facilitate harm reduction engagement early on and supportive housing should have substance use peer specialist/recovery coaches on staff.

Simplify application and referral process in NYC: The 2010e application must be simplified and the process re-designed to prioritize referring tenants to housing based on their level of service need rather on availability as well as to honor borough of preference.

Embed more services and programs on-site: Tenants highlighted the need for additional on-site services and programming. Tenants specifically called for grievance and re-entry groups, independent living skills support, mindfulness classes, art therapy, additional transportation assistance, and increased funding for community engagement activities (e.g. trips, birthday parties, etc.).

Support & Invest in the Supportive Housing Workforce: Staff need smaller caseloads, higher wages, and more comprehensive training to effectively support tenants and address their needs.

Strengthened Pathways for Peer Workforce Training Opportunities for Tenants: There is a significant disconnect between the workforce shortage crisis and the large, untapped, potential of peer workers who are passionate and ready to work. Expanding the tenant-to-peer worker pipeline is crucial to address the staffing shortage and tenant satisfaction.

Foster the Creation of More Tenant Advisory Committees: While many tenants in the roundtables were active in advisory committees, most supportive housing agencies lack them. There is a clear need to develop tools to aid tenants in establishing their own advisory committees and to advise staff on the best strategies to support tenants in creating and continuing the committees.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, supportive housing is a critical resource to tenants across the state but the model needs real investment and tenants need additional support. Centering tenants and tenant-led solutions in policy and programming solutions will result in increased safety, accessible services and overall long-term model sustainability and tenant satisfaction.

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| ACMH | In Unity House |
| Albany Damien Center | Institute for Community Living |
| Breaking Ground | Jericho Project |
| CAMBA | Lantern Community Services |
| CARES of New York | Long Island Coalition for the Homeless |
| Catholic Charities of Brooklyn and Queens | Lutheran Social Services |
| Catholic Charities of Onondaga County | Matt Urban Center |
| Catholic Charities of the Diocese of Albany | Mental Health Association of Nassau County |
| Center for Urban Community Services | Mohawk Opportunities |
| Circulo de la Hispanidad, Inc. | Options for Community Living, Inc. |
| Community Access | Project Renewal |
| Community Housing Innovations | Providence House |
| Concern Housing | Providence Housing Development Corporation |
| DePaul | RiseWell Community Services |
| Eagle Star Housing | Services for the UnderServed |
| Episcopal SeniorLife Communities | South Shore Association for Independent Living, Inc. (SAIL) |
| Fortune Society | United Veterans Beacon House |
| GEEL Community Services | Unity House of Troy |
| Goddard Riverside | Urban Pathways |
| Homeless and Travelers Aid Society | VIP Community Services |
| Housing & Services, Inc. | WellLife Network |
| Housing Works | YWCA of Rochester & Monroe County |
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CONTACT INFORMATION

Supportive Housing Network of New York

247 W 37 Street, 18th Floor

New York, NY 10018

shnny.org

Joelle Ballam-Schwan

Director of Programs & Engagement

jballam-schwan@shnny.org