

## **Testimony of RuthAnne Visnauskas**

**Commissioner and CEO of the New York State Homes and Community Renewal**

### ***“A Matter of Life and Death: Improving Fire Safety in Federally Assisted Housing”***

**House Committee on Financial Services, Subcommittee on Housing, Community Development and Insurance**

**April 20, 2022**

Thank you, Chairman Cleaver, Congressman Torres, and other members for holding today’s hearing on the need for new legislation to better ensure the safety of public and affordable housing in America.

I am RuthAnne Visnauskas, Commissioner and CEO of New York State Homes and Community Renewal, where our mission is to build, preserve and protect affordable housing throughout New York State. New York State is home to more than 20 million people, living in approximately 7.4 million housing units, of which 3.4 million are renters. All across the state, HCR supports local governments and municipalities in administering Section 8 vouchers, rent stabilization and rent control, and state homeownership assistance programs, and has been charged with delivering Governor Hochul’s ambitious 5-year, \$25 billion housing plan to create and preserve affordable housing.

The tragic Twin Parks complex fire took the lives of seventeen people on Sunday, January 9, and upended the lives of the residents in that building as well as their families and larger communities. I am here today to share both the state’s response to the fire and to discuss what Congress and individual states and localities can do more to protect residents living in affordable housing including those in lower-income, working-class, and immigrant families.

Following the fire, the primary role of the state has been to support residents in securing safe, new housing in a community of their choice. Together with the New York City Department of Housing Preservation and Development, the State Office of Temporary and Disability Assistance, and the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, we have actively engaged with tenants, the property owner,

and the affordable housing community to ensure the building's residents received immediate emergency assistance, as well as options for long-term relocation.

HCR has engaged CVR Associates, which administers project-based Section 8 vouchers on behalf of the agency in the Bronx, to work with all of the residents of Twin Parks who wish to relocate. Current voucher holders may take their voucher if they move and HCR has worked closely with HUD to provide access to new Section 8 vouchers for eligible individuals previously living in the building without a subsidy. Additionally, Governor Hochul has made \$2 million available to impacted tenants for housing relocation services, case management, moving expenses, security deposits for new apartments and reimbursement for families in need of new furniture and other necessities.

The City of New York quickly made available a newly constructed affordable property in the Bronx called La Central. To date, more than 90 families have applied to the new building: 62 families have signed leases; and 54 have already moved in. CVR is continuing to work with each family to identify housing that meets their needs in the neighborhood or community of their choice.

Despite our ability to provide assistance and the crucial contributions of the community and our partners, we must work together to strengthen public and affordable housing protections because the construction and maintenance of subsidized housing is a multi-layered collaboration between federal, state, and local agencies in urban and rural areas.

Within this ecosystem, one of HCR's primary roles is to ensure building owners comply with federal guidelines and requirements. As the affordable housing agency for New York State, we administer several federal programs, including HOME, CDBG, Section 8, as well as 4% and 9% LIHTC programs. We provide fiscal, regulatory and physical oversight of these buildings and are required to conduct ongoing compliance visits, in accordance with federal rules, by inspecting a sample of units in federally subsidized properties to confirm owners meet federal standards. We take our responsibility of making sure building owners comply with these requirements very seriously.

Our constituencies are depending on us all – federal agencies, state agencies, and local agencies – to identify and implement new ways to mitigate safety risks and

to and enhance health and safety requirements for public and affordable housing. As part of this, New York State urges Congress to advance a few key priorities:

- Increase federal funding for safety inspections as well as funding to support new technology-based infrastructure between local, state and federal partners to better ensure compliance monitoring.
- Improve subsidized and affordable housing through the \$150 billion proposed federal investment from the Build Back Better Act to address the massive backlog of public housing capital needs and reduce tenant complaints.
- Increase funding to create new affordable housing options.
- Require space heaters to be produced and sold with automatic shut-off switches.
- Work with industry experts to determine the efficacy and affordability of heat sensors in subsidized multifamily buildings to increase building safety.
- Create a commission with owners, tenants, state agencies, and local code enforcement entities to examine, change or update HUD inspection protocols. Local perspectives are critical as it is the local entities and tenants that are most aware of the unique features, and challenges of the housing stock in their communities.

The need for more federal funding cannot be overstated. Housing in America is at a level of crisis and requires robust funding to begin undoing decades of federal disinvestment in the nation's housing stock. The House of Representatives acknowledged this and successfully passed billions in housing funding through the Build Back Better Act that included meaningful provisions such as:

- \$65 billion to address the backlog of public housing capital needs that would yield a reduction in tenant complaints by improving housing conditions;
- Over \$25 billion in housing choice and rental assistance programs helping to provide hundreds of thousands of housing opportunities for families and reduce overcrowded housing conditions;
- \$25 billion in funding to produce and preserve affordable housing through programs like the National Housing Trust Fund, HOME Investment Partnerships Program, and Community Development Financial Institutions;

- Nearly \$25 billion for climate cognizant housing planning in addition to debt forgiveness for National Flood Insurance Program policyholders;
- \$15 billion in funding to position hundreds of thousands of first-generation homebuyers within reach of homeownership;
- Nearly \$10 billion to support a host of housing planning, development, and revitalization programs that emphasize equitably and efficiency;
- Roughly \$5 billion to ensure that housing related health and safety hazard mitigation is being addressed; and
- Many affordable housing tax credit provisions to support public-private investments that unlock affordable housing construction opportunities not just in New York but nationwide.

We know that we cannot rely on federal funding alone and that is why we emphasize the need for state and local action and collaboration. At the direction of Governor Hochul, the State FY2023 Enacted Budget lays out a comprehensive and thoughtful blueprint for addressing New York's housing and homelessness crisis. It recognizes housing access as critical to the State's economic recovery efforts and commitment to social justice. It addresses longstanding systemic inequities, and it also brings us closer to our goals of achieving a cleaner, greener climate and closing the gap in digital connectivity for lower-income families.

The centerpiece of the budget includes a comprehensive \$25 billion housing plan. This five-year housing plan will create or preserve 100,000 affordable homes across New York, including \$1.5 billion for 10,000 units with support services for vulnerable populations. Other key aspects of the investment include \$1 billion for developing new multi-family affordable housing and \$450 Million for preservation of existing multifamily rental housing; \$400 million to support homeownership opportunities, particularly in historically underserved markets; and \$250 million for a nation leading electrification fund to improve the energy efficiency of 50,000 homes, moving towards the statewide goal of electrifying 1,000,000 homes. The FY 2023 Enacted Budget also addresses several other key housing priorities such as \$350 million in capital improvements for the New York City Housing Authority, \$200 million for all public housing authorities outside of New York City, and \$100 million for the Housing Our Neighbors With Dignity Act to convert vacant commercial properties and distressed hotel properties across the state.

With additional federal support, we could do even more to preserve and upgrade affordable housing across the state.

Looking ahead, HCR stands ready to work with state, federal and local partners and experts on how to enhance health and safety measures in subsidized housing and to protect against tragedies like this in the future. The proposed bills that create standards for space heaters and require heat sensors in subsidized properties are straightforward proposals that we believe could protect against tragedies like this in the future. We hope that today's hearing can advance the conversation on these proposals and other methods for improving the safety of subsidized housing across the nation.

HCR is poised to work towards sensible measures that will increase the safety of buildings and better protect our residents, friends and neighbors who reside in subsidized and affordable housing units across the state.

I thank you for the opportunity to testify today and welcome your questions.

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