

August 30, 2023

Open letters to state government rarely begin with “thank you,” but this one is from the heart. As the fall semester begins, we are writing to thank and applaud Assembly Speaker Craig Coughlin and Senate President Nicholas Scutari and their bodies, and Governor Phil Murphy, for legislation that helps vulnerable tenants by increasing New Jersey law schools’ capacity to stand up for them. We would also like to thank the other legislators who sponsored the establishment of this program in 2021: Nicholas Chiaravalloti, Vincent Mazzeo, Britnee N. Timberlake, Troy Singleton, and Shirley K. Turner, as well as co-sponsors Gordon M. Johnson, Herb Conaway, Jr., Benjie E. Wimberly and M. Teresa Ruiz. The programs made possible by this legislation are great successes, genuinely improving conditions for low- and middle-income tenants, promoting housing stability in the state, and helping to build a new generation of advocates.

Housing costs in New Jersey are 32% higher than the national average. Prior to the pandemic, new eviction filings averaged 12,500 new cases each month. When the pandemic struck in 2020, Speaker Coughlin and his colleagues recognized that the ongoing housing crisis would soon worsen. He consulted with the law schools, reasoning that if early career health care professionals could step up and make a difference in a crisis, so could law students and new lawyers. With input from the law schools and the Governor’s office, the Legislature passed NJSA 22A:2-51a. The legislation acknowledged that the lack of affordable housing, long an issue in New Jersey, was exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic and disproportionately impacts Black and Latinx residents of New Jersey. The state’s commitment to providing equal justice assures low- and moderate-income tenants that they are valued members of our community. The Legislature renewed these critical appropriations in 2022 and 2023.

From the start, the concept was to cultivate advocates for a problem that will be with us for years and decades to come: a severe lack of affordable housing, forcing many tenants to live in substandard and deplorable conditions because they have nowhere else to go. With funding from the Legislature, Seton Hall and Rutgers – at its Camden and Newark locations – established the New Jersey Housing Justice Project to provide legal services for low- and moderate-income tenants in need of housing assistance; advocate for policy changes to

assist tenants; and train law students and law graduates in housing law. The Project has made a difference in the lives of New Jersey tenants who are seeking a safe and affordable home. We have defended parents in eviction cases and helped them obtain repairs to make their homes safer for their children. We have assisted tenant organizations and challenged illegal rent hikes. We have helped seniors find new apartments with the supportive services they need to continue to call New Jersey home.

In September 2022, we launched the Housing Justice Corps, a community of recent law school graduates committed to eradicating housing instability and addressing inequities in housing availability and quality in New Jersey. Nine Fellows were assigned to host organizations around the state, and two are embedded in the law schools. Under close supervision and with intensive mentoring, they provide direct representation, build collaborative partnerships in the community, and challenge structural and systemic issues that form barriers to housing stability. Several are continuing as Fellows this year, while some have transitioned to other public interest positions, where they continue to develop the skills and sensibilities to become career advocates for tenants.

With the expansion of experiential education opportunities and the establishment of the Corps:

- Since the inception of the Project, the law schools and host organizations have provided legal assistance in more than 1,200 individual cases for tenants facing housing instability issues. More than 70% of the tenants for whom legal representation was provided met their needs for housing stability.
- Enrollment in housing justice clinics, where advanced law students represent clients in tenancy cases under close faculty supervision, has more than doubled.
- In the last academic year, 84 students participated in the law schools' housing justice clinics. Seventeen of those students were able to return for a second semester as advanced students. The clinic students provided more than 25,000 hours of clinic service.
- More than 75 additional students have worked with individuals and community organizations as interns and volunteers.
- Over 30 separate community education events have reached more than 800 people in our community, and students have distributed informational and educational materials and social media posts on issues affecting tenants.

Our community of advocates is deeply involved in efforts across the state to assist in the realization of the goals of legislative and judicial reforms in the landlord-tenant process. We are working with tenants in East Orange, Newark, Jersey City and other

communities to seek repairs to the deplorable conditions in their homes. We issued a [report](#) last year on the implementation of judicial reforms and are currently working on projects to continue improvement in court procedures to make the process transparent and accessible. We are working too on “legal design” projects to shift power to communities and capitalize on technology that can help lay people gather and share information and better understand legal processes even if they are forced to represent themselves in court.

Speaker Coughlin himself said, “As we navigate through our economic recovery from the pandemic with eviction moratoriums lifted, empowering renters with free legal support and resources is a proven means of boosting positive housing outcomes. The partnerships created under these programs serve as a critical means of support for New Jerseyans and are well-deserving of the national attention they are receiving.”

The state’s investment in the New Jersey Housing Justice Project is an effective use of resources. Housing instability tears communities apart, and lawyers make a difference. In accord with research from all over the country, a [recent Philadelphia study](#) established that every \$1 investment in legal services for tenants saves \$12.74 in social, educational, health, carceral and other costs. New Jersey is taking steps to save taxpayer dollars while supporting individuals who need help.

The Legislature and the Governor got it very right. We applaud their investment – including the most recent expansion of funding for fiscal 2024 – and encourage them to continue this extraordinarily effective use of taxpayer dollars for as long as the need persists.

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