



## Still a Refuge and Resource: Basement Conversion

**Testimony before the New York City Council,  
Committee on Housing and Buildings**  
Elena Conte, Director of Policy, November 13, 2018

Chair Cornegy, Council Members, thank you for the opportunity to testify. I am Elena Conte, Director of Policy at the Pratt Center for Community Development.

Pratt Center is pleased to support the proposed legislation, which would pave the way for a groundbreaking pilot program to convert existing informal units into safe, healthy, affordable housing with legal status, providing protection and support for homeowners and tenants in the neighborhood of East New York. This legislation and the pilot that it will enable are the long- and hard-fought products of steadfast organizing and advocacy of visionary community-based organizations Chhaya CDC, Coalition for Community Advancement/Progress East New York, and Cypress Hills LDC, among others.

We have been partners in their efforts for more than a decade, co-publishing [New York's Housing Underground: A Refuge and A Resource](#), which revealed that there are an estimated more than 100,000 tenants citywide that are living in informal units in basements and cellars across the city, especially concentrated in the immigrant and communities of color in the eastern reaches of Brooklyn, Queens, and the Bronx. Since then we have looked closely at New York's housing stock, drawn on the experience of other jurisdictions nationally, and those of other experts in the field, to develop and call for solutions that would stabilize these communities. These community efforts, joined by partners in the City Council, resulted in the 2016 commitment from Mayor de Blasio to advance a pilot.

After participating in more than two years of inter-agency and community collaboration with Council Member Espinal and the Administration, we can affirm firsthand that developing a pilot is detailed, painstaking work that has required

deep conversation, collaboration, and compromise. This effort is still very much in process.

**We are glad to note that the proposed legislation allows for several very important changes:**

- Elimination of unnecessary code restrictions that prohibit the conversion of units, including unnecessary restrictions for units based on grade instead of safety features such as light and air
- The provision of financing and other administrative assistance to facilitate the participation of lower income homeowners who would otherwise not be able to take advantage of code changes
- Recognition and the resourcing of existing community-based organizations with deep roots in the community to perform outreach, education, and counseling for the pilot

**At the same time, there are several features that are very important to the success of the pilot in East New York and an eventual citywide program that are outside the scope of legislation. These include:**

- Homeowner incentives and protections
  - Additional measures to increase the ease of participation
  - Policies that guard against the destabilizing threat of predatory speculators
- Protections and rent regulation for tenants
  - For many inhabitants, their informal unit is the only thing standing between them and homelessness; ensuring their ability to remain in their housing is essential to preventing displacement and tackling the housing crisis

- Easier and streamlined processes for converting the most common and most commonly inhabited housing stock
  - Pathways for converting 2 family homes into 3 family homes, and 3 family homes into 4 family homes are essential for meeting community need
  
- Additional code changes, as enabled by City and State rules and laws, that increase feasibility and reduce conversion costs
  - Allowing for the international standard of 7-foot ceiling heights in all units
  - Removing unnecessary limitations imposed by the Multiple Dwelling Law

The potential for impact on the housing crisis for the city's most vulnerable New Yorkers – homeowners and tenants alike – is tremendous, and requires that we get this right. We look forward to continuing to work with the City Council, the Administration and its agencies, and of course our community-based partners to create a meaningful program in East New York, and to take advantage of the opportunity to derive lessons that will inform a more comprehensive program locally and citywide.

For more information, please contact:

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NOTE: This testimony was prepared by the Pratt Center for Community Development.  
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