

Saving One's Home: Collateral Consequences for Innocent Family Members

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Mrs. Smith, a resident of public housing for 30 years, had eviction proceedings brought against her after her 16 year-old son was found in possession of cocaine several blocks from her apartment. Unable to afford or retain an attorney, Mrs. Smith appeared at her administrative hearing without counsel. Unaware of the law and administrative procedures, Mrs. Smith refused to sign a stipulation agreeing to probation and permanent exclusion of her son from her apartment. During the hearing, Mrs. Smith did not submit proof of the mitigating circumstances that would have established her eligibility to remain in her apartment. The Hearing Officer rendered a determination terminating Mrs. Smith's tenancy. Not knowing what to do, Mrs. Smith prepared to move herself, her children and three grandchildren out of the apartment with nowhere to go.

This scenario highlights one of the severest collateral consequences of criminal activity – eviction of innocent family members from their federally-assisted housing. Routinely, eviction proceedings² are commenced against a tenant of record based upon the criminal (usually drug) activity of another household member or guest. The tenant of record often is a parent or grandparent who lacks knowledge of or the ability to control the criminal activity. Yet, despite their innocence, statutory provisions may subject the entire household to eviction proceedings and potential homelessness.

The harshness of these consequences is compounded by the fact that there is no right to counsel in housing matters in New York. These family members generally must

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² These include both administrative and court proceedings.

attempt to defend the right to their homes without the benefit of counsel.³ Given the scope and complexity of the applicable federal, state and local laws, these tenants are placed in an untenable situation as they must fend for themselves in forums that have been designed by and for attorneys, in which the culture and language are alien to them, and where they face experienced counsel who represent the public housing authority or other landlords. Without the assistance of counsel, these tenants are unable to fully access the courts⁴ and thus ensure their right to equal justice.

This paper will examine the federal law that is the basis for eviction of family members for drug activity of a household member, the various procedures that tenants must pursue to defend their right to remain in their home, and why an attorney is necessary at each step of the process to address this vital unmet legal need.

Eviction as a Collateral Consequence

In an effort to eradicate drugs from our society, the national public policy has been to wage a “war on drugs” through the enactment and enforcement of strict drug laws and policies. In the area of federally-subsidized housing, these laws seek to exclude or evict those involved in drug activity.⁵ Beyond that, they also seek to evict

³ Publicly-funded legal services programs exist throughout the State to provide legal representation to those financially eligible. However, due to limited resources, these programs are unable to serve the vast majority of individuals seeking assistance. *See e.g.* Legal Services Project, *Funding Civil Legal Services for the Poor: Report to the Chief Judge*, at 5-7 (May 1998); New York State Bar Association, *The New York Legal Needs Study*, at 162-163 (revised 1993).

⁴ “Courts” refers to both administrative and judicial tribunals.

⁵ *See e.g.* 42 USC § 13661 (ineligibility for federally-subsidized housing if person engaging in illegal use of a drug or had engaged in past criminal drug-related activity); 42 UCS

innocent family members who lack fault or knowledge of the drug activity or the ability to control it.⁶ While purporting to serve an important government objective – to ensure a safe, peaceful environment for residents of federally-subsidized housing – these policies victimize the innocent tenants by imposing collateral consequences upon them, possibly even more severe than the criminal sentence that may have been imposed on the offending household member. Moreover, these consequences undermine the goals of public housing by having a devastating impact on poor communities who lack the resources to defend against such evictions and are unlikely to find alternative housing if evicted.

Under federal housing law, criminal or drug-related activity⁷ engaged in by a federally-subsidized housing tenant, a member of the tenant’s household, a guest or any other person under the tenant’s control is grounds for eviction from federally-assisted

§ 1437d(l)(termination of tenancy of person engaging in illegal drug use).

⁶ See e.g. 42 USC § 1437d(l)(6), *infra* note 8. According to the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD), the rationale behind these policies is that the tenant of record should be able to control the drug and other criminal activities of household members. If the tenant is unable to do so, the tenant is deemed a threat to other residents. 56 Fed. Reg. 51567 (Oct. 11, 1991), *cited in Rucker v HUD*, 535 U.S. 125, 134 (2002).

⁷ “Drug-related criminal activity” is defined as “the illegal manufacture, sale, distribution, use or possession with intent to manufacture, sell, distribute, or use, of a controlled substance (as such term is defined in Section 802 of Title 21). 42 USC § 1437a(b)(9). Neither an arrest nor conviction is necessary to terminate the tenancy; moreover, the standard of proof used for criminal convictions does not need to be satisfied. 24 CFR 966.4(l)(5)(iii)(A)(public housing); 24 CFR 982.553(c)(Section 8 housing).

housing. Known as the “One Strike and You’re Out” policy,⁸ the statutes⁹ and implementing regulations¹⁰ require that all federally-assisted housing leases contain a

⁸ This policy was so-named by President Clinton in his 1996 State of the Union Address. Although introduced as “new”, the legislation was first enacted in 1988 as part of the Anti-Drug Abuse Act and required public housing authorities to use lease provisions that allowed evictions based upon a tenant’s criminal or drug-related activity. The statute was amended in 1990 (by the Cranston-Gonzalez National Affordable Housing Act) to expand the bases for eviction. In 1996, the statute was amended again (as part of the Housing Opportunity Extension Act) to further expand the scope of the criminal activity lease provisions to “on or off the premises.” See generally Barclay Thomas Johnson, *The Severest Justice is Not the Best Policy: The One-Strike Policy in Public Housing*, 10 J Affordable Housing & Community Dev L 234, 235-236 (2001).

⁹ For public housing, the applicable statute is 42 USC § 1437d(l)(6) which provides:

Each public housing authority shall utilize leases which . . . provide that any criminal activity that threatens the health, safety, or right to peaceful enjoyment of the premises by other tenants or any drug-related criminal activity on or off such premises, engaged in by a public housing tenant, any member of the tenant’s household, or any guest or other person under the tenant’s control, shall be cause for termination of tenancy.

For Section 8 federally-subsidized housing, the applicable statutes are 42 USC § 1437f(d)(1)(B)(iii) (Certificates) and 42 USC § 1437f(o)(7)(D)(Vouchers) which provide:

during the term of the lease, any criminal activity that threatens the health, safety, or right to peaceful enjoyment of the premises by other tenants, any criminal activity that threatens the health, safety or right to peaceful enjoyment of their residences by persons residing in the immediate vicinity of the premises [or any violent] or any drug-related criminal activity on or near such premises, engaged in by a tenant of any unit, any member of the tenant’s household, or any guest or other person under the tenant’s control, shall be cause for termination of tenancy.

Bracketed language only found in 42 USC § 1437f(o)(7)(D)(Vouchers).

¹⁰ For public housing, see 24 CFR § 966.4(l)(5)(i)(B)(2004)(“The lease must provide that drug-related criminal activity engaged in on or off the premises by any tenant, member of the tenant’s household or guest, and any such activity engaged in on the premises by any other person under the tenant’s control, is grounds for the [public housing authority] to terminate the tenancy”). For Section 8 housing, see 24 CFR § 982.310(c)(Vouchers) and 24 CFR § 880.607(b)(iii)

provision stating that any drug-related criminal activity is a cause for termination of a tenancy. Tenants who knowingly or unknowingly violate these provisions are subject to immediate lease cancellation and eviction from their homes. The implementing regulations, however, also emphasize the public housing authority's discretion to look to the circumstances surrounding each case and decide whether eviction of innocent tenants is appropriate.¹¹

After the implementation of the "One-Strike" policy, courts were divided on whether the statutory provision for public housing imposed a standard of strict liability or permitted an innocent tenant exception for those tenants who either were not at fault or had no knowledge of the drug activity.¹² A number of courts reasoned that due process only permitted one-strike evictions when a tenant knew of the drug-related activity.¹³ In 2002, the United States Supreme Court resolved this conflict with its

and 247.3(a)(3)(Certificates).

¹¹ 24 CFR § 966.4(l)(5)(vii)(B). The "One-Strike" policy created a tension with the public housing authority's discretion because the former provides incentives for public housing authorities to evict tenants without regard to case-specific circumstances by tying the project's rating (and thus its level of federal funding) to the number of drug activity evictions. *See e.g.* E.J. Hurst II, *Rules, Regs and Removal: State Law, Foreseeability, and Fair Play in One Strike Terminations from Federally-Subsidized Public Housing*, 38 Brandeis LJ 733, 741-742 (2000).

¹² *See generally* Johnson, *supra* note 8, at note 62 (analyzing the courts' debate over the one-strike policy). One New York case squarely illustrates the divide – *Syracuse Hous. Auth. v Boule*, 172 Misc 2d 254 (Syracuse City Ct 1996)(no good cause for termination of tenancy where tenant had no knowledge of, did not consent to, and could not foresee the drug activity by her babysitter), *aff'd* 177 Misc 2d 400 (Onondaga County Ct 1998), *rev'd* 265 AD2d 832 (4th Dept 1999)(applying strict liability standard).

¹³ *Id.*

decision in Rucker v HUD.¹⁴ In that case, the Supreme Court unanimously held that the plain language of the “one-strike” provision unambiguously precluded any knowledge requirement and thus allows public housing authorities to evict tenants “whether or not the tenant knew, or should have known” about the drug-related activity of a household member or guest.¹⁵ The court reasoned that this sort of strict liability “maximizes deterrence and eases enforcement.”¹⁶ Yet the court also emphasized that the statute does not require the eviction of tenants that violate their lease. Rather, it entrusts the decision to the “discretion” of the public housing authorities “who are in the best position” to take account of the specific factors of the situation.¹⁷

In the aftermath of Rucker, HUD reiterated its position that the public housing authorities have the authority to evict any tenant, no matter how innocent, for a violation of the lease provision. Implicitly recognizing that this position could lead to harmful consequences, HUD urged the public housing authorities to use their

¹⁴ 535 U.S. 125 (2002). In *Rucker*, the local housing authority evicted a number of innocent tenants, including two elderly tenants whose grandsons were caught in the apartment complex parking lot with marijuana; a woman whose mentally disabled daughter who resided with her was found with cocaine three blocks from the apartment; and a man whose care giver was found with cocaine in the tenant’s apartment.

¹⁵ *Id.* at 130.

¹⁶ *Id.* at 134.

¹⁷ *Id.* at 133-134. While the *Rucker* court recognized the discretion of public housing authorities to determine the appropriateness of eviction, it did not address what standards, if any, should govern the exercise of that discretion.

discretion “responsibly” when deciding to evict innocent tenants by balancing all of the competing interests before deciding to evict.¹⁸

Despite HUD’s exhortation regarding public housing authorities’ discretion, innocent tenants are still facing eviction proceedings.¹⁹ Following Rucker, the courts generally will uphold the public housing authority’s decision because the public housing authority has the discretion to consider – or not to consider – the factors that weigh against eviction of an entire household.²⁰ In light of the limited review power of

¹⁸ See Letter from Mel Martinez, Secretary of HUD, to Public Housing Directors, <www.nhlp.org/html/pubhsg/Maritznez%204-16-02%201tr.pdf> (April 16, 2002); Letter from Michael Liu, Assistant Secretary of HUD, to Public Housing Directors, <www.nhlp.org.html/pubhsg/Lis%206-6-02&201tr.pdf> (June 6, 2002). The Assistant Secretary specifically stated that after *Rucker*, public housing authorities remained free to consider a wide range of factors – such as the seriousness of the violation, the effect that eviction of the entire household would have on the innocent family members and the willingness of the primary tenant to exclude the wrongdoing household member – in deciding whether and whom to evict as a consequence of such a lease violation. *Id.*

¹⁹ This may largely be due to HUD’s assessment criteria which undermines any references by HUD that public housing authorities balance all factors before deciding to evict. See *Hurst, supra* note 11; *Note: You Call That a Strike? A Post-Rucker Examination of Eviction from Public Housing Due to Drug-Related Criminal Activity of a Third Party*, 37 Ga. L. Rev. 1435 (Summer 2003).

²⁰ See e.g. *Hous. Auth. of the City of Pittsburg v Fields*, 572 Pa 415, 816 A2d 1099 (Pa 2003); *City Hous. Auth. of Joliet v Chapman*, 780 NE2d 1106 (Ill App Ct 2002); *Matter of Delvalle v NYCHA*, 6 Misc 3d 1010(A)(Sup Ct, NY County 2004); see also *New York City Hous. Auth. v Taylor*, 6 Misc 3d 135(A)(App Term, 2nd & 11th Jud Dists 2005); *B & L Associates v Wakefield*, 6 Misc 3d 388 (Civil Ct, Kings County 2004); but see *Oakwood Plaza Apartments v Smith*, 352 NJ Super 467; 800 A2d 265 (NJ Super Ct App Div 2002); *Hampton Houses, Inc. v Smith*, NYLJ, Mar. 13, 2003, at 23, col. 2.

It is HUD’s position that courts can no longer decide whether the eviction was reasonable or whether the PHA balanced factors when deciding to evict. See Letter from Carole W. Wilson, HUD Associate General Counsel for Litigation, to Charles J. Macellaro, P.C., <nhlp.org/hm/pubhsg/HUD%20Rucker%20Legal%20Opinion%20Yonkers%2015aug2002.pdf> (August 15, 2002); but see *Oakwood Plaza Apartments v Smith*, 352 NJ Super 467, 800

the courts, it is essential that innocent tenants faced with eviction have all resources available to them to ensure that the public housing authority use its discretionary authority and elect not to evict. To accomplish this, it is more imperative than ever to insure the availability of representation for innocent federally-subsidized housing tenants, particularly at the earliest stages of the eviction process.

Eviction Process for Federally-Subsidized Housing

Administrative Procedures for Public Housing

Local housing authorities have established administrative procedures, pursuant to either HUD guidelines and regulations, or consent decrees,²¹ that purport to provide tenants with substantive and procedural protections when faced with eviction from federally-subsidized housing. However, these protections are largely negated if the tenant is not represented by counsel.

While the administrative proceedings are more informal than judicial proceedings, they still require a familiarity with the law and trial practice. At each stage of the process, tenants must put forth evidence and advocate for their position. They are expected to submit appropriate evidence, make informed and strategic decisions, and establish weaknesses or deficiencies in the public housing authority's case through

A2d 265 (NJ Super Ct App Div 2002).

²¹ 24 CFR § 966.4(l)(4); 966.56; *Escalera v NYCHA*, 425 F2d 853 (2d Cir 1970).

objections to evidence,²² cross-examination of witnesses and introduction of evidence in rebuttal.²³ Most importantly, the housing authority is always represented by counsel with expertise in eviction proceedings. With this imbalance of knowledge and resources, the tenant is not likely to prevail at the administrative level.

The procedures employed by the New York City Housing Authority²⁴ demonstrate what a tenant must overcome at each step of the administrative process to preserve the tenancy. The termination process begins informally, with the project manager calling in the tenant when criminal drug activity has been discovered.²⁵ At this stage, the tenant is interviewed in order to ascertain the facts involved.²⁶ While it may appear innocuous to the tenant, any information provided at this stage can be used

²² It is important to note that the rules of evidence are not strictly applied in these proceedings. While this might assist the tenant in some regards, it also places the tenant at a great disadvantage as the tenant lacks the expertise to counter the public housing authority's experienced advocate and leaves the tenant without the protections of a set of rules that inherently protect both sides from potentially problematic evidence (e.g. hearsay evidence).

²³ Tenants also must consider the implications for any related criminal matter that may be pending.

²⁴ These procedures were established pursuant to a consent decree entered in *Escalera v NYCHA*, 425 F2d 853 (2d Cir 1970). Given that decree, it is likely that NYCHA's procedures provide greater rights and protections to tenants than the procedures employed by other public housing authorities in the State.

²⁵ The public housing authority receives police reports from the local precincts about crimes committed on or near its projects.

²⁶ At this stage, the project manager is assessing, pursuant to its discretionary authority, whether termination of the tenancy is the appropriate course of action. Factors taken into consideration include the extent of the impact of the activity upon the project.

against the tenant at a subsequent hearing. It also can be used in any pending criminal proceeding.

If the project manager determines that termination of tenancy is appropriate, the tenant's file is sent to the Tenancy Administrator and, if appropriate, to NYCHA's Law Department for preparation of a Notice of Charges. The Notice of Charges sets forth the charges against the tenant and the facts underlying the charges, and informs the tenant of her right to bring witnesses and to appear with counsel. A copy of NYCHA's Termination Procedures²⁷ is attached. The tenant is requested to answer the charges in writing.²⁸

On the hearing date, except for the most serious of cases, a representative of NYCHA will seek to settle the matter by stipulation. Generally, the stipulations contain provisions allowing for the continuation of the tenancy upon the imposition of certain conditions such as probation, permanent exclusion of the offending family member and right to inspect the premises. A tenant, unaware of the law and the penalties that can be imposed following a hearing, will not be able to assess if the stipulation is in her best

²⁷ The Procedures document is a five-page single spaced document that details the steps of the administrative proceeding, from the initial informal interview process through eviction. While the document contains useful information for the tenant, it is too difficult to comprehend for the average person (who reads at a sixth to eighth grade reading level).

²⁸ Prior to the hearing, the tenant or her representative is permitted to examine any materials in the tenant's folder that relate to the issues in the eviction proceeding. NYCHA is precluded from relying on any material at the hearing that was not provided to the tenant after a proper request.

interest.²⁹ She may agree to terms that place her at great risk of termination/eviction in the future.³⁰ Further, the stipulations are offered immediately prior to the hearing, depriving the tenant of the opportunity to consult with an attorney before signing.³¹

If the tenant does not agree to settle the matter, a hearing is held before an independent hearing officer. At the hearing, NYCHA is represented by an attorney. NYCHA puts forth evidence to prove the grounds for eviction, including calling witnesses such as police officers. The tenant has the right to object to evidence and cross-examine NYCHA's witnesses as well as offer a rebuttal case, including proof of mitigating circumstances. If the termination is based upon the activity of a third party, NYCHA must establish that the third party occupied the premises at the time of the offense.³² If NYCHA makes this showing, the tenant can avoid termination of her

²⁹ By signing the stipulation, the tenant avoids the risk that the tenancy will be terminated after a hearing. However, the terms of the stipulation (generally a form stipulation) may be harsher than the penalties that can be imposed by the hearing officer after a hearing. For example, if the offending household member no longer resides in the household, the only dispositions that can be imposed by the hearing officer is eligible, probation (up to 12 months with various conditions), or eligible subject to permanent exclusion. However, the NYCHA attorney may seek a settlement that includes a longer term of probation and a permanent ban on visitation to the apartment or elsewhere on the premises.

³⁰ See e.g. *Matter of Robinson v Martinez*, 308 AD2d 355 (1st Dept 2003); *Matter of Patrick v Hernandez*, 309 AD2d 566 (1st Dept 2003); *Matter of Holiday v Franco*, 268 AD2d 138 (1st Dept 2000).

³¹ According to Ricardo Morales, General Counsel of NYCHA, a majority of the administrative proceedings are settled pursuant to stipulations. The high number of settlements illustrates the need for an attorney at this stage of the administrative proceeding.

³² Termination Procedures ¶ 6(d).

tenancy if she asserts that the third party has left her apartment permanently and presents evidence to support this assertion.³³

Following the hearing, the hearing officer renders a decision which is reviewed by the NYCHA Board. Upon the Board's determination, the tenant is notified of the Board's determination.

Court Proceedings Following an Administrative Proceeding

If NYCHA's determination is unfavorable to the tenant, the tenant generally will be faced with three options: to voluntarily vacate the apartment; to challenge the determination through an Article 78 proceeding in Supreme Court; or to appear in Housing Court once served with a summary holdover proceeding.

If the tenant chooses to pursue an Article 78 proceeding, there will be numerous hurdles as Supreme Court practice and procedures are complex and generally difficult for the self-represented litigant to understand.³⁴ Initiating and pursuing such a proceeding requires knowledge of the law and civil procedure. Generally, the tenant will be required to seek poor person's relief to commence the action,³⁵ prepare the

³³ *Id.*; see *Matter of Abney v Popolizo*, 182 AD2d 815 (2d Dept 1992)(tenancy cannot be terminated under NYCHA's procedures absent substantial evidence that the third party continued to reside with the tenant at the time of the administrative hearing).

³⁴ Offices for the Self-Represented have been established in some of the Supreme Courts to assist the self-represented by providing procedural and legal information. While these offices provide a great service, they cannot assist the self-represented in drafting pleadings or give them legal advice about how best to proceed with their case.

³⁵ Pursuant to CPLR 1102(a), the court has discretionary authority to appoint counsel for an indigent litigant. However, because the statute does not allow for compensation of counsel, very few courts invoke their authority under this provision and appoint counsel.

pleadings (which might include writing a legal brief) and secure the transcript from the administrative proceeding. In certain circumstances, the Supreme Court will not have jurisdiction and the case will be transferred to the Appellate Division for resolution, adding greater requirements and burdens upon the tenant.

If the tenant chooses to appear in Housing Court, there is little that the tenant can do as the Housing Court has no authority other than to order the eviction upon a finding that the tenancy has been terminated by NYCHA; it cannot review the prior administrative proceedings. However, if the tenant has any procedural defenses, such as to service of process, these can be raised.

Initial Court Proceedings for Federally-Subsidized Housing

In certain case types, the administrative process does not need to be exhausted before proceeding into court to evict a federally-subsidized housing tenant. These cases, known as “Bawdy House” cases, generally involve a private landlord or a public housing authority seeking to evict a Section 8 or public housing tenant who has used the premises for an illegal trade or business.³⁶ Because these cases involve matters of

³⁶ These cases generally are brought pursuant to RPAPL § 711(1)(grounds where landlord tenant relationship exists); RPAPL § 711(5)(grounds and procedure where use or occupancy is illegal); and RPL § 231(1)(lease when void; liability of landlord where premises are occupied for unlawful purpose), and are brought in either the Civil Court of the City of New York (in New York City), a City Court (in the 62 cities outside New York City), a District Court (in Nassau and Suffolk Counties) or a Town and Village Court (outside New York City).

A private landlord also can bring a summary holdover proceeding against a Section 8 tenant pursuant to RPAPL § 715 for violating the lease based upon drug-related criminal activity. Following *Rucker*, it appears that courts are applying a strict liability standard in such cases. See e.g. *B & L Associates v Wakefield*, 6 Misc 3d 388 (Civ Ct, Kings County 2004); but see *Hampton Houses, Inc. v Smith*, NYLJ, Mar. 13, 2003, at 23, col. 2 (Civ Ct, NY County).

public policy for the “protection of the safety and welfare of neighboring tenants and the community,”³⁷ these matters are prosecuted fully, generally requiring a trial on the merits.³⁸ Given the complexity of the legal issues and the nuances in the law, a tenant without representation in these matters is unlikely to defeat the eviction.

In these cases, the petitioner landlord has the burden of proof, by a preponderance of evidence, to show that the leased premises were used for illegal purposes. In so doing, the landlord must show: the existence of a sufficient nexus between the alleged illegal activity and the premises in question; that the tenant’s alleged illegal use of the premises is customary and habitual; that the alleged illegal use is ongoing and not just an isolated incident; and that the tenant, if not involved in the alleged illegal activity, had knowledge of the activity and acquiesced to the commission of it.³⁹ To prove the case, the landlord generally will call police officers and other expert witnesses to testify about the drug activity which, if counsel were available, would be subject to cross-examination.

As with an administrative hearing (although with much more formality), the tenant must submit appropriate evidence, make informed and strategic decisions, and

³⁷ *Hudsonview Co. v Jenkins*, 169 Misc 2d 389, 393 (Civ Ct, NY County 1996).

³⁸ In certain circumstances, the District Attorney requires the landlord to commence the proceeding. In these cases, the District Attorney’s office remains the driving force behind the case and is involved in its prosecution.

³⁹ The holding in *Rucker* is not applicable to “Bawdy House” cases. However, at least one court has applied the strict liability standard to a “Bawdy House” case involving federally-subsidized tenants. See *New York City Hous. Auth. v Taylor*, 6 Misc 3d 135(A)(App Term, 2nd & 11th Jud Dists 2005).

establish weaknesses or deficiencies in the landlord's case in order to prevail. The tenant also may be required to participate in motion practice. As significant, the proceeding can have serious implications for any related criminal case that is pending, as the Housing Court matter will examine the underlying facts of the criminal case.

A troubling example of how the absence of representation can create a severe disadvantage is seen in two cases where the public housing authority worked in conjunction with the District Attorney's office to obtain sealed criminal records for use in the Housing Court proceeding.⁴⁰ In both cases, the sealed records had been disseminated without a court order. If not for the respondents-tenants' knowledgeable attorney, the issue of the unlawful dissemination would not have been raised or

⁴⁰ See *People v Canales*, 174 Misc 2d 387 (Sup Ct, Bronx County 1997); *In re People of the State of New York v Manauri R.*, NYLJ, Oct. 22, 2004, at 21, col. 1 (Sup Ct, Bronx County).

addressed.⁴¹ Clearly, a self-represented tenant would not be aware of the issue and even more unlikely to know how to address it.

Necessity of Attorney Representation

The above discussion of the legal and procedural requirements necessary to evict a federally-subsidized housing tenant make clear that attorney representation is essential to fully access the adjudicatory process and thus avoid eviction. At every stage of the eviction proceeding – from the initial interview by the project manager, to the settlement negotiations, to the hearing or trial – an attorney can and will make a difference.⁴²

⁴¹ There is significant anecdotal evidence that, despite the statutory sealing of certain criminal records, public housing authorities continue to obtain and use sealed records to prosecute eviction proceedings. Such actions by public housing authorities appear to contravene the legislative intent behind the sealing of criminal records. Most commonly, criminal records are sealed when a case is terminated in favor of the accused (CPL 160.50) and when a an eligible youth has a conviction replaced with a youthful offender adjudication (CPL 720.20). Under CPL 160.50, the sealing deems the arrest and prosecution a nullity, and restores the accused, in contemplation of law, to the status occupied before the arrest and prosecution. The statute specifically states that “the arrest or prosecution shall not operate as a disqualification of any person so accused to pursue or engage in any lawful activity, occupation, profession, or calling. . .” CPL 160.60. It is hard to see how the accused could be restored to the status before an arrest if he faces losing federally-subsidized housing as a result of the sealed events.

Similarly, when records are sealed due to a youthful offender adjudication, “all official records and papers, whether on file with the court, a police agency or the division of criminal justice services. . . are confidential and may not be made available to any person or public or private agency. . .” CPL 720.35(2). In addition, CPL 720.35(1) states that “[a] youthful offender adjudication is not a judgment of conviction for a crime or any other offense, and does not operate as a disqualification of any person so adjudged to hold public office or public employment or to receive any license granted by public authority. . .” This again evinces the legislative intent that such records not be used to prosecute eviction proceedings.

⁴² Research confirms that the availability of attorney representation significantly impacts the outcomes of judicial proceedings. See e.g. Carol Seron, et al., *The Impact of Legal Counsel on Outcomes for Poor Tenants in New York City Housing Court*, 35 L. & Socy 419 (2001)(represented

Yet under our civil justice system, most tenants cannot access the services of an attorney.⁴³ For low-income tenants who cannot afford to pay for an attorney, generally their only chance for representation is through a legal services program or a pro bono attorney.⁴⁴ At best, these resources leave a very large number of low-income New Yorkers without representation.⁴⁵ In light of the stakes involved for innocent tenants, steps should be taken to ensure the availability of legal representation from the earliest

tenants were significantly more likely to achieve a successful outcome); Steven Gunn, Note, *Eviction Defense for Poor Tenants: Costly Compassion or Justice Served?*, 13 Yale L. & Pol’y Rev. 385, 413 (1995)(noting that tenants represented by legal services programs are more than three times as likely to avoid eviction as were unrepresented tenants in New Haven eviction actions); *The New York Legal Needs Study*, supra note 3, at 31 (noting the results of a pilot housing program funded by the New York City Human Resources Administration in which represented tenants avoided eviction in over 90% of the cases and retained their original apartments over 75% of the time; if not represented, tenants would have been evicted in 85% of those cases); see also Karl Monsma & Richard Lempert, *The Value of Counsel: 20 Years of Representation Before a Public Housing Eviction Board*, 26 Law & Soc’y Rev. 627, 645-53 (1992)(reporting that in a study of Hawaiian public housing eviction proceedings, represented tenants had a 1% probability of eviction for financial nonperformance and a 29% probability of eviction for behavioral violations, while unrepresented tenants had a 51% and 29% probability of eviction for the same respective violations, during one out of six time periods studied).

⁴³ Approximately 10% of tenants are represented in judicial eviction proceedings statewide. See *The New York Legal Needs Study*, supra note 3, at 39, 40-41. The same statistic applies to tenants appearing at administrative hearings at the New York City Housing Authority. Interview with Ricardo Morales, General Counsel, New York City Housing Authority (Mar. 17, 2005).

⁴⁴ While there are at least six law school clinics statewide that handle housing matters, these programs can only assist a small number of tenants due to their pedagogical focus.

⁴⁵ See e.g. supra note 3. *The New York Legal Needs Study* found that only 14% of the civil legal needs of New York’s poor were being met and that funding for legal services programs in New York was inadequate to serve no more than 4% of those needs. *Id.* at 159-160, 162-163. See also New York State Unified Court System, *Report on the 2002 Pro Bono Activities of the New York State Bar*, at 7-9 (January 2004)(finding that pro bono services to poor persons has remained fairly static; however the provision of direct pro bono services to poor persons in civil matters [such as housing representation] has showed a substantial decline).

stages of federally-subsidized housing eviction proceedings.⁴⁶

⁴⁶ Such representation will not only benefit innocent tenants but larger society as well. Studies have determined that the provision of civil legal services is highly cost-effective and results in the significant savings to the State. *See e.g. Legal Services Project, supra* note 2, at 7-9 (outlining three lawyer representation projects which have resulted in savings for the State. One of the projects, the Homelessness Prevention Program, was found to result in savings of approximately \$4 for every dollar of cost).