



**Testimony of Habitat for Humanity – New York City  
To the New York State Assembly Standing Committee on Housing**

**Public Hearing on Rent Regulated Housing**

**January 20, 2011**

**Testimony respectfully submitted by:**  
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Board Chair, Habitat for Humanity – New York City

Good afternoon, I am Rev. Mark Hallinan and I serve as Chair of the Board of Habitat for Humanity - New York City. I want to thank Assembly Housing Chair Vito Lopez for his strong effort to make sure that the rent laws are renewed and strengthened, as well as Speaker Sheldon Silver for his support of stronger rent law.

Habitat-NYC is not simply concerned with providing home ownership opportunities for low-income New Yorkers, we are also committed to improving the communities in which we build and in advocating for policies that will preserve and expand the supply of affordable housing.

It is not my desire today to build a policy-rich argument in support of strengthening and renewing the rent regulations and repealing vacancy decontrol issues that are increasingly vital for so many low-income New Yorkers whose wages have stagnated as their costs have escalated. We all know the raw facts that underscore the crisis in affordability – the loss of 300,000 affordable units since the early '90s, the threat posed by overleveraged buildings (many of which are now sinking into disrepair and neglect) and the more than 8,000 families who are forced to navigate the city's shelter system every night. I will leave it to the policy experts to build the factual case for why we need to strengthen and renew our rent regulations and repeal vacancy decontrol.

What compels my testimony today is the moral issue at stake here. Housing is a fundamental human right. Safe, habitable, affordable housing is a fundamental human right because such housing is integral to the preservation of human dignity and essential to the enjoyment of other rights. Without safe, habitable, affordable housing, individuals will find it difficult to obtain and sustain employment. Housing that is in good condition is essential to the good health of its occupants. Housing that is safe and in good condition enables young people to stay healthy and to do better in school. When housing is not affordable, that is, when it consumes more than 30% of an individual's or a family's income, then the individual or family cannot afford other essentials (such as food, clothing, and medicine). Safe, habitable, affordable housing is a fundamental human right as it is essential to human dignity and essential to the access of other fundamental rights – employment, health, education, food security.

We hear a great deal of talk today about the need to make government more efficient, more transparent and more accountable. These are all laudable goals, but we need to ask ourselves as a people whether there continues to be a role for government to play in ensuring the citizens of our country, our state and our city have access to the most basic of human needs. We need to ask ourselves whether our government has a role to play in making sure that the market is not simply free, but fair. I am here today to testify to my belief that government support for the preservation and creation of more affordable

housing is not simply a legitimate role of government, but an essential role of government. The fact is that an unfettered market will not provide the housing that is necessary for all New Yorkers to know their fundamental right to safe, habitable affordable housing. It is necessary, therefore, for our government, city and state to take those measures required to preserve and create more affordable housing.

I think many of you are familiar with the story in the Christian scriptures of the rich man and Lazarus. The rich man lived sumptuously in a home protected by a fence or wall – a fact we know because at the gate to this man’s house lay a poor man named Lazarus. While the rich man had his every need and desire well-satisfied, Lazarus languished in abject poverty, longing to eat but the scraps that fell from the rich man’s table. When each had died, the rich man found himself in the torments of hell while Lazarus found himself in the presence of God, resting in the bosom of Abraham. The rich man was not condemned because he was rich, but because he had fenced himself off, literally and figuratively, such that the poor man was invisible to him.

Today, too many persons want to fence themselves in, to protect what is theirs and to shield themselves from the reality of their fellow citizens, who lack what is essential to their dignity. As legislators, you need to recover your moral voice and make it clear that our society can no longer shield itself from the reality of the tens of thousands of New Yorkers who yearn for no more than safe, habitable, affordable housing. All they want from our society is what is essential to their dignity – a safe, habitable, affordable place to live. Are we, as a people, going to continue to shield ourselves from those who are in need of such housing, or are we going to open our eyes to this shameful reality and take the requisite action to secure for all New Yorkers their fundamental right to housing?

In strengthening and renewing our rent laws and repealing vacancy decontrol, our government will be acting to secure for its citizens one of their most fundamental rights – a right essential to the accessibility of other rights and a right essential to the preservation of our common human dignity. Let us recover our moral voice as we speak out on behalf of the tens of thousands of low-income New Yorkers who struggle daily to find and maintain safe, habitable, affordable housing. It should be a moral imperative for all of us to help them win that struggle – and one way we can do so is to preserve and strengthen our rent laws and to repeal vacancy decontrol.