



**TESTIMONY OF BARIKA WILLIAMS
BEFORE THE NEW YORK CITY COUNCIL COMMITTEE ON OVERSIGHT AND INVESTIGATIONS
REGARDING DISPARATE IMPACTS OF COVID-19 ON COMMUNITIES OF COLOR.**

April 28, 2020

Good afternoon, and thank you Speaker Johnson, Chairman Torres, members of the Black, Latino/a, and Asian Caucus, and members of the Committee on Oversight and Investigations for the opportunity to testify today.

My name is Barika Williams and I am the Executive Director of the Association for Neighborhood and Housing Development (ANHD). ANHD is a nonprofit organization whose mission is to build community power to win affordable housing and thriving, equitable neighborhoods for all New Yorkers. Our members include more than 80 neighborhood-based affordable housing and equitable economic development organizations across New York City the work in and serve NYC's communities of color, immigrant communities and low-income communities.

The global health and economic crisis due to the COVID-19 pandemic will reverberate across the City, at the local level, and from block to block. ANHD quickly transitioned our work to focus on a strategic and rapid response to the crisis unfolding before us in support of our members and the communities they serve.

We are actively listening to our 80+ nonprofit housing and economic justice member groups and other community-based organizations providing direct support in low income communities, and communities of color throughout New York City to gather real-time on-the ground needs.

One of the most significant and impactful pieces of our COVID-19 response has been ANHD's work visualizing the racial disparity and local neighborhood trends. **ANHD was one of the first NYC organizations to provide data that clearly showed the intersections of COVID-19 impacts and long-standing racial and neighborhood inequities.** ANHD has released a series of maps and analysis to that have been widely shared and used as a lens through which to understand this crisis.

Neighborhoods with the highest range of positive COVID-19 cases in the city are home to communities of color whose residents are disproportionately employed in frontline service occupations and face among the highest rates of rent burden and overcrowding. The two COVID-19 hardest hit zip codes in the City - 11368 and 11373 - are located in Western Queens, with 62% and 79% nonwhite populations, respectively. East New York, Brooklyn, has one of the highest rates of COVID-19 cases, also ranks in the top ten neighborhoods citywide for density of service workers, rent burden, and people of color. **ANHD's analysis clearly shows that communities of color are the epicenters of the epicenter, and are home to the largely invisible workforce that is keeping New York City running in this moment of crisis, and they are the ones who are bearing the brunt of its impacts.**

This pandemic is not only a public health crisis, but a crisis of racial and economic justice as well. **The disparate impact of Covid-19 on communities of color is not unexpected; it is rooted New York City's legacies of slavery, oppression and settler colonialism that shaped a host of policies that restricted resources into these neighborhoods.**

At least 18 hospitals have closed all of their inpatient services in New York City since 1998 - leading to the loss of thousands of hospital beds - with two-thirds of those closures occurring in the outer boroughs. A look at the data shows that the majority of these outer borough hospital closures fell in lower-income communities of color that bear the brunt of the coronavirus crisis today. Of the 18 hospitals that closed in the last two decades, over 40% have been replaced by residential developments, most of them with rents or sales prices that are astronomically out of reach for the average New Yorker. Each of the neighborhoods where these hospitals were once located in have some of the highest rates of COVID cases in the city.

That existing affordability crisis now combined with the COVID-19 crisis and its economic fallout is driving New Yorkers towards a financial cliff that compounds banking and financial inequities. For many New Yorkers this sudden loss of income due to the pandemic comes on top of pre-existing financial precarity and reinforces existing disparities in housing and financial security for Black and Latinx households. Nationally, the median savings account balance for Black and Latinx households is \$1,500 - not enough to pay more than one month's rent for the vast majority of New Yorkers. White households have a median of \$9,700 in savings accounts while Asian and Other households have a median \$12,800 in their accounts. While national data on savings for Asian households is limited - with Asian Americans aggregated into an "Other" category - New York's Asian American population is also likely to be adversely impacted - 23.8% of Asian New Yorkers live in poverty, the highest rate of any racial group in the city.

ANHD's analysis highlights that what we are seeing now during this COVID-19 crisis is the intersection of long-standing disparities in housing conditions, rent burdening, economic stability, land use actions, public health access, and quality job.

We are deeply concerned that the Mayor's cuts to discretionary funding are clearly an equity issue and will have a damaging impact on communities of color. Grassroots organizations, including ANHD's members, are working daily to serve this City's communities of color and often have been shutout or do not have the organizational capacity to engage in the onerous City agency RFP process. We know and appreciate the city is in a challenging financial position, but this approach shows a concerning lack of understanding of how government connects with and serves communities of color. Discretionary funding is how our members are able to get public funding, services and supports to communities of color. Cutting this funds will impede our groups ability to:

- Advise tenants who are struggling to pay rent and could face eviction later in this crisis.
- Support homeowners who are now struggling to pay their mortgages and could face foreclosure.
- Protect tenants who are facing harassment and threats from their landlords during COVID-19.
- Advising NYCHA tenants of their rights and required NYCHA development safety protocols.
- Working with tenants and homeowners who face housing insecurity due to the loss of a household member.
- Supporting small businesses to access government aide and support their workers.
- Working to ensure all frontline and essential workers have PPEs.

· Ensure banks are serving truly small businesses, non-profits, and under-banked populations.

If we begin from the understanding and knowledge that our current systems are built on inequities and injustices, then the response, actions, recommendations for COVID-19 recovery should and must look vastly different from the previously “normal” status quo. We as a city are now forced to reckon with the consequences of prior decisions that have left our communities of color behind. I cannot stress enough, the urgency and severity of this crisis and the required recovery, demands NYC does more.

Thank you again for the opportunity to testify, and for your work on this important legislation.