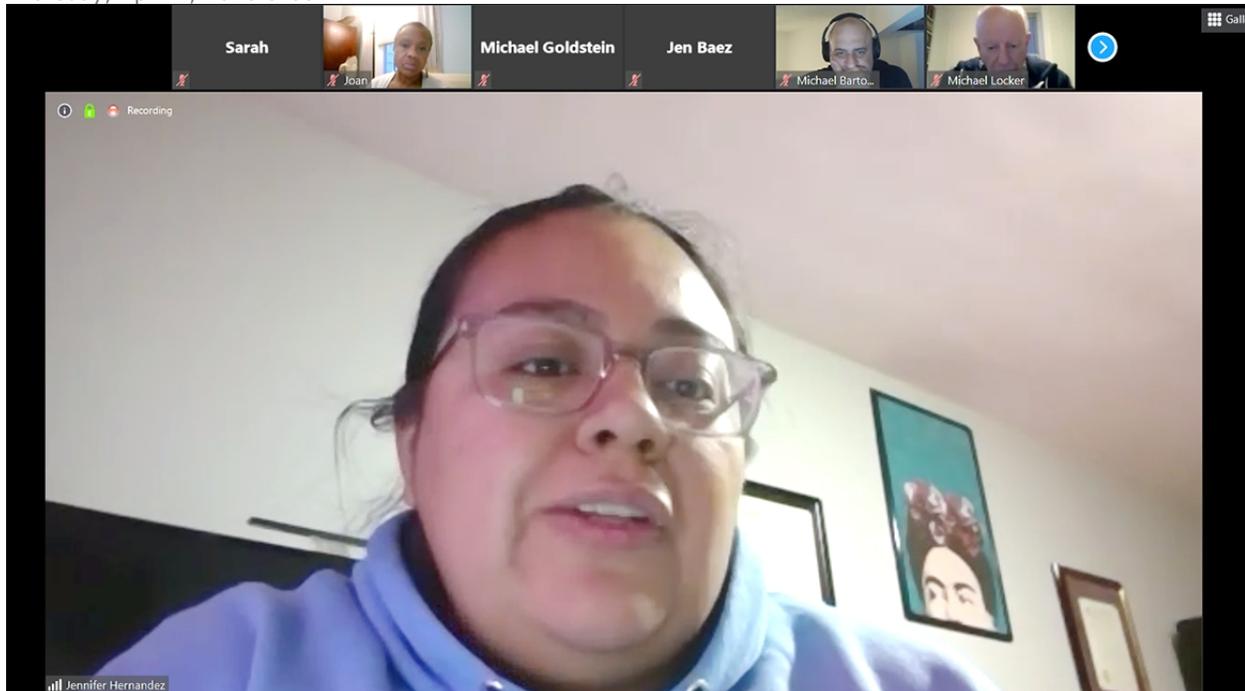


## It's illegal to evict renters: Is it enough protection?

*Petition circulates calling on governor, legislators to cancel rent during COVID-19 pandemic*

By Sarah Wolpoff

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Make the Road New York organizer Jennifer Hernandez speaks to around two dozen Port Chester residents about Governor Andrew Cuomo's eviction moratorium during an online Sustainable Port Chester Alliance Town Hall meeting on Tuesday, Mar. 31. Sarah Wolpoff|Westmore News

Anticipating Apr. 1 has been a point of anxiety for millions across the U.S. And not because of the acclaimed April Fool's Day—a traditional time for pranks that seems particularly trivial this year.

It's because unemployment is skyrocketing—a direct result of the COVID-19 outbreak, as businesses across the country and New York State have been mandated to operate under extreme limitations or shut their doors.

As renters typically pay their monthly housing fee on the first of every month, Wednesday marked the first due date since the pandemic became a harsh reality in the state. And many residents who have lost their income—whether it be hourly workers in retail, commission-

based salon employees or restaurant servers relying on tips—are also the most likely to be living paycheck to paycheck and don't have the savings to cover living expenses.

Predicting the economic hardship for millions, Governor Andrew Cuomo called for a 90-day moratorium on evictions on Mar. 20. Under these measures, tenants are still fully responsible for paying rent. However, if they can't do it, they cannot be kicked out of their homes.

While recognizing the moratorium will save millions of people short-term, housing advocates think more action is needed to protect those vulnerable populations in the future.

Dozens of people virtually tuned into Zoom on Tuesday, Mar. 31, for a Sustainable Port Chester Alliance-hosted Tele-Town Hall to propagate tenants' rights during these times. Guest speaker Jennifer Hernandez with Make the Road New York, an advocacy organization that fights for working class and immigrant populations, went over what the memorandum means, how renters should be defending themselves and current initiatives to expand housing protection.

"It's important that we talk about this," said Port Chester Trustee and Alliance Director Joan Grangenois-Thomas. "The Sustainable Alliance really formed because there was a vacuum of information here. The Alliance formed to give voice and bring power to the people of Port Chester."

While there are unemployment benefits New Yorkers can tap into, Hernandez said it's important for the Port Chester community to understand their rights. Undocumented immigrants, who make up a large population in the Village, are not eligible for such state and federal aid. Therefore, they won't be able to receive the same help in paying their bills.

The eviction moratorium applies to all residential and commercial properties, Hernandez explained. Tenants can't be evicted for 90 days, even if a final notice had already been served before the order went into effect.

"It's a huge win, of course, because a growing homeless population would only make the pandemic worse right now," she said, and later continued: "We know that over 60 percent of folks are renters, in New York City and across the state, and they'll be the most affected by all of this."

Luis Yumbla, a Port Chester advocate for the local immigrant community, said residents are worried. On their behalf, he questioned what actions they should take if landlords ignore the order and lock the doors, shut off utilities and proceed with eviction anyway.

Hernandez stressed that anyone in that circumstance should call the police—her organization has been contacting sheriffs' offices across the state to make sure they also understand the moratorium. Depending on the circumstance, the landlord could be arrested for taking forceful actions.

"If someone is pushed out at this moment, it's an illegal eviction," she said. "Any lockout or eviction is illegal. So, if the police are called, they can stop it."

Renters also maintain the right to live in safe dwellings. There are designated courts available to anyone struggling to get emergency repairs or serious code violations addressed. To find the appropriate court, call 833-503-0447.

Moving forward, housing advocates are reining their focus in on protecting renters after the 90-day eviction memorandum is lifted. It's unlikely that residents without an income will be able to pay three months' rent when the COVID-19 outbreak dies down, which could spark its own housing crisis then.

"The next step is to push for rent cancelation, meaning you will not owe this money long-term," Hernandez said. "The moratorium doesn't mean people aren't responsible for rent. But what will happen is, people won't be able to pay and then at the end of those 90 days there will be a mass wave of eviction. We also don't know what the economy will look like then and if they can even get their jobs back."

The Upstate/Downstate Housing Alliance launched a petition to address just that. With 83,500 signatures as of Wednesday, Apr. 1, it calls on Cuomo and state legislators to immediately negate housing payments—forgiving all rent and mortgage debt accumulated during the COVID-19 crisis.

"An eviction moratorium is the first step, but right now it's critical that every New Yorker is safely housed, especially those who are currently without homes or most in danger of losing their homes due to loss of income," the petition states. "We are calling on (legislative leaders) to implement an immediate suspension of rent, mortgage, and utility payments, a full moratorium on evictions/foreclosures—for renters and homeowners, and investment in safe, affordable housing for every New Yorker."

Because instability will not be over once the coronavirus crisis ends and the eviction moratorium is removed, advocates argue that forgiving housing debt during these months will not only keep people in homes but stabilize the economy.

"People are not going to be able to pay that rent they haven't paid in three months," Hernandez emphasized. "We can't expect them to catch up. A lot of folks live paycheck to paycheck in a system that for a lot means you don't have savings because it's expensive to live here."

The online petition, which can be found at [bit.ly/SuspendRent](https://bit.ly/SuspendRent), continues to call on the state to establish permanent housing for homeless residents. Urging an order to move all homeless New Yorkers to safe homes as quickly as possible, it states: "It's immoral and wrong for the state to keep any homeless New Yorker in tightly-packed shelters where coronavirus can spread rapidly."

Along with the eviction moratorium, Cuomo issued a 90-day mortgage and foreclosure suspension. If homeowners facing financial hardship can receive help without repercussions, Hernandez said it's only fair that renters have the same advantage.

Canceling rent would economically harm landlords, particularly small-scale owners who rely on those payments for income. At the virtual Town Hall, residents raised those concerns, which the speaker legitimized.

Hernandez emphasized that activists pushing the state on rent suspension action are also advocating for financial support for landlords. No one deserves to fall behind due to this crisis, she said.

"They need protection as much as the tenants in their homes do," Grangeniois-Thomas added.

Recognizing the housing business should be supported during these difficult times, Hernandez concluded that right now their focus must be on the renters—they're the ones in the most vulnerable position and are subjected to the most harm.

"My understanding is this is all more to help the renters. For the people who will be facing difficult times," Yumbla agreed. "I understand the homeowners, but they have a house. We have to understand who will suffer the most. The people who can't pay rent."