

# Tenant activists hit 22 cities with protests against devastating housing cuts

*Trump's housing budget is a recipe for needless evictions and homelessness.*

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Judy Montanez has lived in the rent-subsidized units of Staten Island's Castleton Park development since they opened in the mid-1970s. She's been fighting to keep the apartments there affordable almost that whole time.

Throughout her first decade in Castleton Park, Montanez could afford to pay fair-market rent for a three-bedroom unit. When she divorced and lost her job in the 1980s, she was able to downsize and keep her kids in the building thanks to federal renter support programs. She got back to work, helping with New York City's youth services programs until an accident in 1995 left her permanently disabled and eligible once again for rent subsidies.

"I was always involved in the community, always giving back," Montanez said. Since her injuries ended her working career, giving back has meant fighting to protect Castleton Park tenants from private developers eager to convert the lot into full market-rate housing.

"Since 2009, predatory developers have been trying to buy the building," she said. When one finally succeeded in 2015, the resulting rent hikes—units have more than doubled in price, even after tenant activists convinced the new landlord to soften the blow for many of Montanez's neighbors—meant that about 100 families left the 454-unit development in the St. George area of Staten Island.

Battling with the market forces of New York real estate has been challenging enough. Now President Donald Trump has proposed multi-billion-dollar cuts to the federal rent support systems that built Castleton Park in the first place and helped keep the complex's working-class tenants in the city all these years. His budget plan for the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) would shred funding for the rent supports, affordable housing construction, and Community Development Block Grants that drive many local and state housing policy programs.

Now, Montanez and hundreds of other tenants around the country are pushing back. A broad coalition of community groups, tenants, clergy, and even some real estate developers have organized an escalating series of tenant actions to pressure lawmakers and public officials in the coming weeks. On Thursday, in more than 20 cities nationwide, activists will hold in-person meetings with lawmakers and protest at local HUD offices.

From Massachusetts to Miami, Denver to Delaware, and Spokane to Staten Island, tenant protesters will deliver a straightforward message.

"It's not just don't cut HUD, but fully fund HUD," Community Voices Heard executive director Afua Atta-Mensah said. "Don't let them use the cuts to do a shock doctrine thing where, 'Oh there's no money now, so now we need private partnerships, these hedge fund managers are going to take over where HUD left off with private capital.'"

Trump has proposed staggering cuts across the federal rental support system. His budget badly understates the scope of the cuts, depicting them as a course correction, when in fact they amount to intentionally crashing the plane. A Section 8 cut billed at \$300 million, for example,

actually amounts to a \$2 billion reduction once soaring annual rent hikes and inflation are factored in, housing experts have told ThinkProgress.

Across all the various rent support programs HUD funds, Trump's cuts would strip crucial housing vouchers away from more than a quarter-million households. But even those who don't lose their vouchers outright would face radical increases to what they are expected to pay in rent, effectively pricing them out of the system in a sneakier way than simple topline budget cuts. The HUD proposal calls for increasing tenant payments from 30 to 35 percent of household income and erasing various deductions from how subsidized tenants calculate their income. That is a recipe for a spike in homelessness; those who currently rely on these programs do not have alternatives should their housing costs suddenly jump out of reach.

Montanez predicted that her own rent would spike by \$200 a month with the formula changes Trump is proposing. Most of the people still clinging on at Castleton Park following the severe rent hikes of the past two years couldn't absorb that kind of hit.

"These are middle-class tenants trying to make a decent living, and we're all just barely making it. We're all struggling," Montanez, who said she gets by solely on her Social Security checks these days, said. "Affordable housing programs have kept me from being homeless. I would not be able to have my independence or my home without Section 8 and the medical [expenses] deduction."

"Our member-leaders are clear that this has a devastating impact on them," Atta-Mensah said. "If your housing isn't stable, everything else is gonna go awry. If you've got kids in school and you're moving in and out of shelters, they're not going to be able to focus on school. If you're looking for a job and you don't have a stable address, that's going to affect your job search."

Trump's mass-evictions budget carries a sour irony. The president's father built his business empire on federally subsidized housing developments for New York's lower-middle class. Unlike his son's luxury developments, Fred Trump's offerings were built on the idea that providing decent housing to the working poor could be profitable. The federal programs eviscerated in the budget proposal made that idea a reality.

Trump's father and his fellow developers were hardly the only businesses to benefit from the success of federal housing subsidy systems, as Montanez pointed out in an interview.

"We have 454 families. We eat in the area. We shop in the area," Montanez said. "We have helped this community survive."

Subsidizing low-income people's lives returns dividends to the rest of the surrounding community. Poorer people have more reason to spend every extra dollar in budget headroom on goods and services in their local area.

But not everyone appreciates that, in Montanez's experience.

"A lot of homeowners associations in the area don't want us in their town, because we are project-based Section 8 and society doesn't understand that that shouldn't be a stigma," she said. "I worked all my life. I paid my taxes."

*Thanks to Ned Resnikoff.*

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