

[In a housing-starved city, de Blasio looks to unlock basement potential](#)

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02/01/2018 07:54 PM EDT

In the ongoing search for new housing in a cramped city with a growing population, Mayor Bill de Blasio is looking down on New Yorkers.

The city on Thursday unveiled an experimental program to legalize basement apartments in East New York, Brooklyn, which has become the administration's go-to neighborhood for trying out new development policies.

The "basement abatement program" sets in motion a priority of many development experts who feel the city is overlooking housing potential. It will cost \$12.5 million over three years and, if successful, will be replicated throughout the city.

The mayor projected it would unlock up to 5,000 new units of housing.

"We've got to keep looking for new ways still to create and preserve affordable housing," de Blasio said during his budget address Thursday. "So one of them is beneath us, meaning it is the basement apartments. And this is a really interesting area. The basement apartments in so many parts of the city have not been legal, have not been as safe as they should be, and have not been part of our affordable housing inventory."

The program will offer city resources to property owners to resolve building and fire code obstacles so their basements could serve as legal apartments. It would also loan money to cover the cost of retrofits and tenant relocations, which is unprecedented in the country, a mayoral spokeswoman said.

"We believe, minimally, there are 5,000 apartments in this city that will qualify. Ultimately we'd love to see that number get even bigger, but we have to prove the model first and we're going to do that in East New York," de Blasio added.

In addition to providing more housing in a city with a low vacancy rate, the program would also allow homeowners to generate revenue by taking on basement tenants.

Council Member Rafael Espinal, who represents East New York, has proposed basement apartment conversions in the neighborhood since the de Blasio administration rezoned it in 2016 to allow more development.

"For too long, tenants and homeowners were being put at risk of eviction and major fines, while the city was missing out on an opportunity to maintain thousands of affordable units," Espinal said in a prepared statement.

Housing experts have also been pushing for this change citywide. A [report last year](#) from the Citizens Housing & Planning Council concluded the city has up to 38,000 potential apartments that could be made legal without any changes to the zoning resolution, through methods including basement conversions.

"The city is growing and is going to continue to grow, and you look at the homelessness numbers and you look at the overcrowding numbers and you see what the result is when you aren't adding new homes to accommodate this," Moses Gates, of the Regional Plan Association, said in an interview.

"While a pilot program in East New York is great, I think that we should be looking at — sooner rather than later — instituting this in other markets and other places throughout the city as well because this is not just an East New York thing," Gates said. "This is a Maspeth thing. This is a Douglaston thing. This is a Morris Park thing."

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