

HOUSING IS ESSENTIAL

March 2021



essential

adjective

1. **completely necessary; extremely important in a particular situation or for a particular activity.**

We applauded, shouted our thanks, and rattled pots and pans at 7pm every night. Now what? Essential workers need affordable housing.

New York City owes a debt of gratitude to its essential workers, who have battled to sustain the city in some of its darkest days. What can New York do now for our essential workers? How can we recognize the work they have done for the city and offer them quality of life, health, and financial stability in return?

We should prioritize essential workers in the allocation of affordable housing

The pandemic has starkly revealed how much New York depends on its essential workers. As lockdowns were announced and millions of New Yorkers retreated into their homes, essential workers continued to provide healthcare, food, transportation, essential infrastructure, manufacturing, and services. Any semblance of normalcy experienced by other New Yorkers was thanks to the home health aide and the mail carrier, the grocery store clerk and the food delivery worker, the firefighter and the MTA station agent.

Essential workers put themselves and their families at risk to continue to fulfill their work responsibilities. The only way we can begin to recover from the devastating crisis of the COVID-19 pandemic is if we truly recognize what this crisis has revealed, and build policies that respond.

WHY prioritize essential workers for housing?

Affordable housing is inextricably linked to positive health outcomes and to financial and geographic stability.

Priorities for a scarce city resource like affordable housing should reflect who we value in society; especially at a time when we have had a reckoning about who we have been undervaluing for too long.

Essential workers need good quality, affordable housing, without overcrowding, close to their workplaces. [A recent study by the NYC Comptroller's office](#) found that 24 percent of essential workers live in households at or below twice the poverty line (\$52,400 for a family of four).¹ Many essential worker industries do not offer health insurance and job insecurity is high; for example, 22 percent of cleaning services workers do not have health insurance.² The majority of essential workers are renters and they have long commutes. [A study by the Center for an Urban Future](#) found that healthcare workers experience some of the worst commutes in the city — the longest travel time of any workers in the private sector.³

While the pandemic has reduced the average rent in the city, the housing challenges facing essential workers have not improved. [A recent StreetEasy study](#) found that the pandemic caused rents to fall most in the city's most expensive neighborhoods, but in



neighborhoods where many residents were already rent-burdened, prices have hardly changed.⁴

As well as showing our gratitude and our values, it is in New York City's interest that these workers are protected, and able to remain in the city in healthy and stable living situations.

Prioritizing essential workers for affordable housing is also popular with the public - New York City voters agree that we owe our essential workers a debt of gratitude. Recent polling by CHPC and OnCue Analytics showed that New Yorkers overwhelmingly believe that we should prioritize policies to help essential workers afford to live in New York City. 91% of New York voters were convinced that we should prioritize helping essential workers with their housing; one of the top answers when discussing the purpose and value of affordable housing.

Because of the incredible crisis management that essential workers have performed in 2020, the City and State should explore all possible avenues to enable New York City's essential workers to access an affordable, high-quality apartment in the neighborhood of their choice.

WHO is an essential worker?

When Governor Cuomo signed the "New York State on PAUSE" executive order on March 22, 2020, it came with [clear guidance](#) for the categories of businesses or entities categorized as essential.

HAS this ever been done before?

Municipal workers are already prioritized in affordable housing allocation, a policy that could serve as the foundation for this initiative. Households that were displaced by Hurricane Sandy also received a priority for a period of time after the crisis in 2012. In other states and countries, essential workers are being granted special public benefits to show appreciation for their service. In the state of Michigan, the newly created [Futures for Frontliners](#) program offers free college tuition to essential workers. In France, frontline workers have even been granted [expedited citizenship](#).

"Health professionals, cleaning ladies, childcare workers, checkout staff: They all proved their commitment to the nation, and it is now the turn of the republic to take a step towards them."

- *The Office of Marlene Schiappa, Junior Minister for Citizenship, France.*⁵

HOW would we provide the housing?

Avenues to explore essential worker priority for affordable housing could include: pursuing funding proposals that prioritize essential workers; setting aside the city's current lottery system and opening up priority to essential workers for a set period of time; or developing a new affordable housing program specifically for essential workers.



Endnotes

- 1 Office of the NYC Comptroller. *New York City's Frontline Workers*. March 2020. https://comptroller.nyc.gov/wp-content/uploads/documents/Frontline_Workers_032020.pdf.
- 2 Ibid.
- 3 Weintraub, Arlene. *An Unhealthy Commute: The Transit Challenges Facing New York City's Healthcare Sector*. Center for an Urban Future, January 2018. <https://nycfuture.org/research/an-unhealthy-commute>.
- 4 Wu, Nancy. "The Historic Decline in Rents Hasn't Helped NYC's Essential Workers." *StreetEasy Reads*, February 17, 2021. <https://streeteasy.com/blog/essential-workers-struggle-to-find-affordable-housing/>.
- 5 "Covid: France rewards frontline immigrant workers with citizenship." *BBC News*, December 23, 2020. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-55423257>.