

## Looking for Government Help on Housing

by {ga=jlampert}

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The prospects for resolving New York City's affordable housing crisis have suddenly brightened thanks to the recent election results. Housing advocates are excited that a Democratic Congress and Senate can address a long list of problems contributing to the crisis, a list that includes the loss of federally subsidized housing in Section 8 projects and the financial difficulties faced by the New York City Housing Authority.

"The election results are absolutely thrilling for those of us working on housing issues and the tenant movement," said Patrick Coleman of Tenants and Neighbors, the statewide tenant lobby group.

Victor Bach, senior housing policy expert at Community Service Society, agreed.

"I think it's a big opportunity," Bach said. "It certainly changes what we expect in terms of housing initiatives coming from Washington."

In Washington, the Democrats can now move forward with long-stalled plans for a national low-income housing trust fund and seek to repeal laws passed in 1998 that require some residents of public housing to do community service or face eviction, Bach said.

Democrats like Representative Barney Frank of Massachusetts, who has long pushed for government intervention in housing, and New York Representative Charles Rangel will be able to use their new clout to address the financing of affordable housing and other federal housing policies. Frank is expected to become chair of the Financial Services Committee and Rangel chair of the Ways and Means Committee.

Coleman of Tenants and Neighbors recalled attending rallies where Frank's commitment to affordable housing was clear. "He has the background as a community activist and he is very knowledgeable about Section 8" and other housing issues, Coleman said.

The federal government has done very little to preserve and create affordable housing for years,

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according to advocates. They now hope that will change with the Democratic gains.

“We need allies in Congress (to work on housing issues) and now we’ve got that,” Coleman said. The federal department of Housing and Urban Development, he said, “has only listened to the Republicans for the last six years. It’s been a nightmare. Now HUD is going to have to respond to Democrats who will be in positions to oversee HUD.”

On the state level, housing advocates hope to counter 12 years of inaction on housing by outgoing Governor George Pataki. (A [report](#) from the Pratt Institute for Community Development released in June described in detail how little Pataki has done to create and preserve affordable housing, especially compared to his predecessors.)

Advocates look to Governor-elect Eliot Spitzer to reinvigorate the state’s efforts, but many are unsure what to expect. Spitzer comes from a real estate family, they note, and the real estate lobby is always powerful. Nevertheless, advocates hope Spitzer strengthens rent regulation laws and overhauls the agency charged with enforcing those laws, the [Division of Housing and Community Renewal](#)

Spitzer has already indicated he supports the use of administrative tribunals to address repair issues, one item on advocates’ [agenda](#)

, but does not support repeal of the Urstadt Law, which restricts City Council’s ability to write rent regulation laws that are stricter than state laws.

Again, advocates are looking to Spitzer to put more resources into preserving and creating affordable housing.

“Spitzer has said some good words about preservation of Mitchell-Lama and other subsidized housing,” Bach said. The governor could also “restore operating subsidies” to public housing that Pataki cut in 1998. The New York City Housing Authority has significant budget deficits and this summer announced plans to hike rents and fees for repairs to address that deficit.

Noting the new governor has also “said some good words about that,” Bach said, “We expect to hold him to his words.”

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Joe Lamport is the assistant director of the [City-Wide Task Force on Housing Court](#) , a coalition of community housing organizations. Â