



# Streets to Statehouse:

Building Grassroots Power in New York

# Letter from Maria Mottola and Jennifer Ching

The New York Foundation and North Star Fund share a deep commitment to supporting a robust ecosystem of grassroots organizing in New York. Grassroots organizing centers the voices and strategy of people who are most directly affected by whatever problem they seek to solve. For decades, our foundations have invested in organizing efforts that build the leadership of low-income communities of color in identifying and advocating for systems change.

This is an exciting time for organizing in New York. After years of deadlocked political power in Albany, voter mobilizations resulted in significant electoral transitions. 2019 saw Democratic majorities in the State Senate and Assembly for the first time in a decade. Moreover, several of the newly elected legislators came to Albany as the result of powerful, grassroots campaigns. Their victories infused energy into the political sphere and opened greater opportunities to advance campaigns by and for low-income communities of color.

This report shares the lessons learned from two 2019 statewide campaigns that were led by grassroots organizations working in coalition with broader policy and advocacy networks. **Housing Justice for All** and **Green Light NY** won significant changes for low-income renters and driver's licenses for undocumented immigrants, respectively. The campaigns challenged the model of traditional top-down advocacy by centering directly-impacted people from low-income communities of color in leadership and decision-making. Both campaigns also demonstrated that community power can be leveraged between grassroots electoral organizing and issue-based legislative campaigns. Finally, by

centering member-led organizations from rural, suburban and urban communities, the campaigns demonstrated how progressive policy changes require long-term investment in groups that build people power across regional difference through shared mass mobilization strategies.

Philanthropy has long avoided supporting work led by communities of color that challenge entrenched systems of power. Indeed, less than 3% of philanthropic funding goes towards social justice movements. This report is a call to action for donors, funding networks and philanthropic institutions. Together, we need to fund movements in order to build power. This means we must pivot as many resources as possible towards grassroots organizing or we will not only lose again in 2020, but we will lose a generation's worth of progress.

On behalf of the New York Foundation board and staff, and the North Star Fund Community Funding Committees, board and staff, we thank the 30+ organizers who took the time to share with us strategies for building a future that centers grassroots power. Our colleagues are on the frontlines defending and building a more inclusive democracy. We are grateful to share their wisdom and vision.



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# Letter from Alexa Kasdan

Public policy is more powerful and truly public, when those who have historically been excluded from decision-making participate in changing the system. The act of conducting research: gathering, analyzing and organizing data into findings, is a foundational tool used by those in power to make the case for changing and reforming laws and policies. However, too often research is conducted at a distance from those who are being studied and disconnected from on-the-ground experiences. Typically, academics are considered to be the experts, rather than those who have first hand knowledge of the issues and systems being researched.

To counteract this norm and use research to build power, I've spent the last 15 years creating the tools, generating the data and designing the processes to ensure that the communities most impacted by research and public policies have a seat at the table. The voices of those who are directly affected by the issues being studied are central to my research approach; community leaders are the protagonists in the reports that I write about policy and political change.

In order to understand the role of those most affected by housing and immigration policy in the changing New York State political landscape, the New York Foundation and the North Star Fund contracted with me to conduct case studies of the Housing Justice for All and Green Light NY campaigns because both won historic victories in the 2019 legislative cycle, had representation of grassroots organizations across New York State, challenged the traditional model of top-down advocacy and centered the role of directly affected people in their campaign's decision-making and governance. I interviewed a total of 32 organizers and leaders, 18 from the housing justice movement and 14 from the immigrant rights movement. Interviewees came from grassroots, membership organizations with representation from across all the participating regions in New York State. I talked to people from

a range of organization sizes and models with an emphasis on grassroots organizations. I also reviewed relevant news articles and campaign literature for context.

The interviews explored how local grassroots organizations contribute to larger statewide movements; what structures are in place in for directly-impacted community members to participate and lead; and what barriers to success exist for grassroots organizations in building statewide power.

The findings in this report are drawn from the interview responses of the community leaders and organizers. Their perspectives on strategy and leadership can teach us important and motivating lessons for how to support and strengthen movements for social change. I hope you find the report illuminating and inspiring!

In Solidarity,



Alexa Kasdan

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# The Role of Grassroots Organizations in Statewide Policy Campaigns

Through interviews with more than 30 organizers and community leaders across New York State, we found that statewide coalitions are an important vehicle for low-income communities of color to exercise power when they are built from the ground-up, prioritize grassroots organizing and develop leadership from communities that are most affected by the issues at stake.

Using the Housing Justice for All and Green Light NY campaigns as case studies, this report lays out why statewide organizing is an important way to build statewide power; what tactics and strategies are most effective in creating successful statewide movements; and how statewide campaigns can successfully center the leadership of those most affected.

# 1. Why is Statewide Organizing an Important Vehicle for Building Power in Low-Income Communities of Color?

While grassroots organizations often focus on neighborhood or citywide organizing, interviewees reported various reasons why statewide organizing adds value for low-income communities of color, including:

- **Statewide organizing provides an entry point for movement building and consciousness raising:**

People from different regions of New York State rarely meet one another in local organizing contexts. Through statewide organizing, directly affected people from across New York State can be inspired by one another to see beyond the local issues that affect them. They are able to see what is possible if organizing is new to them and veterans of organizing are exposed to fresh perspectives. They build solidarity and shared struggle and understanding that there are common problems impacting low-income people of color across the state.

*‘When we went to Albany and our tenant leaders heard stories and experiences of people upstate... it was mind blowing for all of us. There was a type of connection that people were able to make that deepened people’s commitment to the work. There was a broadening of our consciousness about what is happening elsewhere.’*

**-Aga Trojnak, Flatbush Tenant Coalition**



- **Builds community organizing capacity and infrastructure:** Statewide work catalyzes new organizing in places with little or no organizing. These places (i.e. rural areas outside of New York City) can learn from places and people with a longer history of community organizing. Trainings, leadership development and political education can be built in to the work of the coalition and provide a blueprint for less experienced organizations.

*‘Statewide coalitions can also serve the purpose of strengthening new and emerging organizations by building relationships with other organizations, and building skills and capacity of members and education on issues and politics. Small groups may not have the internal capacity to do this work but when they are part of a coalition, this gets built in’*

**-Ryan Acuff, Rochester Tenants Union**

*‘We used the campaign to develop our capacity, expand and activate our base to participate in community organizing and learn about the legislative process.’*

**-Bryan MacCormack, Columbia County Sanctuary Movement**

- **Strengthens local initiatives:** Statewide campaigns build local power for small or emerging organizations and can energize their local organizing initiatives. Backed by groups across the state, local groups and their issues gain visibility and local officials are forced to pay attention.

*‘It was really important to do statewide work, especially in these smaller towns. Mobilizing renters that have never had their door knocked on...it is a big mountain to climb. Even trying to get 20 renters to do something is a big climb. To be working with people in New York City that have 10,000 renters that are ready to take action, it makes our local lawmakers notice.’*

**-Alex Panagiotopoulos, Kingston Tenants Union**

*‘Everyone in Buffalo can see that the immigrant community said what they needed and then were able to organize to pass it. For politicians and unions and other power players to see us demonstrate power is really important. Now they have to include it in their calculations for how to engage.’*

**-Jennifer Connor, Justice for Migrant Families WNY**

- **Builds solidarity across different types of communities and constituencies:** Connecting with others across geography and constituency builds solidarity and helps people to overcome a sense of isolation and to understand that others also experience similar problems even if they may look different on the surface.



*‘Members understand why the rent fight matters even though they aren’t going to be protected by it. The first time one of our board members was arrested was for a rent fight, even though he is homeless and isn’t a renter. Because he is involved in the political education work, he understands the connection between preserving housing and ending homelessness.’*

**-Paulette Soltani, VOCAL**

*‘The Gabinete [body of directly-impacted coalition members] felt it was really important to do Albany mobilizations. We really are in every corner of the state. Folks from Brentwood and Western New York who never see each other came together. Physically being in the same space with other people was not just about building relationships, it was also about building momentum and feels very powerful.’*

**-Meghan Maloney de Zaldivar, New York Immigration Coalition**

- **Creates new networks that strengthen other areas of work:** Networks that grow out of statewide campaign work can be leveraged for work on other issues that fall outside the campaign (e.g. networks developed through Green Light NY created new relationships that could be activated to help when ICE was detaining immigrants across the state).
- **Addresses many local issues that can only be changed through action at the state level:** This is due to various archaic mechanisms in the New York State constitution including “home rule” (which gives New York State powers over “property, affairs and government” if there is “substantial state interest”) and “preemption” (which says that local law must take a back seat when it collides with a state statute). Local rent laws are a key example.

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## 2. What Strategies & Tactics were Effective in Building a Grassroots Movement across New York State?

In order to build successful grassroots movements across New York State, the Upstate-Downstate Housing Alliance and Green Light NY campaigns knew they had to do things differently than in the past. For the Upstate-Downstate Housing Alliance, this meant casting a wider policy net and moving beyond New York City to bring people together across geography, organization type and housing status. For Green Light NY, this meant organizing immigrants in diverse regions across New York State, building up infrastructure in regions outside of New York City, giving local autonomy to those regions to set strategy, and mobilizing large numbers of directly affected people to demonstrate power.

Strategies and tactics that helped to push the campaigns towards victory included:

- **Widening geographical spread:** Both coalitions focused on building a base of members across New York State. For Green Light, the origins of the coalition were based outside of New York City and representation on the steering committee was split into eight regions. Each region had its own lead organization charged with building up regional membership and targeting local electeds.
- **Expansive policy platform:** The Upstate-Downstate Housing Alliance built a bigger tent than in previous years by including policy changes in their platform that would affect people across New York State. This meant looking beyond rent regulation to include bills to protect unregulated tenants and homeless New Yorkers, including Good Cause Eviction, Expansion of the Emergency Tenant Protection Act (ETPA, which is rent regulation outside of New York City), etc.
- **Political education and statewide convenings:** Both campaigns worked to build solidarity across geography, type of constituents, and type of organization to prevent their opponents from using “divide and conquer” as a tactic. They held statewide convenings to bring everyone together in one space that included trainings for members to learn about the issues they each face. These retreats became a space for leadership development.
- **Local autonomy:** Each region was able to develop their own plan to mobilize and build the campaign in ways that were strategic for their local membership. For example, the groups participating in Green Light NY in Westchester, developed a plan focused on moving Andrea Stuart Cousins, the Senate majority leader. Similarly the Bronx Caucus in the Housing Justice for All campaign held a large town hall led by Bronx tenants, targeting Carl Heastie, the Assembly speaker. In both these cases, local groups determined the strategy for these targeted efforts which built community buy-in and momentum for the statewide work.
- **Local town halls and rallies:** Each region organized their own town hall meetings and rallies to educate people about the legislation and to show their local power and support for the campaign. For example, on Long Island, Sepa Mujer organized a rally to combat growing white supremacy and racist rhetoric on Long Island.

- **Leveraging electoral/C4 work:** Some coalition members were part of political organizing entities (in the form of 501(c)(4) organizations) that could put direct pressure on elected officials to support their policy priorities. In both coalitions, electoral organizing work by coalition members in the 2019 election cycle led to increased power and leverage in the legislative session.
- **Local resolutions to create local political buy-in for statewide legislation:** Both coalitions pushed their local governing bodies such as town councils, to pass resolutions of support for the statewide legislative package. This served to bring local electeds into the political calculus and to put additional pressure on state representatives.

- **Building the capacity of smaller organizations:** Participation in coalitions helped to build up the capacity of smaller, emerging organizations across the state. This was an intentional strategy.

*“Green Light had an intentional focus on developing organizing and advocacy capacity of groups based outside of New York City. The coalition was the vehicle to do that...to build infrastructure and power among immigrant communities across the state.”*

**-Emma Kreyche, Workers Justice Center of NY/  
Green Light NY Campaign Coordinator**

- **Mass mobilizations:** Directly affected people from across the state came to Albany to show power. Elected officials and members of the media were able to see the broad implications of the issue and how it affected so many people in so many places across New York State.

### 3. How did the campaigns center the leadership of people most affected by the issues?

For both campaigns, those who were most affected by the issues at stake—low-income tenants and homeless New Yorkers for Upstate Downstate Housing Alliance and undocumented immigrants for Green Light NY, were central to the campaign. Organizers and leaders recounted the various ways that people, whose lived experience reflected the campaign’s central issues, were involved in the work:

- **Legislative visits and face-to-face time with elected officials:** During these visits, those most impacted by lack of affordable housing and driver’s licenses in New York State had a seat at the table and could weigh in on important decisions when meeting and negotiating with elected representatives.

*“We went up to meet with Cuomo at the final hour. He canceled the meeting at the last minute. We are sitting around thinking about the strategy. We get word that he wants to meet with us but not with the upstate people—only the downstate groups. So we looked around the table, and said, this is a statewide coalition. We are not going to let our elected officials divide us. This is Housing Justice for All. So we canceled the meeting. The tenant leaders were the ones that decided this.”*

**- Anita Long, Tenant Leader, CASA**



*‘Many members did door knocking, education, rallies, marched into Andrea Stewart Cousins office several times. There was an education forum where 800 people came and it was run by leaders. They did outreach, exceeded the event, had the ideas about how our stories can be more vivid, did media work, called local newspapers. Many sacrificed their freedom by saying they are undocumented on TV.’*

**-Ignacio Acevedo, Nobody Leaves Mid-Hudson (formerly)**

- **Statewide and regional convenings for members to meet face-to-face.** This helped to build a sense of power and possibility and gave directly affected people the motivation to keep pushing. These assemblies were held in various locations to ensure people from across the state could participate.

*‘The most critical way for members/leaders to engage and what members still talk about were the cross-region retreats. We had a retreat in Albany with people from across the state to talk about the different things they are going through and learn about it. Now we are reorienting the immediate next steps to focus on this learning and sharing. Connecting the dots and hearing from people from other regions was critical.’*

**-Paulette Solani, Organizer, VOCAL**

- **Exchanges between organizations** for sharing, learning and leadership development provided political education and enabled leaders to see the shared struggle, even if specific policies or problems were different.

*‘Some of the Rochester folks that we met in Albany came down to New York City and met with our housing court reform committee. They are working on getting a housing court in Rochester. Having that conversation and understanding how things are happening up there and how it works here allowed us to develop a sense of a movement. Before it felt smaller.’*

**-Aga Trojnak, Organizer, Flatbush Tenant Coalition**

- **Local caucuses:** Smaller groupings of coalition members convened based on geography or issue area. For example, there was a homeless caucus for people who had experienced losing their homes and a caucus for residents of the Bronx. This enabled decision-making at a more defined level and gave organization leaders, who were not on the steering committee, an extra layer of autonomy and leadership in setting strategy related to their neighborhood or area of issue expertise.

*‘There were borough-wide strategy meetings. Through this we started to create new alliances that we didn’t have before. That was where leaders could have the most impact on strategy. We had a powerful Bronx townhall with AOC [Alexandria Ocasio Cortez] and targeted key electeds through direct actions and meetings. Tenant leaders had a real role in shaping that and the messaging. They were not just asked to turn out but could shape agenda and run the show.’*

**-Pablo Estupiñan, Deputy Director, CASA**

- **Testifying at hearings across the state and not just in Albany:** This provided another opportunity for people to tell their story and to shape how local elected officials and members of the media would understand the narrative. For some, getting to Albany was not tenable because of work, family commitments, or transportation or other barriers.

# From Consejo to Gabinete: Intentional and Evolving Structure for Leadership and Decision Making for Directly-Impacted People in the Green Light NY Campaign

*“When coalitions come together we often just think of people that are just the heads of the organization. And we did this differently.”*

**-Organizer, Sepa Mujer**

When the Green Light NY coalition was formed in 2016, there was a collective understanding that the coalition would be guided by the principle that people directly affected by the drivers' license ban should be central to decisions and priorities of the campaign. To do this, they created a Consejo, or a specific body for directly affected people to engage in the campaign through monthly conference calls. However, once the campaign was underway, it became evident that Consejo was operating more as a space for education and information sharing but not as a decision-making body.

At a coalition-wide retreat in 2019, a group of directly affected members presented a proposal for a more formal governance structure that would allow grassroots leaders to participate in critical decisions. The coalition voted to approve the proposal and form the “Gabinete.” Each organization in the Green Light NY campaign that had affected members could appoint representatives who would be provided a stipend for their participation. The Gabinete would have decision making powers about key decisions in the campaign.

## **The Gabinete made high level strategy and budget decisions**

Once the Gabinete was formed, they were able to take on big strategic discussions. This included an in-depth discussion about whether to pursue a legislative or executive order strategy to achieve the campaign goals. After deciding to pursue a

legislative strategy the coalition translated the legislation into Spanish and the Gabinete made revisions to the language of the bill. The Gabinete was also involved in the negotiations about how much personal information would be released to police as part of the legislation. Because of their direct lived experience, they helped to create a line in the sand: do not give access to personal information to Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE). This was an important distinction and interviewees noted that it ultimately helped the coalition to make a more informed decision.

## **The Gabinete generated principled debates within the coalition**

As the legislative session was ramping up in April 2019, the question came up about whether to organize another mass mobilization in Albany. Some organizers on the steering committee felt that the action would be too expensive and not the most strategic use of resources, but members of the Gabinete felt that the mobilization was critical to galvanize the support of the people that would be affected by the bill. The Gabinete pushed the coalition to have a principled debate about this question and the coalition decided to accept the Gabinete's recommendation to do the mobilization. Ultimately, the April action was a pivotal moment of the campaign and in retrospect, organizers who initially opposed the action believe it was the right call.



# What were barriers or challenges to grassroots leadership?

While there was significant attention and work put into centering the leadership of those that were directly affected by both campaigns, some barriers and challenges were identified. There was some overlap in the type of challenges faced by Upstate Downstate Housing Alliance and Green Light NY, but because they each had some unique challenges, they are separated here.

## Housing Justice for All

- **Geography and location of face-to-face meetings:** New York State is vast and the cost of travel made it difficult for tenant leaders to constantly be in Albany or New York City. It was hard for them to be physically present when decisions were being made.
- **Different levels of experience:** Downstate groups had a long history of housing organizing and leadership development work however, many upstate communities did not imagine that statewide organizing for tenant protections was even a possibility before this campaign. This created additional work for the coalition to bridge these divides.
- **Steering committee representation:** Some felt that a lack of tenant representation on the steering committee meant that high-level decisions were made without input from people that were directly affected
- **Barriers to participation:** Work and family responsibilities make it difficult for tenant leaders to take part in convenings, actions and other non-local activities.
- **Lack of funding:** Resources for training and political education were scarce and limited the amount of cross-regional face-to-face events that were possible.
- **Capacity:** Some groups participate in multiple statewide coalitions and don't have the capacity to participate in more without additional funding or staffing.

## Green Light NY

- **Xenophobia and threat of deportation:** In many of the regions where groups were organizing undocumented immigrants, organizers and members faced racist and xenophobic opposition from the public and from government officials. This coupled with the threat of deportation made it very difficult for people to come out of the shadows and take on public roles as leaders in the campaign.
- **Risk of travel:** Distance made it difficult for leaders to travel to meetings, actions and hearings in Albany and elsewhere. Additionally, undocumented members traveling across the state risked being stopped and detained by immigration enforcement.
- **Difficult for people to miss work:** It was also risky for people to engage in activities and travel to actions because they could be penalized for missing work.
- **Language access:** Due to limited resources, meetings of the Gabinete and Consejo were only held in Spanish. Other non-Spanish speaking immigrant communities were unable to fully participate in leadership bodies.
- **Funding:** Most local groups were volunteer-based and money for travel and leadership development was scarce. Many groups simply did the work without funding but this is not a sustainable model.
- **Federal political climate:** Immigrant communities have had to react to a constant barrage of federal attacks, and some member-led grassroots organizations could not prioritize the Green Light campaign.



# Impact and Lessons for Funders:

**How to Support the Ecosystem of Grassroots  
Organizing in New York**

## Invest in the Leadership of Directly-impacted People

- Clear structures, guidelines and support need to be developed from the start for people who are directly affected to authentically participate in high-level decisions.
- Convening across geography is necessary in order to build solidarity among directly-impacted leaders and broaden consciousness of shared a struggle. These convenings cost money and financial support is needed to pull it off.
- Political education and leadership development takes time and needs to be funded over time; statewide campaigns are a unique opportunity to do leadership development and build shared consciousness across geography and demographics.

## Support a Variety of Organizational Approaches

- There is a need for different types and sizes of groups to participate in statewide organizing. Successful campaigns also need a mix of groups that have been in the work for a long time as well as newcomers to the game who can infuse new energy and ideas.
- Funders should support the larger, developed coalitions that center grassroots leadership as well as the smaller catalyzing policy campaigns that are being launched by small grassroots groups.
- Impact should not be solely defined by the size of an organization's reach.

## Support the Intersection of Grassroots Electoral & Issue Organizing

- Democracy reform is most successful when it is connected to long-term grassroots organizing efforts.
- Grassroots groups can increase their impact when they integrate electoral/C4 work with issue/legislative advocacy work. They can leverage the relationships and power they build with elected officials through endorsements and *Get Out The Vote* work to win support for legislative fights.
- Philanthropy needs to figure out the appropriate vehicles to support the intersection of electoral and legislative organizing when it is being led by grassroots, member-led organizations.

## Provide Long-Term Support for Organizing Infrastructure

- Statewide organizing provides a vehicle to build new organizing infrastructure in places where it did not exist before.
- Support is needed in smaller towns and rural areas where organizing infrastructure is less developed or non-existent. Often times these areas also represent important electoral districts.
- To truly build capacity of upstate groups, there needs to be organizers on the ground and coordination from someone who is based in those areas.
- Rural vs. urban divide needs to be factored in when measuring success. Impact is not just about the number of people engaged but also about the number and type of new places that build the capacity to engage community members.



## After a Victory, Fund Implementation of Policy Changes

- Implementation is key! A campaign is not over after a legislative win. Implementation is just as important as passing the law or policy and must be funded at the same level as the legislative work.
- Implementation work also presents a new opportunity for organizing and leadership development.

## Funding Should be Timely, Flexible and Support All Aspects of Work

- Provide general operating multi-year support for organizations. For coalitions, provide similar support for the coordination of the coalition itself.
- Grants should be made before or earlier in the legislative cycle to give coalitions time to staff up.

- General operating grants are particularly urgent for this kind of work because demands and needs change regularly. Groups must have access to flexible funds that allow them to take on new challenges as they arise.
- Victories are not just defined by legislative changes. As demonstrated in the case studies, coalitions and participating organizations play different roles across the length of a campaign, and each pivot is a milestone that requires funder investment.



# Case Studies

The Upstate-Downstate Housing Alliance's Housing Justice for All and the Green Light NY campaigns provide an in-depth look at recent statewide organizing victories for two grassroots movements: housing and immigration. These campaigns are just two examples of many important grassroots organizing coalitions across New York State. These were chosen because they prioritized leadership of directly-affected people, focused on building grassroots power in regions across New York State, strategically leveraged power built through electoral organizing and won historic policy victories in the 2019 legislative cycle.





## Case Study: Housing Justice for All

### Overview

Low-income people across New York State struggle daily to afford decent, safe housing. At the same time, pressure from gentrification is causing rents to rise and laws protecting tenants have remained inadequate. Landlords and the real estate lobby have been exploiting loopholes, amassing wealth and consolidating political power. In recent years, this has reached a tipping point making more and more New Yorkers vulnerable to harassment, eviction and homelessness.

The Upstate-Downstate Housing Alliance is a diverse coalition of tenants, homeless people, manufactured housing residents, and advocates from across New York. In 2019, the Alliance, which represents New Yorkers from Long Island, New York City, Westchester County, the mid-Hudson Valley,

the Capital Region, the Southern Tier, the Mohawk Valley and Western New York, was successful in their efforts to expand rental protections for tenants across New York State through the passage of the Housing Stability and Tenant Protection Act of 2019.

## History of Statewide Tenant Organizing in New York State

For decades, community organizations have fought for housing justice through neighborhood, citywide and statewide campaigns. They have formed various coalitions over the years including, Housing Here and Now, Real Rent Reform and the Alliance for Tenant Power. While these coalitions did push for changes to statewide rent laws, they were anchored and led by organizations in New York City and pushed for changes to rent stabilization laws that disproportionately affected tenants in New York City.

This time around things were different. The Upstate-Downstate Housing Alliance recognized that they could not win a grassroots, statewide campaign without a real base of power outside of New York City, nor could they build this base without the leadership of organizations and tenants across New York State. They also knew that in order for tenants outside of New York City to engage with the campaign, their policy platform needed to include more than just protections for rent-stabilized tenants. As a result, the Alliance expanded their reach to include homeless New Yorkers and tenants in unregulated housing in their policy agenda and sought key partners from outside of New York City.

This shift in organizing strategy also intersected with a changing political landscape in Albany. For decades, the New York State Senate was controlled by Republicans and later by the Independent Democratic Caucus (IDC), which for years stymied much of the progressive policy agenda. In 2019, a wave of newly elected progressive representatives in the New York State Assembly and Senate were brought into power through grassroots organizing. Some of the core groups in the Upstate-Downstate Housing Alliance ran electoral organizing operations through their 501(c)(4) organizations. Newly elected representatives entered office with a pledge that they would not accept donations from the real estate industry, providing additional leverage for the Housing Justice For All campaign.

## What Did the Housing Justice for All Campaign Win in 2019?

While the Housing Justice for All Campaign did not win all of the planks of their platform, including “good cause” eviction and the eradication of Major Capital Improvements (MCI), they were successful in passing the most sweeping protections for tenants in New York State in decades.

### The New Law Covers the Following:

- Rent-stabilization now covers the entire state. Municipalities outside of New York City will have to opt-in to rent-control regulations.
- It’s much harder for landlords to deregulate apartments.
- The “vacancy bonus” has been eliminated.
- “Preferential rents” are now permanent.
- Landlords are now much more limited in what they can charge for building-wide or apartment-level improvements.
- All tenants in New York State now have stronger protections against evictions.
- Tenants have new protections surrounding the use of security deposits, apartment rental fees, and more.
- All tenants in New York State now have stronger protections from exorbitant fees and the right to know if their lease will not be renewed.
- Protections for residents of manufactured home communities.

## The Coalition Members and the Structures

A wide variety of types of organizations make up the coalition spanning size, geography and organizing experience and philosophy. Interviewees noted that the diversity of these organizations was an asset in building a strong coalition.

### Included were:

- **New York City neighborhood-based grassroots organizing groups** that had been working together in local, citywide and statewide coalition for years, including participating in the Real Rent Reform (R3) coalition in previous years. These groups, many of which are New York Foundation and North Star Fund grantees, have had decades of experience developing grassroots tenant leaders and building local organizing infrastructure.
- **Tenant unions** from the Hudson Valley, Upstate and other regions of New York that tended to be newer to organizing and to the statewide policy sphere. Many are volunteer-run or operate with very small budgets and little infrastructure or capacity.
- **Statewide organizing groups** that were founded in New York City, have been working together in coalition for many years, and are veterans of previous rent law fights. These groups, which tend to have relatively larger budget and staff size compared to the neighborhood-based grassroots tenant groups or upstate tenant unions, have expanded to cities and counties outside of New York City over the past decade. They have hired local organizers and are building a base across New York State. Most of these groups also have 501(c)(4) arms, giving them the ability to do partisan electoral organizing and unlimited lobbying.
- **Social service/service to organizing groups** that provide direct social services to low-income tenants and homeless individuals such as homeless shelters, soup kitchens or housing case management and have developed ways for

program participants to become advocates and leaders. When people come in for services to meet their immediate needs, these groups provide the opportunity for clients to learn about structural barriers to social policy change, talk about their priorities, and loop into the organizing campaign.

- **Legal service organizations provide** direct legal services to low-income renters and homeless New Yorkers and often play a technical assistance role in the coalition, advising on crafting legislation and have insider access to elected officials.

## It Takes Time: Building a Campaign With Grassroots Power

**June 2017:** Cuomoville: Homeless New Yorkers and renters come together, two years before rent laws expired, to sleep outside Andrew Cuomo's office and demand an end to homelessness, investment in public housing and stronger rent laws.

**October 2017:** Upstate-Downstate Housing Alliance founded at first statewide assembly in Albany.

**January 2018:** The Alliance holds a civil disobedience in Albany at the Governor's State of the State address.

**February 2018:** Second statewide member assembly in Albany to create strategic plans for the rest of the legislative session.

**April 2018:** The Alliance held an action to protest Cuomo's budget.

**May 2018:** Rochester tenants occupied Cuomo's office demanding "Good Cause Eviction."

**June 2018:** One year before rent laws are set to expire, 1,000 people from across New York State shut down Park Avenue in New York City demanding universal rent control.

**June 2018:** The Alliance holds its third statewide assembly in New York City including teach-ins about rent regulation, good cause eviction and homelessness.

**September 2018:** The tenant movement came together with the No IDC coalition to defeat state senators affiliated with the Independent Democratic Caucus (IDC).

**October/November 2018:** Housing Justice for All town halls are held across New York State.

**October 2018:** The Alliance holds its fourth member assembly in Rochester, New York. Marched to Governor Cuomo's Rochester office.

**November 2018:** Groups march on the Rent Stabilization Association.

**January-June 2019:** Tenant Tuesdays trend on social media almost every week.

**April 2019:** New York State Assembly Announces support for eight out of the nine Housing Justice for All bills.

**May 2019:** Tenants and homeless New Yorkers present moving testimony at hearings across the state.

**May 14, 2019:** 2,000 New Yorkers rally at Albany and shut down the State Senate.

**May 30, 2019:** AOC holds a townhall meeting in the Bronx.

**June 4, 2019:** Eighty tenants risk arrest blocking the governor's office and senate/assembly chambers.

**June 14, 2019:** Victory of majority of bills in the legislative package.

## What comes next?

Following the passage of the legislative package there are several buckets of work: 1) implementation of the bills that did pass; 2) passing the bills that did not; 3) crafting new priorities for populations that were not covered by the legislative package and 4) building upon the organizing and leadership development infrastructure that emerged through the Housing Justice for All campaign.

## Implementation

- Work with the Department of Housing and Community Renewal (DHCR) to implement the new laws.
- Organize and educate so tenants know about and can exercise new rights and protections.
- Organize and push for local governing bodies across New York State to opt-in to the Emergency Tenant Protection Act.

## New and continuing legislative and budget priorities

- Build a campaign to end homelessness, to fix public housing and to pass good cause eviction. This includes a budgetary campaign focusing on raising revenue for homelessness and public housing.
- Organize to pass legislation that did not pass last cycle: Just Cause Eviction and elimination of MCI loophole.

## Building the capacity for groups to increase community organizing activities

- Create structures that can support and sustain community organizing in places where new organizations popped up and where gaps exist. Address the need for basic infrastructure such as offices, databases, printers, etc.
- Continue political education and leadership development across the state through statewide convenings.

## Another Approach to Statewide Organizing for Housing Justice: Right to Counsel Coalition

State legislation is not the only approach for statewide organizing. For example, the Right to Counsel, a coalition of tenant organizing groups in New York City, builds statewide power by winning progressive policy at the local level in New York City and then using that as a model for other cities across the state (and the country) to win similar policies. The Right To Counsel coalition

won a local law establishing the right for low-income tenants to legal representation in housing court. Now the coalition is developing tools and providing technical assistance to support other municipalities (such as Yonkers, Rochester) to push for similar legislation. If enough municipalities launch a Right to Counsel campaign, a statewide legislative strategy could emerge.

# Case Study: Green Light NY

## Overview

Since 2004, immigrants across New York State have had to live in constant fear of driving because of their inability to access a driver's license. A simple traffic stop can lead to deportation. In regions without public transportation, undocumented immigrants are forced to drive to meet their basic daily needs, putting them at risk of arrest and subsequent deportation every time they are on the road. With the recent upsurge in anti-immigrant sentiment—from presidential executive actions to mass shootings targeting immigrants—the need to pass statewide legislation guaranteeing immigrants a right to a driver's license became more important than ever.

The Green Light NY: Driving Together Coalition works to ensure equal access to driver's licenses for all residents of New York State, regardless of immigration status. The coalition brings together immigrant communities, advocates, allies, and other stakeholders throughout the state to coordinate a unified driver's license campaign.

In 2018-19, the Green Light NY coalition successfully waged a grassroots, people-powered campaign to restore equal access to driver's licenses and expand

access to the "standard license." The Driver's License Access and Privacy Act was introduced by Marcos Crespo in the Assembly and Luis Sepulveda in the Senate, and signed by Governor Cuomo on June 19, 2019 despite a significant legislative and political battle. The law establishes a newly created "standard license" that will be accessible to all state residents, regardless of immigration status. It also restricts what information can be retained and given out on those applying or holding standard driver's licenses.

## History and Political Context

Following the attacks on the World Trade Center on September 11th, 2001, and xenophobic atmosphere that followed, then-New York Governor George Pataki passed an executive order that required applicants for driver's licenses to provide a valid Social Security number or other documents to prove their legal status. When Governor Eliot Spitzer assumed the Statehouse in 2007, he tried to overturn the Pataki-era policy by passing another executive order expanding access to driver's license to undocumented immigrants. However, swift backlash, particularly from county clerks in upstate New York, caused him to reverse course. He followed this by trying to pass legislation and another executive order, both of which were killed by political opposition. Because there was little to no organizing infrastructure across New York State at the time, there was no people power to counteract the attacks and backlash.

In the subsequent years leading up to the 2019 legislative session, undocumented immigrants have lived in constant fear of driving. The problem only intensified with the election of Trump and the anti-immigrant sentiment that he has fueled.

In 2015, recognizing these past organizing shortfalls and the uphill battle of passing statewide legislation, groups from outside New York City, began to form a loose volunteer-led network called Upstate Network for Immigrant Rights. At their meetings, driver's licenses and language access emerged as the main issues this group wanted to act upon. When it formed, this group did not have funding—however an initial seed grant allowed them to create a leadership committee which eventually turned into the Green Light New York Steering Committee. Over the next few years, several versions of the Green Light bill would be introduced in the state assembly. However, without political power in the New York State Senate, the bill did not move.

In January 2019, a new wave of legislators assumed office in Albany, including a Democratic majority in the State Senate for the first time in decades. This was following electoral organizing efforts targeting incumbents who had failed immigrant communities for years. Despite this partisan shift in the senate, the Green Light bill was far from a sure shot and was not high on the list of priorities for the new assembly and senate leadership. Instead, the new leadership publicly prioritized the passage of the New York State Dream Act and thought this would satisfy immigration advocates. While this bill was also important to the immigration movement, Green Light coalition members made clear that it was the floor, not the ceiling and that they would also demand and fight for the passage of the Green Light bill.

*“Until people have the license in their hand, then we need to keep our attention on how it is implemented. There is real hatred out there. How do we educate the rest of the community? This is a human issue. How to bring this back to human beings? Keep growing the leadership. As immigrants we are everywhere and we can educate each other.”*

**-Ignacio Acevedo (formerly of Nobody Leaves Mid-Hudson)**

*There is a rural anti-immigrant and white supremacist sentiment in our area. We literally have Oath Keepers who are police officers and white nationalist militias in our county. We receive a lot of threats and have a very hostile organizing environment. Our community members are constantly harassed by law enforcement and residents. We've even received reports of vigilantes confronting and stalking community members. This reality makes it even more important for us to organize our communities and in turn contribute to flipping these districts.*

**-Bryan MacCormack, Columbia County Sanctuary Movement**

## The Organizations and Structures

The Green Light NY Coalition has members and partners all across New York State. The Consejo is the group of directly-impacted community members and includes participants in all regions of the state; the Gabinete is a smaller decision-making body that is composed of directly-impacted leaders from the coalition's member organizations. The New York Immigration Coalition provided overall coordination and infrastructure over the course of the campaign. In the final months of the campaign, funding was secured to bring on a campaign coordinator who had already been on the Steering Committee representing the Worker Justice Center of NY.

### Types of member organizations

- **Larger convening organizations:** These groups with relatively more staff and a more established organizing infrastructure provided in-kind resources to the coalition; back office support for finance and operations of the coalition and helped to re-grant funds to smaller grassroots organizations. These groups also have 501(c)(4) arms allowing them to provide additional tools to the coalition to target specific elected officials and do electoral organizing related to the campaign's goals. Groups such as the New York Immigration Coalition also provided overall coordination support for the coalition and had on-the-ground organizers on Long Island and in Buffalo.
- **Smaller member-led grassroots groups, both urban and rural:** These member-led organizations composed of people directly affected by the lack of driver's licenses played a variety of roles: some sat on the steering committee; Nobody Leaves Mid-Hudson coordinated the Gabinete and led mass mobilizations to Albany; and other smaller groups focused on local mobilization and advocacy. These groups also had member leaders sit on the Gabinete.

- **Volunteer ally groups/solidarity organizations:** Many of these groups were formed after the 2016 presidential election and the subsequent targeting of immigrants by ICE. They are led by non-immigrant allies, are almost entirely volunteer-run and provide emergency support and services to immigrants facing deportation. These groups got involved in Green Light through their service work, such as legal support, court accompaniment, visits to detention centers, housing and transportation assistance. Throughout the Green Light campaign volunteers helped provide transportation to directly-impacted people so they could participate in the campaign's activities and actions.
- **Social service groups:** Groups such as Neighbors Link in Westchester focus on providing services and community outreach to immigrants while also coordinating volunteers and educating allies such as the local police about immigrant issues. These groups played an important role in the coalition in mobilizing their clients to participate in local and Albany rallies and by educating their clients about the legislation.

### It Takes Time: Building a Campaign With Grassroots Power

**2015:** Upstate Network for Immigrant Rights (UNIR) forms as an unfunded, informal network in Upstate New York, conducts issue identification with advocates, service providers, and community organizations and forms working group to explore relaunching a driver's license campaign.

**2016:** Formation of statewide driver's license coalition with steering committee and advisory council of directly-impacted leaders (Consejo). Seed funding from Hagedorn Foundation supports grassroots outreach and coalition-building among directly-impacted communities (i.e. collection of petitions, community forums). Conducted 3 leadership trainings for coalition members in Syracuse, Hudson Valley, and Long Island.

## 2017

**January 2017:** Official launch of Green Light campaign, introduction of assembly bill sponsored by Francisco Moya, release of studies by Fiscal Policy Institute and New York City Comptroller.

**May 2017:** Albany mobilization with 300+ people to build support for the bill.

**June 2017:** Ended session with no movement in assembly, no Senate bill

**July - December 2017:** Planning phase, outreach to non-traditional stakeholders, fundraising. DMV released plan to comply with Real ID, requiring a re-draft of the legislation. Identified new assembly Sponsor, Marcos Crespo.

## 2018

**January - April 2018:** Faced hurdles getting new bill introduced, had to mobilize base to pressure assembly sponsor. Worked on growing public support among local officials; first public support by law enforcement.

**May 2018:** Assembly bill introduced with only two months left in session. Senate bill introduced by Luis Sepulveda after he won his senate seat in a special election. Albany mobilization with 300 people to help build support.

**June 2018:** Ended session with 34 assembly sponsors and nine senate sponsors.

**July - November 2018:** Focused on pressuring governor to issue an executive order on driver's licenses; gained support from Cynthia Nixon. Primary helped raise the profile of the issue. Made changes to coalition structure to formalize decision-making role of directly-impacted people and grow coalition.

**December 2018:** Westchester community forum with electeds and 300+ community members helped build momentum for 2019 legislative session.

## 2019

**January 2019:** Bills reintroduced in assembly and senate.

**February 2019:** Lobby day and senate call-in day.

**March 2019:** One thousand person Albany mobilization; Call-in campaign targeting senate majority leaders (over 2000 calls made).

**April 2019:** Call-in day targeting Assembly Speaker Heastie; Long Island Week of Action; Social Media Day of Action & Tweet Storm.

**May 2019:** Local actions at Senate Majority Leaders' Yonkers' office & Deputy Senate Majority Leader's Queens office; Senator Savino call-in day; launch of month-long "Story a Day" social media campaign; 350 person mobilization and civil disobedience at Senate chambers; New York Business Council endorses Green Light bill.

**June 2019:** Ongoing actions and lobbying in Albany; Albany press conference with Black legislators; local mobilizations in Long Island & Yonkers; action at Governor Cuomo's Albany office.

**June 12, 2019:** Bill passes Assembly.

**June 17, 2019:** Bill passes Senate, Governor signs bill.

**July-August 2019:** Erie, Rensselaer, and Monroe Counties file lawsuits challenging the constitutionality of Green Light bill.

**September-November 2019:** Community education and administrative advocacy to ensure smooth implementation.

**December 14, 2019:** Implementation deadline.



## What Comes Next

Following the passage of the bill, there is still much work to be done to protect the win and to make sure people can safely get licenses. The work falls into several buckets including:

### Implementation:

- Need to work with undocumented immigrants to make sure they can safely get licenses in a way that doesn't do harm or put people at risk.
- Work with DMVs to fairly and justly implement the law;
- Educate people about their rights and how to safely get a license.

- Accompany people to go get their licenses.
- Create messaging to reduce fear of going to get a license.
- Prevent fraudulent schemes targeting immigrants trying to get licenses.

### Counteracting the backlash:

- Defend against legal challenges.
- Develop a narrative to counteract anti-immigrant spin.



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