

October 30, 2023

The Honorable Kathy Hochul
Governor of the State of New York
NYS Capitol Building
Albany, NY 12224

Dear Governor Hochul:

The legacies of leaders are shaped by their responses to crises. Perhaps the greatest internal crisis faced by our country was the Great Depression of the 1930s, during which millions of lives were devastated by homelessness, hunger, and grinding poverty. The response of the Roosevelt Administration – most notably, the programs of the New Deal and the Social Security Act of 1935, which for the first time acknowledged that it is the role of government to ensure the welfare of the people – established a lasting legacy that uplifted millions of lives and continues to define our country to this day.

The profound impact of that philosophical shift in our expectation of the role of government was echoed and amplified three years later in the New York State constitutional convention of 1938. While many at the time were concerned with international threats, Senator Robert F. Wagner stated: “The problem of the day is to meet the threat to freedom that comes from another source — from poverty and insecurity, from sickness and the slum, from social and economic conditions in which human beings cannot be free. This threat to freedom can only be met by affirmative action, much of which must come from the State. The need for such affirmative action has been fully recognized in New York.”

As a result of this realization of the state’s obligation, one of the most important changes to the New York State Constitution to come out of the 1938 convention was the inclusion of Article XVII, which states: “The aid, care and support of the needy are public concerns and shall be provided by the state and by such of its subdivisions, and in such manner and by such means, as the legislature may from time to time determine.”

This is part of the legacy of Governor Herbert H. Lehman, and one that is also fully consonant with New York’s proud history as a beacon of humane and progressive values. Not incidentally, Article XVII, as you of course know, is the provision of the New York State Constitution upon which New York’s bedrock Right to Shelter, first established under 1981’s *Callahan* consent decree, is based.

Over the past 42 years, the Right to Shelter has given hundreds of thousands of impoverished individuals an alternative to sleeping on the streets, exposed to the elements. It has set New York City apart from other municipalities around the country, where people without homes are left to fend for themselves in vast tent encampments in public spaces. It has served as an inviolable baseline of humanity and decency in New York City.

And so we, the descendants of those who dedicated their lives to establishing these important legacies and who led the country and the state through such difficult times, are deeply concerned about the erosion of New York's long-established, fundamental Right to Shelter. Abandoning Right to Shelter now would be an overt rejection of the values that have helped define New York's commitment to impoverished individuals and families for the past 85 years, and, from a practical standpoint, would likely result in countless vulnerable people being relegated to sleeping unsheltered on the streets.

We know that you would wish to honor the values of the New Deal and of New York's progressive roots, and we hope you will bear in mind that the aid, care, and support of the needy are public concerns. These values have served New York well, and we hope that you, as Governor, will continue to protect them.

Sincerely,



James Roosevelt
Grandson of Franklin D. Roosevelt



Henry Scott Wallace
Grandson of Henry A. Wallace



June Hopkins
Granddaughter of Harry Hopkins



Tomlin Perkins Coggeshall
Grandson of Frances Perkins