



**Commission On
Human Rights**

New York City Commission on Human Rights

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**STATEMENT FROM ANNABEL PALMA, CHAIR AND COMMISSIONER
OF THE NYC COMMISSION ON HUMAN RIGHTS**

Combating discrimination goes beyond policy; it is deeply personal. As a woman of color, it has shaped every chapter of my life. I experienced it as a child in the Bronx when my mother organized the tenants in our building after the landlord shut off the heat in the middle of winter. I felt its weight at seventeen, as a young single mother trying to secure a safe home while caring for a parent who was losing their battle with HIV/AIDS. I confronted it as a Council Member, as a leader within the Department of Social Services opening shelters for people with nowhere else to go, and now as the Commissioner of the New York City Commission on Human Rights. To me, combating discrimination is not political. It is personal.

I am so proud of the Commission's leadership and staff who have strengthened our housing enforcement work with discipline, expertise, and an unwavering commitment to the public. Together, we expanded early intervention so New Yorkers can receive relief faster, reshaped leadership structures to support a more efficient and accountable process, and prioritized the needs of unrepresented New Yorkers who often face the steepest barriers. Our investigations are conducted with extraordinary rigor, ensuring that every allegation is pursued fully and fairly.

Before addressing the Comptroller's audit, I want to speak plainly about the process that led to its publication. Throughout the audit, my team and I raised clear and repeated concerns about misrepresentations of our work and misunderstandings of our enforcement process. We provided explanations, data, and context at every stage – a significant undertaking for our team of 109 civil servants. Despite this, the Comptroller chose to move forward with a report that ignores the reality of how the Commission operates or the progress we have made. That decision is deeply disappointing, not because it challenges us, but because at a time when civil rights are under increasing attack and protections at the federal level are eroding, an incomplete narrative risks misleading the public about an agency that countless New Yorkers depend on when they face discrimination.

The Comptroller's audit disrespects the work of the entire agency and minimizes it to a narrow and incomplete set of findings. That approach does not capture the reality of how deeply our staff is improving outcomes for New Yorkers, or the stakes for tenants that rely on us when they face housing discrimination. The truth is clear: the Commission is delivering just resolutions, strong investigations, and an equitable system for people who need us most. Our work continues because the stakes are not abstract – they affect the safety, stability, and dignity of people across this city.

While the report focuses on cases dating back to 2019, I want to focus on what we accomplished since I joined in 2021. Our record reflects the strength and dedication of the Commission's staff. In that time, we initiated more than 2,000 matters and successfully closed more than 1,400 cases. We focused on early intervention, conducting more than 1,000 effective pre-complaint interventions, which today takes only 25 days on average to resolve. These efforts result in real opportunities to explore housing options, provide reasonable accommodations for people with disabilities, and allow people to remain in their homes without the stress and uncertainty of a lengthy legal process.

These are not just numbers. Every case represents a worker, a tenant, or a family who turned to us for help when they were in crisis or felt powerless. That is why our team has pushed so relentlessly. Because of my staff's dedication, we have secured more than \$30 million in damages and civil penalties for New Yorkers and hundreds of housing opportunities, including hundreds of set-asides for voucher holders who are too often shut out of the housing market. These are real homes, real stability, and real second chances for people who have long been pushed to the margins.

The largest civil rights housing settlement in city history is only the most visible example of what this agency can achieve when it is allowed to do its work. That case set aside 850 apartments for voucher holders, and resulted in a \$1 million civil penalty – the highest ever included in a settlement of its kind. For those who have spent years searching for a landlord willing to say yes, this was not just a legal victory. It changed lives.

Our housing enforcement strategy is deliberate and effective: using early intervention to deliver faster relief when possible, litigation when necessary to hold wrongdoers accountable, education for housing providers and brokers so they understand the law and their obligations, and thorough investigations so that no one feels their case was rushed or overlooked. Our results show that this approach works.

This is why it is so important to set the record straight. The Comptroller's audit does not capture the progress, the impact, or the human stakes of our work. It presents a limited view of our work that overlooks measurable gains driven by the commitment of our staff and the trust that New Yorkers place in us every day. Our work is not just theoretical or bureaucratic. It is life changing.

I recognize that the Commission has faced real staffing challenges in recent years, and that this has affected our capacity. However, even during the most difficult periods when staffing reached its lowest levels, the Commission never stopped its work to combat discrimination or protect the rights of New Yorkers.

As we look ahead, I appreciate that the incoming administration has expressed a commitment to strengthening the Commission. We welcome that partnership. We have always said that we can do more with more, and we look forward to conversations about investments that will enhance our enforcement work and further improve outcomes for the public. We are always open to growth and improvement and ask only that the work of our team be accurately evaluated.

I want New Yorkers to know one thing clearly. While I strongly disagree with many points in the Comptroller's audit, my commitment to this city has never wavered. The Commission exists to

uphold the protections that guard every New Yorker against housing discrimination. When possible, we use pre-complaint interventions to resolve cases quickly to secure stability without delay. But when housing providers refuse to come to the table in good faith, we do not hesitate to take the time required to litigate a case fully and pursue a just resolution. That is our duty. That has been our practice. And that will continue to be our promise to New Yorkers.