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Senior Advocates Urge Overhaul of Underused Rent Freeze Program

By Sally Goldenberg

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A coalition advocating for elderly New Yorkers will issue a report Tuesday calling on the de Blasio administration to overhaul an underused city program that provides rent relief for senior citizens – changes that would cost the administration several hundred million dollars.

The 17-page report, compiled by affordable housing organization Enterprise Community Partners and nonprofit LiveOn NY and provided to POLITICO, calls for City Hall to freeze rents for qualifying seniors at 33 percent of their income. The change would reduce costs for many tenants and would cost the city an estimated \$324 million a year in foregone property tax revenue.

As part of the 46-year-old program, Senior Citizen Rent Increase Exemption (SCRIE), City Hall gives property tax abatements to participating landlords to make up for the income they are losing.

The agency that administers the program, the Department of Finance, recently said that nearly 80,000 seniors who qualify are not enrolled, often because they do not know about it. By the time seniors sign up for the rent break, they are often already paying more than a third of their incomes on rent.

"I think there needs to be an understanding that a fixed income is a fixed income. Most older adults tend to become poorer as they get older, because their income doesn't buy as much as the cost of living increases. This means that there are those older New Yorkers who have to pay their rent and are indeed choosing between food, medication and other daily needs," Bobbie Sackman of LiveOn NY said in an interview. "This is an opportunity for the city to say to older New Yorkers, 'We're going to make sure that you have the peace of mind and the safety net in terms of affordable housing.'"

A typical senior who participates in the program has an annual income of \$16,504, and more than 26,000 SCRIE recipients take in less than that – \$11,000 per year, on average – which leaves them with \$183 a month in discretionary cash, the report found.

The city's senior population is growing as life expectancies climb. More than 100,000 single seniors currently spend at least half of their income on housing costs, a share that in housing terms gets them classified as "severely rent-burdened," according to a report released by the Citizens Budget Commission last fall.



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Freezing rents for SCRIE enrollees at half their income would cost the city less — \$225 million instead of \$324 million. The current program costs about \$137 million a year, according to the study.

A change to the program would require legislative approval in Albany — a hostile political climate for the mayor, and one where he has had mixed success in furthering his agenda.

In an emailed statement, the city Department of Finance said it would back the changes suggested in the report.

"SCRIE is a priority program of the Department of Finance and for the city. In the last two years, we have initiated and supported a range of new rent freeze legislation to raise the income limit, to extend the renewal process, to create new rules for benefit takeover and we want to see this pass as well," the agency said.

The rent caps suggested in the analysis are included in legislation that has been introduced in both houses of the state Legislature.

"This is our bill that would allow renters back into the rent freeze program at their old, frozen rent after losing the benefit for one lease term because of a spike in income, but later re-qualify," the agency added.

Under the current law, seniors who fall out of the program re-enter at a higher rate.

The report also calls on the administration to launch a television and subway ad campaign to boost enrollment.

Sackman said she had asked city officials, to no avail, to tack on a mention of SCRIE in a \$1 million ad campaign to tout a rent freeze last year.

"It was a missed opportunity," she said.

The report comes two months after de Blasio partnered with senior advocates, namely the AARP, to push through zoning changes intended to create more below-market-rate housing throughout the city. At the time, he acknowledged SCRIE is underused and said he wanted to fix that.

"The number of severely rent-burdened seniors living on less than a shoestring budget is appalling," Judi Kende of Enterprise said. "A SCRIE rollback is critical, because it will improve outcomes for the elderly by allowing them to afford rent as well as food and medicine, and it will prevent eviction, which has a huge social and economic cost."