Lawsuit Seeks To Block City On Evictions

BY MICHAEL HOWARD SAUL

Thousands of low-income families in New York City are at risk of becoming homeless because they have been blocked from applying to a rental-assistance program designed to ward off eviction, a lawsuit contends.

The Family Eviction Prevention Supplement program, a joint initiative by city and state governments, provides back rent and continuing aid to families on public assistance who face eviction. But high demand combined with state funding cuts mean eligible New Yorkers are turned away each week, advocates say.

The nonprofits hired to oversee applications are underfunded and overwhelmed, the lawsuit argues, effectively blocking recipients who qualify for help.

April Bumbray, a 25-year-old mother of four and one of the plaintiffs, said she owed her landlord about $6,500 and faced eviction. After spending hours last month waiting in line at BronxWorks, one of the nonprofits hired to prepare applications for the anti-eviction program, she was told her application couldn’t be filed until September.

“People were crying. People were fighting,” she recalled of the scene at the nonprofit office.

“There’s hundreds and hundreds and hundreds of people who need this help—all of whom will probably become homeless without it,” said Carolyn McLaughlin, executive director of BronxWorks. “We just don’t have the capacity to help everybody.”

Ms. McLaughlin said the state slashed her funding by nearly half, forcing her to lay off staff.

BronxWorks has appointments booked through August and turns away urgent cases.

“It doesn’t make any sense to say, ‘We’ll see you in September,’ because you will be evicted by then,” Ms. McLaughlin said.

Eight applicants, including Ms. Bumbray, filed a lawsuit earlier this month accusing the city and state of “creating an unduly burdensome and inadequate application system.”

The plaintiffs have now received special dispensation to submit applications to the anti-eviction program. Most have been approved.

A spokesman for the state Office of Temporary and Disability Assistance, a defendant in the case, declined to comment because of the ongoing litigation.

City officials acknowledged a mismatch between demand for the program and the nonprofits’ ability to file applications.

Robert Doar, commissioner of the New York City Human Resources Administration, the city’s welfare agency, said the agency is working with the state on “initiatives which we believe will respond to the issues raised by the plaintiffs.” He declined to discuss specific changes.

Judith Goldiner, an attorney at Legal Aid Society, which is working with the plaintiffs, said the case is about problems with outsourcing vital social services.

“When those private not-for-profits have to close their doors, you cannot apply for what is a public benefit,” she said.

The high demand for anti-eviction aid comes, in part, as a result of the city’s move in February to stop making rental-assistance payments to formerly homeless New Yorkers under the Advantage program. At the time, there were more than 18,700 recipients—many of whom might now seek help through the anti-eviction program.