Bronx program to keep seniors from homelessness needs $250G

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Carmen Mercado, 64, was on the verge of eviction from her Bronx apartment after being hit with a hefty tax bill and the unexpected cost of her sister's funeral in Puerto Rico. (HOWARD SIMMONS/NEW YORK DAILY NEWS)
A Bronx program that’s helped keep hundreds of seniors from becoming homeless is seeking $250,000 in funding — or it may have to shut down.

Since 2014, the Senior Homelessness Prevention Project at BronxWorks has plucked 422 seniors out of Bronx Housing Court and helped them pay their rent, connect with available benefits and get financial counseling.

But the program was funded by a grant that will run out in July — so organizers are asking the City Council to step in.

“Seniors are a group that has been overlooked for quite some time. It’s something that should concern all of us,” Eileen Torres, executive director of BronxWorks, said. “They’re on a limited income. Their rents are increasing.”

The program was launched after former Supervising Judge Jaya Madhavan noticed how many seniors were appearing in housing court due to an inability to pay their rents. The judge worked with BronxWorks, which has offered other services in housing court for years, to launch something just for seniors — a portion of the city’s population that is growing.

“Before that, most of the assistance that was available was really targeted to families,” Torres said. “Seniors very often were the group that was left out.”

Seniors like Carmen Mercado, 64, who was on the verge of eviction from her Bronx apartment after being hit with a hefty tax bill and the unexpected cost of her sister’s funeral in Puerto Rico. Mercado was so worried about losing her home that she started losing weight and couldn’t sleep, fearing a knock on the door meant “they’re coming to kick me out of here.”

The judge in her case referred her to BronxWorks, where she was enrolled in the Senior Homelessness Prevention Project. They helped her get a bridge loan to pay her rent arrears, and then enrolled her in the Senior Citizen Rent Increase Exemption, or SCRIE, bringing her rent from $897 to $856, she said. BronxWorks also helped her with a financial management class.

“I hope they can help more people like me, like families — because when you go to court you see a thousand people there who are losing their apartments, a lot of seniors,” she said.
"Tell them to keep this program. Don’t take it away.”
Mercado retired two years ago from her job as a patient escort at Harlem Hospital. Torres noted that even people who have worked hard can find themselves struggling to pay rent.
"She worked in a hospital for 17 years, is on a pension and was about to be evicted for nonpayment of rent and would end up on the street," Torres said.

BronxWorks has been reaching out to the Bronx delegation of the City Council to seek the funding — and Councilwoman Vanessa Gibson, who represents an area where BronxWorks is active, is optimistic that it could be funded with the speaker’s discretionary funds or as a new initiative, and plans to stump for it in budget negotiations.

The program has demonstrated results, she said, and provides more than just money — services like financial planning help keep seniors stable.

“I really believe that we as a city have to do everything possible to keep families, particularly seniors, in their home,” Gibson said. “I just honestly see seniors falling through the cracks I want to do something.”

A spokeswoman for Speaker Melissa Mark-Viverito said the funding was on the table.

“Keeping New Yorkers safe in their homes and protecting our growing aging population is a priority of this City Council and this will be one of many budget proposals under review in the coming months,” Robin Levine said.