Attorney General James Announces $800,000 Grant to Further Combat NYC Deed Theft

AG James Partners with New York City Department of Housing Preservation and Development, Center for NYC Neighborhoods, and Enterprise Community Partners to Expand OAG's "Protect Our Homes" Initiative

NEW YORK – New York Attorney General Letitia James today announced an $800,000 grant to the New York City Department of Housing Preservation and Development (HPD) and the Center for New York City Neighborhoods (Center) as part of an anti-displacement program aimed at increasing awareness of scams and deed theft in vulnerable neighborhoods. The program uses settlement funds obtained by the Office of the Attorney General (OAG) and includes a Homeowner Help Desk and a grassroots "support your neighbor" outreach campaign.

The OAG's expansion of its "Protect Our Homes" initiative is a part of the New York State Anti-Displacement Learning Network, a $10 million program from Enterprise Community Partners, Inc. (Enterprise) that works to preserve community stabilization and allows residents to remain in their homes in 10 municipalities and counties across the state.

"COVID-19 has exposed and expanded the economic pressures New Yorkers were already under, and homeowners in gentrified areas throughout New York City continue to be targeted in schemes designed to steal their homes," said **Attorney General James.** "Deed theft is a crime that threatens to rip away homeownership and perpetuates a terrible cycle of displacement. This initiative is critical to helping New Yorkers stay in their homes, and my office will continue to work alongside our government and community partners to combat these predatory and heartless crimes."

The anti-displacement network grant is a dual-track program aimed at protecting homeowners at risk of financial distress, foreclosure, and displacement in South/Central Brooklyn, Southeast Queens, and the Northeastern Bronx. Using data analysis, the program will identify individual owners at higher risk of becoming the target of scammers and provide targeted outreach to these homeowners. Further, the anti-displacement network grant will support the expansion of the Homeowner Help Desk, which will be staffed by nonprofit housing experts. In addition to individual outreach, the program also includes a comprehensive outreach campaign to provide communities with the information and resources needed to protect themselves and their neighbors against scams. The Homeowner Help Desk will tailor its outreach and services to the most at-risk communities of color, focusing on the specific need to disrupt patterns of fraud, speculation, and displacement, as well as protect home equity built over decades.

"New York City takes the threat of deed theft and scams seriously, and we want to make sure struggling homeowners get the help they need to keep their homes, maintain safe, quality housing, and build equity that can be passed on to the next generation," said **HPD Commissioner Louise Carroll**.

“Especially in light of the economic effects of COVID-19, we are glad to have the support of Attorney General Letitia James as we work with the Center and so many others to actively reach out to vulnerable homeowners.”

“We are thrilled to work in partnership with the OAG, HPD, and Enterprise to deploy our Homeowner Help Desk so that New Yorkers can protect their homes, assets, and hard earned equity from scams and displacement,” said **Christie Peale, CEO/Executive Director of Center for NYC Neighborhoods.** “The Help Desk is an especially critical tool for supporting and stabilizing communities of color, reducing the racial wealth gap, and empowering homeowners and their neighbors.”

“Enterprise is pleased to fund this important strategy to ensure that homeowners have the assistance and resources to stay in their homes,” said **Elizabeth Zeldin, Director of Enterprise Community Partners**. “The ‘Protect our Homes’ expansion is a critical strategy to prevent deed theft and scams and to promote stable homeownership in key NYC neighborhoods.”

Deed theft has become a common tool of career criminals and unscrupulous real estate developers to illegally obtain real estate so they can sell it at a huge profit in high-demand housing markets, like Brooklyn. This illegal scheme especially affects people of color, the elderly, and other vulnerable homeowners who are scammed into signing over the deeds to their homes to con artists. Deed theft usually happens when scammers forge deeds to look like they purchased the home, or when homeowners are tricked into signing their homes over to a scammer without knowing what they are doing. Scammers then seek to evict the homeowner and sell the house to a third party at a significant profit.

In January 2020, Attorney General James launched the office’s “Protect Our Homes” initiative, a program that uses prevention and enforcement actions to combat deed theft in New York City. The OAG also formed an interagency deed theft taskforce with members including the district attorneys from all five boroughs in New York City and the Office of the Sheriff of the City of New York. The anti-displacement program builds off these efforts by focusing on the neighborhoods most at-risk of deed fraud, enlisting community members to talk about deed theft with their neighbors, and educating community members about how to spot deed fraud scams.

Those who believe they have experienced deed theft are encouraged to contact the OAG by calling the help line at 1-800-771-7755, emailing **deedtheft@ag.ny.gov**, or filling out the **online complaint form**.

“Deed theft has become an increasingly problematic issue in the Northeast Bronx and across the city,” said **State Senator Jamaal Bailey**. “In a day and age where the COVID-19 pandemic is still plaguing our communities, we need to ensure that our residents are protected, aware of deed theft, and do not become displaced. I would like to thank Attorney General Letitia James for her advocacy and action in order to combat this through her 'Protect Our Homes' initiative. I would also like to thank the New York City Department of Housing Preservation and Development and Center for New York City

Neighborhoods, for their work in the anti-displacement program and educating the public on how to prevent these deed scams and thefts."

"In middle class communities like those I represent, folks' homes are their nest eggs," said **State Senator Leroy Comrie**. "House speculation, deed theft, and other types of fraud are an imminent threat to the financial security of many at-risk, middle, and fixed-income homeowners. I applaud Attorney General Letitia James for committing this funding to NYC HPD and the Center for New York City Neighborhoods."

"Protecting homeowners from deed fraud, theft, and other tactics used to displace long-time is a priority for our office," said **State Senator Zellnor Myrie**. "I'm grateful to the Attorney General, HPD, the Center for NYC Neighborhoods, and Enterprise Community Partners for supporting this critical work, and for building on our efforts to stabilize communities in Central Brooklyn."

"I want to thank Attorney General James for putting together this grant and partnering with community stakeholders to help in the fight of deed theft," said **Assemblymember Alicia Hyndman**. "For far too long, our communities have seen a tremendous increase in scams targeting vulnerable homeowners. The expansion of this program will ensure the much-needed awareness and support for our homeowners to combat this menace."

"Homeownership creates stability, security, and generational wealth for individuals and their families throughout our great state," said **Assemblymember Diana Richardson**. "I proudly support these programs being implemented by the Attorney General to keep families in their homes by further protecting them from the many bad actors seeking to displace them for the sole reason of turning a profit."

"We are excited that Attorney General James is working to combat deed theft," said **Assemblymember Clyde Vanel.** "We must ensure that our neighbors are not robbed of their family home and generational wealth. Too often New Yorkers lose homes, to unscrupulous tactics, that they have worked to pay off in thirty years. This program will help protect our neighborhoods and the family homes."

"Committing ourselves to protecting and preserving homeownership in our city's Black and brown communities is critical," said **Council Member Adrienne Adams**. "The Attorney General's provision of an $800,000 grant to the New York City Department of Housing Preservation and Development and the Center for New York City Neighborhoods to increase the awareness of scams and deed theft is a much-needed boost to keep low- to moderate-income residents in their homes. Expansion of the Homeowner Help Desk and greater community outreach will further support housing stabilization in vulnerable neighborhoods. I salute and thank Attorney General Letitia James for her long-standing, thoughtful commitment to preserving homeownership and look forward to working together in this effort."

"Fraudsters continuously seek to deceive homeowners into signing away their property, and it has been one of my top priorities to stop them," said **Council Member Robert Cornegy, Jr., Chair of the**

Committee on Housing and Buildings. “I have held hearings and introduced several laws to prevent deed fraud. The crisis in the city has dramatically worsened, with fraudsters especially targeting the elderly, immigrants, and New Yorkers facing economic hardship. Central and Eastern Brooklyn, Bed-Stuy, Crown Heights, and Southern Queens are hit especially hard. I commend the Attorney General for giving us a new tool to fight deed theft, and I call on all my community partners to make sure everyone knows about this important new resource.”

“All too often, predatory bad actors attempt to manipulate and deceive homeowners during their time of crisis, worsening an already difficult situation,” said **Council Member I. Daneek Miller**. “With the expansion of this initiative and its tailored, pro-active outreach to vulnerable homeowners, we have another powerful tool in our toolbox to protect and preserve the livelihoods of Southeast Queens residents. I commend Attorney General Letitia James for her longstanding leadership dating back to her time as Public Advocate and the work we were able to accomplish together on behalf of Southeast Queens residents.”

“Deed theft has been a crime that has affected so many communities, especially Black and brown communities like the Northeast section of the Bronx,” said **Council Member Kevin C. Riley**. “This practice of forgery and deception has forced our neighbors’ hand in giving up their assets without knowing. Thank you, New York Attorney General Letitia James for continuing the much-needed efforts on protecting our American Dream of becoming homeowners. This investment of funding is the first step to addressing this crisis that has been a financial and mental burden for many homeowners in district 12. I look forward to working with HPD and the Center in implementing and advocating for more protective measures to ensure we continue to protect, educate, and empower our homeowners.”

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