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## COMMUNITY BOARD NO. 2, MANHATTAN

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The Social Services Committee of Community Board No. 2, Manhattan held its regular monthly meeting on May 26, 2022, at 6:30pm by Zoom videoconference.

Committee Members Present: Ivy Kwan Arce, William Benesh, Keen Berger, Ritu Chattree, Wayne Kawadler, Adam Zeldin (Vice Chair)

Public Members Present: Rachel Yarmolinsky

Committee Members Absent With Notice: John Paul DeVerna, Ryder Kessler, Susanna Aaron (Chair)

Other CB2 Members Present: Carter Booth, Matt Metzger

CB2 Staff Present: Bob Gormley, District Manager

Agenda A conversation with Mobilization for Justice (MFJ) on their ten-year grant, recently expired, to provide legal services to tenants in Community District 2.

### Panelists

From Mobilization for Justice: Mark Liston, *Community Liaison*; Tiffany Femiano, *Supervising Attorney for Housing Rights & CB2 programs*

### Background

In 2012, MFJ received a 10-year, \$100,000/year grant from the Rudin Management Company to operate a tenant-assistance program in Community District 2, Manhattan, as a community benefit stemming from the development of Rudin's Greenwich Lane residential complex on the former St. Vincent's Hospital campus. This agreement was reached through negotiations among The New York City Council, Former Mayor Michael Bloomberg, CB2 Manhattan, and Rudin Development, Inc. Mobilization for Justice has provided dedicated tenant advocacy services clinics in Community Board 2 for the past ten years, but **the formal agreement to provide these services will end this year**. Mobilization for Justice last attended a Community Board 2 meeting in 2019, providing an overview of the caseload and services provided at that time.

### Summary

While the formal agreement for MFJ to provide legal clinics in Community District 2 ends this year, MFJ's services will still be available residents. MFJ has offered services in CD2 for over 50 years, and it seeks to continue to offer (and expand) its services by partnering with community organizations in our area and by receiving continued funding support from elected officials. These partnering organizations can help by providing information about MFJ services and resources that answer common questions. While MFJ seeks to maintain a clinic in CD2,

residents of CD2 can continue to utilize in-person clinics that may be located in other areas of the city.

Report (Note: the report paraphrases or summarizes quotations and elements of the presentation.)

## **Overview of Organization**

### *Organization history:*

Mark Papish: We were formerly known as Mobilization for Youth, founded in the Lower East Side in 1962. MFJ was the legal arm of that organization, and we incorporated into our own organization in 1968. Currently, we have two offices, one in lower Manhattan and one in the Bronx. We have over 150 staffers operating in all five boroughs and offering legal services. We have four different project areas, and last year alone, we served over 13,000 households New York City.

### *Primary Project Areas for MFJ:*

*Housing Rights* – This is a project where Tiffany Femiano is presently working as supervising attorney. That work encompasses everything from anti-eviction work to tenant harassment claims, repairs, and anti-foreclosure work. That project actually accounts for roughly 60% of the work we do in New York City. After the failure of the eviction moratorium, it's a busy area. Specific issues include asserting rent regulation rights, ensuring that apartments remain accessible and livable, and ensuring that reasonable accommodations are made to seniors and those with disabilities (e.g., so that construction can't be used to push out a rent-regulated tenant).

*Disability & Aging* – This area addresses issues affecting seniors and/or individuals experiencing disabilities, including issues of discrimination, Access-a-Ride quality, and adult home advocacy (e.g., discharges, including into homeless shelters).

*Children's Rights* – This addresses issues facing students in DOE (e.g., when a student's Individualized Education Program is not met or not available). In addition, this project includes kinship caregiver law. This work is a bit more of a traditional family law practice - in NYS you are given counsel by the state if you are biological parent, but if a parent isn't biological (e.g., if s/he is adoptive), they don't get counsel, but we know there are often situations where living with the non-biological parent has a strong benefit to children in terms of better outcomes. We seek to keep as many children out of the foster care system as possible if there are other, preferable options.

*Economics Justice* – This might be our most extensive project in terms of service offered. This area addresses topics – from identity theft to consumer rights and our immigration law efforts (including asylum cases and adjustments of status).

*Mental Health Focus* – This is a group of staff who function as general practitioners, practicing across all four areas, with the emphasis on helping folks that have been diagnosed with a mental illness.

CB2 Volume and Demand Characteristics:

*Volume* - Mark Papish: Our services in CB2 peaked in FY 2015, as we handled over 460 cases in Community Board 2. Service numbers fluctuated over the decade, hitting a low of 168 in FY 20 as the COVID 19 Pandemic forced us to close our in-person services.

*Demand Characteristics* - Tiffany Femiano: The majority of our clients in CB2 are seniors in rent-regulated apartments and a majority of cases relate to residents trying to assert rent-stabilized rights. During the pandemic, we have provided significant advice and counsel advocacy services and even full case reference in certain instances. Fiscal Year 2020 reflects a total and abrupt shift and in the way that all legal services providers worked with clients and so, of course, the numbers reflect that. During the pandemic, we saw people who were once gainfully employed and earning substantial income finding themselves unemployed and at a total loss of income and falling vastly into rental arrears. We've consistently provided advice and counsel to those tenants. We also helped tenants in roommate situations who were experiencing problems such as harassment.

Service Involvements:

*Legal Clinics* - We generally have mostly provided advice and counsel through our walk-in clinics. This is meant to be just a brief interaction with a community member who can walk right in ask a legal question of an advocate and either receive information on the spot or receive some follow-up information looking into a more complex legal issue or asking for more information and developing a little bit more of a relationship.

*Extended Advocacy* - We also have always provided extended advocacy services to community members, and that can range from writing letters to landlords or administrative agencies to even ghostwriting advocacy letters or complaints with administrative agencies to assert rent-regulated rights.

*Legal Representation* - In certain circumstances, when tenants may have an active eviction proceeding or an active risk of eviction, we carefully consider whether we can take the case.

Pandemic Service Format:

Tiffany Femiano: When in-person clinics were closed during the pandemic, we aggressively ramped up our hotline phone intake. At one point during the height of the pandemic, we were operating the phones 9am to 5pm every single day with constant call volume, including from CB2 residents.

Sustaining Service Following 10-Year CB2 Contract Expiration

*Organization partnerships* - Mark Papish: We can aggressively pursue new partnerships with community organizations, for example operating a clinic at The Center on W. 13<sup>th</sup> St. We will seek assistance from the Community Board to identify new partners.

*Funding* - Mark Papish: We seek advocacy from the Community Board to ensure funding is made available, for example, through underscoring our needs to elected officials – most of whom are aware of budgetary needs.

### **Why might demand levels be declining since the 2015 peak in CB2?**

Tiffany Femiano: One of the clinics where the MFJ booth was located might not have been so easy to get to, and I think that may have served as a bit of a deterrent. In building partnerships with the community, it's very important for people to know about the program.

### **Does community awareness generally correlate with high utilization of the program?**

Mark Papish: Our highest numbers are in areas where we have the deepest relationships, mostly with elected officials. For example, in the Bronx, we partner with a State Senator who helps connect us with other events like backpack giveaways and career days, and through that, we're also working with other non-profits and legal services. This includes a recent partnership focusing on an education-based model to resolve cases before they need legal intervention.

We are focusing on expanding partnerships with electeds and also with other community-based organizations that might better be able to identify individuals in need of legal information or services.

### **While many still need services, is CB2's lower caseload due to a more affluent community?**

Tiffany Femiano: The demographics are different than some of the other communities that MFJ serves, but the people who do need our services do need to be assisted and need help.

Mark Papish: There's a lot of stratification of wealth, and we want to make sure that we can broaden our offerings so that folks in CB2 don't have to travel to different parts of the city to get help, which is something we've seen in other areas.

### **How is MFJ funded?**

Mark Papish: Funding primarily comes from state and city governments, including the Right to Counsel contract and state agency funding. The remainder of funding comes from foundations, individuals, etc. No funding comes from the federal government so that we can offer unrestricted services to all regardless of immigration status.

### **How does MFJ work to protect the rent-regulated status of apartments?**

Tiffany Femiano: A lot of work in CB2 has been securing succession rights in rent regulated apartments, which is an effective way to keep a rent regulated apartment as such for as long as possible because it becomes a generational asset.

MFJ was involved in the passage of the Housing Stability & Tenant Protection Act in 2019, which puts requirements on the amount of money a landlord must spend on improvements before an apartment can be deregulated. MFJ works with tenants to review rent history and improvement history to determine whether an apartment should be regulated.

**Does MFJ take policy positions (e.g., on 421a) and would MFJ expand its advocacy role?**

Mark Papish: MFJ housing advocacy is often overshadowed by Housing Justice for All, which is a statewide organization made up of various tenant organizations, legal services providers, etc. MFJ does not have as much weight as other organizations in that group, but MFJ will continue to fight for good policy. In the example, 421a causes units to age out of stabilization and incentivizes new construction every 10-15 years – this might not be the best route to create more affordable housing stock.

We have a director of housing policy who consistently writes articles on housing policy, and she's very influential at the state level for housing policy.

**Can individuals in rent-regulated homes covered by the Loft Law facing issues following SoHo/NoHo rezoning call your organization for help?**

Mark Papish: MFJ tends to stay out of rezoning topics but does indeed provide services to tenants facing issues.

ADDITIONAL QUESTIONS TO EXPLORE

- What are the best organizations to partner with MFJ, and how can these organizations most effectively and efficiently provide information to community members?
- Is the in-person legal clinic the most effective way to provide services to CD2 residents?
- What specific funding is necessary to continue to provide in-person clinics in CD2?