

Bill would provide Housing Court lawyers for seniors

by patrick arden / metro new york

> [email this to a friend](#)

NOV 15, 2007

CITY HALL. A bill to provide free lawyers to senior citizens in Housing Court will be introduced today by City Councilwoman Rosie Mendez, D-Manhattan.

While people have a right to free legal counsel in criminal courts, the legislation would represent a first for civil cases. To be eligible, seniors must earn under \$27,000 a year and be in jeopardy of losing their homes. So far, 21 Council members have expressed their support.

“Housing court is unique among civil proceedings, because you have a high volume of people who don't have attorneys,” explained Louise Seeley of the City-Wide Task Force on Housing Court. Yet landlords are typically represented. “It's very difficult for the court, even when it tries, to level the playing field.”

Seniors are especially vulnerable, Seeley said, not only due to “health and age issues.” They're often long-time residents who therefore occupy the least expensive rent-regulated apartments. “There may be more of an incentive to force them out,” Seeley said.

The Department of Aging already has a \$1 million pilot program that has provided free attorneys paired with social workers to 500 seniors in Housing Court this year. But Mendez and Councilman Alan Gerson, D-Manhattan, requested a study from the city's Independent Budget Office, which found a fully funded program would cost approximately \$10 million to serve an estimated 8,000 to 10,000 seniors annually.