Chairperson Williams, members of the Committee, thank you for the opportunity to speak today about the NYU Furman Center’s work on the important issue of affordable housing in New York City.

My name is Jessica Yager. I am the Executive Director of the NYU Furman Center. The Furman Center is a research center at NYU that advanced research and debate on housing, neighborhoods, and urban policy. In addition to conducting empirical and legal research on urban policy issues, providing data and analysis about housing and neighborhoods is central to our mission.

Since 2011, the City Council has supported our efforts to make data about affordable housing and neighborhoods publicly available and usable. The Council’s generous support over the years has enabled us to enhance our Subsidized Housing Information Project (or SHIP), a free interactive database that allows users to access information about subsidized housing in New York City. The SHIP database is the only database of its kind, presenting detailed data from the city, state, and federal government about subsidized housing units in New York City. The SHIP allows users to see information about the location of subsidized housing, the number of buildings and units in a subsidized development, development ownership, finances, physical conditions, and information about the types of subsidies a development receives, the regulating agencies, and the nature and length of the affordability restrictions on a property.

Thanks to the Council’s support, the SHIP is undergoing a redesign that will greatly improve the user’s experience, making the tool more accessible to a broader audience. In addition to improving the design and functionality of the site, we are also adding new data to the database. The SHIP will now include data on a number of subsidized housing programs that were not included previously, including public housing, the Inclusionary Housing Program, Low-Income Affordable Marketplace Program (LAMP), the Article 8A Loan Program, and property tax programs (including 421-a and 420-c). We plan to also include information on new residential construction. In addition, our redesign of the website will make it much easier for users to explore local demographic and economic data alongside subsidized housing data.
We are very grateful for the City Council’s ongoing support for SHIP. We are currently requesting continued funding from the Council for FY17, which will allow us to continue to operate and update the SHIP and also pursue two other, related projects designed to enhance the public understanding of real estate and neighborhoods in New York City. I would like to briefly outline our FY17 proposal for you.

The first part of our FY 17 request would support the on-going maintenance of the newly enhanced SHIP database. We believe that the redesign of the SHIP will not only make the tool more useful tool for our existing user base, but also make the data accessible to a wider audience. The on-going maintenance of the website and the annual updating of the now-expanded data sources to keep the information timely and relevant are significant on-going costs for us. We hope that the Council will continue to support our ability to maintain this important, and soon to be improved, tool.

The second project included in our FY 17 request is a new initiative called Neighborhood Portraits. The project would create detailed portraits of housing and economic conditions in New York City’s neighborhood. We will produce a user-friendly platform for these portraits, making data and graphics accessible to a wide range of audiences. We will also conduct outreach to residents, community leaders, and policymakers to get these portraits into the hands of people who can use them.

Finally, we are seeking funding to continue our Tracking Ownership Patterns Project, which was also included in our grant from the Council for the current fiscal year. Over half of New York City households live in multifamily rental buildings, yet we know little about the owners of these properties. Owners of rental property often take title in the name of a single-use holding company, such as an LLC, (rather than in their own name) to limit their liability in case of an accident on site. Although there is nothing necessarily nefarious about this system, a side effect is that it obscures the true identities of owners and the full extent of their portfolios.

In collaboration with computer science researchers from the NYU Tandon School of Engineering, we have developed a novel methodology for connecting these single-use entities to each other in New York City, using a variety of state and local administrative datasets. These publicly available datasets offer clues that can help us to connect one holding company to another, exposing otherwise hidden connections between nominally unrelated property owners. With support from the City Council this year, we have produced a prototype dataset of apparent ownership portfolios, and are now in the midst of testing the data and refining the algorithm. In the coming year, we hope to complete this process, and make this tool publicly available via an interactive mapping platform.

All of the projects for which we seek funding will make new data and analysis about New York City neighborhoods available to the public. We believe that all three of the projects for which we seek funding will make significant contributions to our understanding about the state of housing and neighborhoods in our city, leading to more informed policy making and service provision.
Thank you again for the opportunity to testify today, and for your continued support of the Furman Center. I am happy to answer any questions you may have.

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