

**Brooklyn, NY** (November 20) – In an amazing show of support, hundreds of neighbors, elected officials, and community groups joined together on Sunday, November 20, in Crown Heights Brooklyn to demand that landlord Yehuda Gruenberg put an end to the extreme harassment of longtime tenant Francis Roberts and finally fix dangerous living conditions that have been plaguing Mr. Roberts for years.

Francis Roberts, a 77-year-old Afro-Caribbean immigrant who has lived 972 Park Place for over 20 years, has been the victim of escalating harassment by his landlord Yehuda Gruenberg and a man named Aaron Akaberi, whom Roberts believed the landlord installed in the building to bully Mr. Roberts out after he refused a buyout offer. The harassment includes breaking into Francis's apartment, grilling food in Mr. Roberts's hallway, blocking the entrance with tents and port-o-potties, making threats, playing loud music, destroying locks and removing doors, and locking Francis into his apartment. The stoop has been strewn with live chickens, tarps, trash, and raw sewage. And an unidentified party was recently accused of leaving a noose on a tree in Mr. Roberts's front yard. Gruenberg also refuses to address mold, leaks, faulty electrical wiring, and other structural issues inside Mr. Roberts's apartment. Mr. Roberts is suing Gruenberg for the harassment and disrepairs and is being represented by Brooklyn Legal Services' Tenant Rights Coalition. Roberts and neighbors are being organized by Crown Heights Tenant Union and Crown Heights Care Collective.

"This is criminal. This is heartless," said **long-time tenant Francis Roberts**. "How can all of this be going on and they expect the community not to react? Why doesn't [the city] respond? Isn't there a mechanism that exists to make sure that somebody not only responds but is held accountable? In a city that has a multi-billion dollar budget like New York?"

- **Photos of event, harassment, and disrepairs** [here](#)
- **Read lawsuit filed against landlord** [here](#)

### **History of Harassment and Neglect**

Much of the above harassment Mr. Roberts has experienced has been at the hands of notorious local character Aaron Akaberi, whom the lawsuit alleges Mr. Gruenberg moved onto the property in May 2022. Akaberi is an outcast of the Chabad world, having previously been arrested in conjunction with running numerous drug houses and providing drugs to children. He remains on the fringes of the religious community. Since Akaberi moved into 972 Park Place, the building has transformed into a spot to use and purchase narcotics, along with many violent altercations between drug buyers and sellers. According to Mr. Roberts's lawsuit, one of the landlord's "associates" told a neighbor they were there to help "get that n----- out of his unit."

Residents also referenced the failure of HPD, NYPD, and other city agencies and representatives to protect Mr. Roberts and his rights and referenced the city-wide trend of tenants organizing against landlord harassment, gentrification, and tenant elder abuse. Mr. Roberts noted that after the building's boiler had been sabotaged by a landlord's associate, each of his many complaints about the broken heat in his building had been prematurely closed by HPD without remedy.

972 Park Place has hundreds of active violations from the Department of Buildings, the Department of Housing Preservation and Development, and the Department of Sanitation, with issues with multiple leaks, mold intrusion, faulty electrical wiring, and other structural flaws. Francis's rent has been legally reduced by DHCR in recognition of the poor condition of the unit.

Community members call the city's lack of meaningful response to the escalating situation a consequence of persistent environmental racism, as housing developments in gentrifying neighborhoods continue to apply undue pressure to Black-Jewish race relations in Crown Heights.

### **A Blind Eye To Gentrification**

Mr. Roberts's story is not unusual. Mr. Roberts is one of thousands of Black, elderly New Yorkers systematically victimized by unsafe living conditions as one strategy for pushing out long-term residents to turn a profit by increasing rents for newer tenants. Mr. Roberts's situation, then, is but one unfortunate symptom of gentrification in Crown Heights amid a worsening housing crisis that disproportionately hurts the elderly.

Across New York, landlords have warehoused 80,000 empty rent-stabilized units in order to inflate housing prices. Meanwhile, across New York, there are 2,600 vacant supportive housing apartment units earmarked for New Yorkers without homes and those with mental illnesses. Earlier this year, when the Rent Guidelines Board voted to pass the largest hike on rent-stabilized housing in almost a decade, Mayor Eric Adams justified the debilitating rent increase as a necessary measure to protect the interests of "small landlords" like Mr. Gruenberg, though Gruenberg, like many small-time landlords, has let his tenant's home fall into disrepair as an investment strategy.

As real estate prices in Brooklyn continue to soar, long-term residents “mainly Black, elderly residents” are expected to either try their luck finding safe, affordable housing elsewhere, risk homelessness, or else remain targets for neglect, landlord harassment, rent overcharge, and deed theft. City agencies like HPD and the NYPD fail to protect elderly residents of gentrifying neighborhoods from extreme harassment tactics by failing to enforce city ordinances. Community members are demanding a complete overhaul of the HPD enforcement system, which continues to enable dangerous living situations for black New Yorkers. Long-term tenants are subjected to dangerous living conditions as investors of distressed properties hire harassers to force tenants out to maximize profit.

“Francis Roberts has been here for decades and refuses to accept pennies on the dollar to get him out,” said **Alvin Dan of Crown Heights CARE Collective**. “Gentrification is happening fast” the block is changing fast, but it is a slow and violent process made by the decisions made by landlords who are greedy and want to get away with all of the violence that they are putting on this one man. What they didn’t count on was people actually caring about Francis, actually caring about Black lives. We are setting a precedent. You can no longer push black and brown people out of our city. And Yehuda doesn’t get away with this on his own. When the question was posed to them that if what was happening to Francis and the people of this neighborhood were happening to a white man, the NYPD actually admitted that that was the only thing that would lead them to an arrest or anything, anything at all.”

## Community Response

The cross-racial and generational group of neighbors joined a city-wide trend by organizing community safety networks to fight back against landlord abuse and HPD inaction. The 900s Park Place Block Association, with the support of the Crown Heights Tenant Union and the Crown Heights CARE Collective, have begun hosting regular community meetings with over 40 neighbors from the immediate block to organize a response to the crisis of landlord abuse and mass displacement in the neighborhood. The Crown Heights Tenant Union and the Crown Heights CARE Collective helped the block association knock on doors in the neighborhood to spread awareness about community meetings. The community groups helped the block association build a local safety network for Mr. Roberts, as well as a communication channel for neighbors and experienced housing organizers to strategize, share updates about the situation, and plan demonstrations. Neighbors also worked together to remove a tent encampment placed in Mr. Roberts’ front yard.

“It’s really important to say we didn’t start this block association. We re-started it,” said **Ari Brostoff of the Crown Heights Tenant Union**. “There was a block association here for decades that has been dormant for years because of displacement, but neighbors remember all of those years of neighbors protecting neighbors, raising each others’ children, celebrating together, which created the block that we have today.”

Brooklyn Legal Services’ Tenant Rights Coalition, a group funded by NYC’s Office of Civil Justice’s Anti-Harassment Tenant Protect program to provide free legal representation to tenants at risk of displacement, is representing Mr. Roberts.

“The landlord’s and associates’ harassment of Mr. Roberts is not only unconscionable, it is also illegal,” said **Liam McSweeney, a lawyer at Brooklyn Legal Services’ Tenant Rights Coalition working on the case**. “Sadly, city and state agencies designed to protect tenants from landlord abuse, like HPD, routinely fail to enforce violations and uphold housing codes, sending a signal to landlords like Mr. Gruenberg that they won’t face meaningful penalties for violations or for trying to force tenants like Mr. Roberts out. We see it over and over again all over the city and it must stop. Mr. Roberts just wants to live in peace and we won’t stop fighting until he gets the repairs, dignity, and justice he deserves.”

Mr. Roberts is asking community members to join him by packing the court on December 5th at 10am at 141 Livingston. Email [parkplace900@gmail.com](mailto:parkplace900@gmail.com) for more information.

*The Crown Heights CARE Collective is a community-led Brooklyn-based organization that develops community alternatives to policing and the violences of the state through shared access to resources, political education, and practical education.*

*Crown Heights Tenant Union is a union of Tenant Associations (TAs) building tenant power to end the cycle of displacement, gentrification, and rent overcharges. Building by building. Block by block.*

*Brooklyn Legal Services’ Tenant Rights Coalition (TRC) affirmatively helps tenants, tenant organizing groups, and communities fight for their housing rights, including the right for tenants to live in safe and habitable homes free from dangerous living conditions and disrepair, the right to live free of landlord harassment, and the right to remain in rapidly gentrifying neighborhoods. Our TRC units are located in every borough and are funded by NYC Human Resources Administration’s Anti-Harassment and Tenant Protection (AHTP) program” a critical tool in helping low-income tenants stay in their homes and live with dignity.*

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