

With \$42,500 grant, local nonprofit PA'LANTE to expand tenant advocacy efforts



Kirberly Flores / Staff Photographer

NEIGHBORHOOD TIES | “PA'LANTE says, ‘I will help you, but you have to help your neighbor,’” founder Elsia Vasquez said.

BY [CHRIS MEYER](#) / Spectator Senior Staff Writer
April 11, 2:12am

Elsia Vasquez can't get a moment's peace.

Three times a week, Vasquez—the founder and executive director of tenant advocacy organization PA'LANTE Harlem—meets with dozens of tenants from across Northern Manhattan, discussing problems ranging from rodent infestations to reductions in rent-stabilized apartments.

This “intake process,” a routine for the office's volunteers, is just one of the operational costs that a \$42,500 grant from the West Harlem Local Development Corporation will help fund. PA'LANTE, which Vasquez established in 2006, was one of just four local housing organizations to receive money in the corporation's recent grant cycle, in which it doled out a total of \$2 million of Columbia's money to 83 neighborhood organizations.

PA'LANTE, which stands for People Against Landlord Abuse and Tenant Exploitation, works to protect tenants in both rent-stabilized and cooperative apartment buildings. During intake hours, tenants from around the neighborhood bring paperwork about their rent payments and lease information to the organization's volunteers. PA'LANTE then helps them deal with city and state agencies, organize into tenants associations, and push landlords to make necessary changes.

Vasquez said her organization often deals with rampant abuse in rent payments, pointing to one case in which the tenant was owed roughly \$100,000 in rent credit to compensate for years of overcharging by the landlord. And as PA'LANTE has grown, so has Vasquez's confidence in the organization's work.

“When landlords see this, they need to hire an attorney because we're so good at it,” Vasquez said, referring to a list of complaints, such as rat and bedbug infestation, that tenants in one West Harlem building were planning to submit to their landlord. “But in reality, just skip the attorney, and fix it. Get a crew, get a licensed crew, and get it done.”

In order to respond to complaints about local landlords, Vasquez said PA'LANTE often encourages individual tenants to form larger organizations within their buildings, which could prevent further issues from emerging.

“PA'LANTE says, ‘I will help you, but you have to help your neighbor,’” Vasquez said. “And if you don’t help your neighbor, I’m not going to help you again.”

Although PA'LANTE deals mostly with landlord-tenant conflicts in rent-stabilized apartments, Vasquez said she was seeing more cases concerning cooperative apartments, which are formerly city-owned apartment buildings sold to a group of tenants rather than to a private landlord.

Rosa Williams, 85, came to PA'LANTE two years ago to help organize the tenants in her cooperative apartment after the president of the building’s board was accused of embezzling roughly \$50,000 in funds. She now works part-time as a volunteer with the organization.

“For me, it meant bread in my children’s mouth, so I was very disgusted about it,” she said, referring to the problems in her building. “Someone told us about PA'LANTE and we went to a meeting, and they really did help us tremendously. I’ve been able to see them put a roof over the heads of children and senior citizens like myself.”

The organization has also increased its work with undocumented immigrants, many of whom cannot find help at legal aid nonprofits without citizenship papers.

Gasper Rivera, a tenant leader at an apartment building on 134th Street, said PA'LANTE had “been there every step of the way” with his group, especially with respect to undocumented immigrants.

“Some of the tenants come from outside the country, so they don’t know their rights or how the system works,” he said.

[Spectator reported in January](#) that PA'LANTE had hoped the grant would be enough to keep a lawyer on retainer full-time, a change that Vasquez estimated could cost roughly \$300,000.

But with the WHLDC opting to fund over 80 organizations, PA'LANTE and other organizations had to settle for smaller amounts. Still, Vasquez says she is pleased that she doesn’t have to worry about the operational expenses of her growing nonprofit.

“We’re happy and we’re thankful because that is the most we have ever received in a grant so far,” said Vasquez, whose organization helped an estimated 611 families in 2012, almost double the number served in 2011. “Everything has a cost, and we’re very happy that we got this money.”

Although the grant is helping fund the organization’s day-to-day operations, Vasquez said she also hopes to benefit from the Affordable Housing Fund outlined in Columbia’s Community Benefits Agreement, which will contribute roughly \$20 million to affordable housing initiatives around the Manhattanville expansion.

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reply

SPECTRUM

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By Shira Lerner
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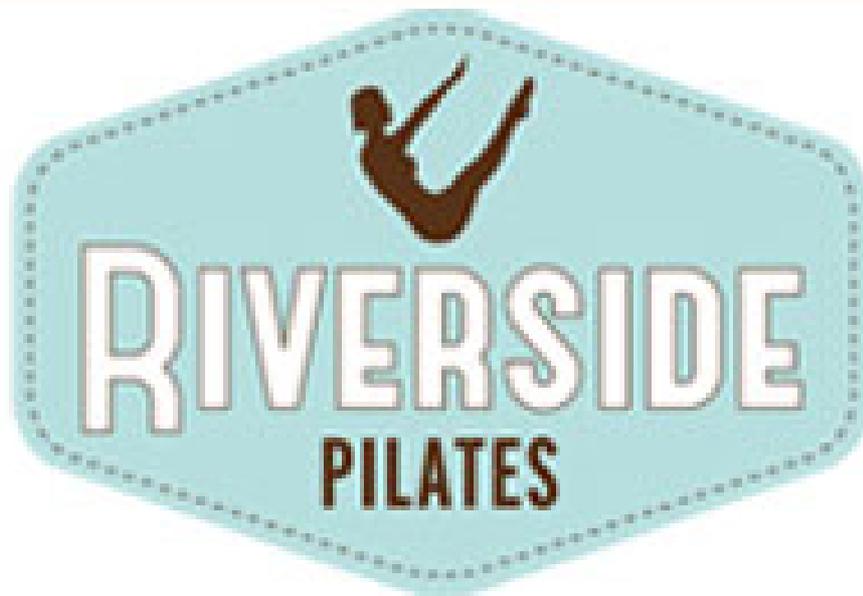
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