COMMITTEE TO END HOMELESSNESS BY THE YEAR 2026
In winter 2020, there were nearly 80,000 people unhoused in New York City, the highest number in the city's history. This situation is an unnecessary tragedy, and is the result of an economic system that does not support the needs of the general population of New York City residents. The system as it exists today is inhumane, flawed, wasteful, and self-perpetuating. It is not designed to end homelessness; at best it accommodates it, and at worst it punishes the poor. The primary populations of New Yorkers in shelters are men, women, and families of color, predominantly Black, and come out of historically redlined neighborhoods that this city has neglected with its education, environmental, health, and housing dollars.

One of the biggest tragedies is the number of school-aged children residing in shelter or unhoused, and the lifelong trauma and intrinsic barriers to educational success inherent in being without a home. There were 1,300 babies born in shelters this year. The city's shelter system has come to substitute for other forms of social safety net and government care that should be available: rental assistance, supportive housing for those leaving institutional settings, and more. Shelter residents have little hope of finding affordable housing, and instead languish in the system for months or years.

In March of 2020, a group of organizations who service all aspects of homelessness—attorneys, housing specialists, and directly impacted homeless advocates—came together on a mission to address and end the homelessness crisis in New York City.

The stated mission of the Committee to End Homelessness by the Year 2026 (CTEH26) was to design a realistic, pragmatic vision and roadmap for the end of systemic homelessness in New York City by the year 2026, transitioning to permanent housing for all. The current system, in addition to being harmful and inhumane, is economically unsustainable and grossly inefficient. Our report includes reimagining the New York City budget with the aim of transforming the current housing and shelter administrative agencies into a system that provides housing for all; developing a supportive, humane, and safe shelter system for people in crisis; and a blueprint for transitioning from a system focused on temporary housing to a system that offers permanent housing solutions for all New Yorkers.
The Committee to End Homelessness

The Committee to End Homelessness was convened by the Office of the Public Advocate in partnership with activists and organizations, including:

Delsenia Glover, **Office of the NYC Public Advocate**
Sara Newman, **Open Hearts Initiative**
Beatriz De La Torre, **Trinity Wall Street**
Brendan Cheney, **New York Housing Conference**
Reginald T. Brown, M. Ed., **VOCAL-NY**
Corinne Low, **Open Hearts Initiative**
Shams DaBaron a.k.a. **Da Homeless Hero**
Samuel Stein, **Community Service Society**
Executive Summary

Established in 1981 following the legal advocacy of New Yorkers experiencing homelessness and activists, New York City's right to shelter was a groundbreaking achievement. In the succeeding decades, New Yorkers experiencing homelessness and advocates successfully fought to expand and deepen the right to shelter. The right to shelter has always been necessary but not sufficient—and that insufficiency is especially clear today. As the affordability crisis has worsened, more people are entering shelters, and it has become more difficult for them to exit. In January 1983, 4,509 single adults lived in New York City shelters. Today, that number has more than quadrupled, peaking at 20,822 in February 2021.\(^1\) On average, New Yorkers who are homeless in all types of households are staying longer in shelter than ever before. For families, the average length of shelter stay has skyrocketed to over 500 days.\(^2\) A shelter system designed to serve as an emergency stop-gap has become a place where people languish.

It is hard to know the true number of people experiencing homelessness in New York City, but estimates place the shelter population between approximately 48,000 and 60,000,\(^3,4,5\) with another several thousand living on the street. What is clear is that the city's current efforts to combat homelessness are not working. The shelter system provides temporary housing for people and families in crisis, but the increasing cost of housing and finite amount of housing assistance available prevents many from permanently moving out of homelessness.

The most effective solution to homelessness is to provide permanent, affordable housing, with support for those who need them. Shelters are necessary to rapidly respond to those who need immediate assistance, but New York City's focus on expanding shelters rather than permanent housing has resulted in overcrowded shelters and a limited supply of affordable housing options. This report outlines how New York City can end homelessness by the year 2026: through permanent, affordable housing, shelters that work to get people back on their feet quickly, and social services that allow people to continue to stay in their homes and to prevent people from becoming homeless in the first place.

With a new mayoral administration and City Council session, New York City has a renewed opportunity to truly commit to ending homelessness and prioritizing creating permanent and affordable housing for all who need it.

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2. Ibid.
Overview of the Problem

New York City currently spends $4.2 billion on homeless services, including $3.4 billion on sheltering people who are homeless. Most of the city’s homeless shelters are funded and overseen by the Department of Homeless Services, which contracts out with nonprofits to run the individual shelters. Three other agencies run shelters targeted to specific populations, which are described later in this chapter.

This sprawling shelter system is effective at providing shelter to people in crisis, but is ineffective at helping people move to permanent housing. The length of time people stay in city shelters is, on average, between 476 days and 773 days across the Department of Homeless Services's (DHS) three systems, leaving the shelters to function less like temporary shelter and more like long-term housing.

DHS Shelters

The traditional DHS shelters are divided into three systems serving different populations: single adults, families with children, and adult families with no minor children (either a parent and a child over 18 or adult couples).

For the vast majority of the city's shelters, the city contracts with nonprofit organizations to run the shelter. Only a small number, like the 30th Street shelter, the family PATH intake shelter, and several others, are run by the city. The shelter buildings themselves are sometimes owned by the city, sometimes by the nonprofit, and sometimes by a for-profit real estate company.

DHS uses two different types of facilities for shelters: buildings dedicated for shelter use and commercial hotel rooms. Until recently, the city also used private apartments being rented as shelter units, called “clusters.” The buildings that are dedicated to shelter use are further categorized as either Tier II, Tier II look-alikes, and family hotels.

Tier II shelters are state-regulated shelters that provide private rooms; access to three meals a day; supervision; assessment services; permanent housing support; recreational information; and referral, health, and child-care services. Tier II look-alikes are buildings that are fully occupied by DHS clients who are homeless and have similar services to certified Tier II facilities, but do not have state-certified plans. Family hotels are hotels or apartment buildings fully occupied by DHS clients but do not have on-site social services.
Single Adults

The DHS shelters for single adults currently serve roughly 16,500 people who stay for 476 days on average. Single adult shelters are typically congregate settings, with as many as a dozen or more people sharing a room. “I’ve been to shelters with 30 people sharing a room,” said Shams DaBaron, a.k.a. Da Homeless Hero, an activist who has experienced homelessness.

There are 150 shelters in the single adult system, including 41 commercial hotels with 4,600 shelter beds and 112 traditional shelter buildings with more than 13,200 units. The traditional shelters include general population shelters and specialty shelters—such as MICA (Mentally Ill and Chemically Addicted) shelters—reflecting the varying needs of single adults who are homeless, including shelters focusing on mental health, substance use, and employment. Some of the general population shelters serve specific populations like young adults, LGBTQ+ people, older adults, and veterans. Not all shelters provide specialty services: “Traditional shelters may have ‘employment’ shelters or cater to employed residents, but in every shelter I’ve been to the shelter itself did not provide services on site for shelter clients,” Shams reported.

Single adult men seeking shelter must go to the East 30th Street Intake Center, run by DHS. Single women can go to either the Women’s Shelter in East New York, Brooklyn or the Franklin Shelter in Morrisania in the Bronx, both run by HELP USA.

There are two caveats. First, single adults who were in a DHS shelter in the last 12 months should return to the shelter at which they were last staying. Second, people who are unsheltered and who decline to enter the city’s traditional shelter system can be placed into Safe Havens—low-threshold shelters favored by people who are unsheltered—by homeless outreach workers. However, there are not enough Safe Haven shelters to accommodate those who may prefer that option. “If I decline a shelter placement, I am told to go back to 30th Street and they simply assign me to another shelter,” explained Shams. “Safe Haven options may happen but I’ve never been offered that opportunity.”

Unlike families, single adults do not need to prove they need shelter. In fact, they do not even need to have identification. After intake, single adults are assigned to an assessment shelter.

Families with Children

The Department of Homeless Services shelters for families with children serve 8,500 families with children every day, with families staying 520 days on average. Early in the city’s response to family homelessness, families were housed in congregate settings (called Tier I shelters) and welfare hotels. The city stopped using Tier I as shelters due to litigation and switched to housing families in their own private units, called Tier II shelters. Unlike the single adult shelter system, the DHS does not have program shelters for families with children experiencing homelessness, instead funding a one-size-fits-all approach.

Families with children enter shelter by going to the city-run PATH (Prevention Assistance and Temporary Housing) center in the South Bronx. At PATH, staff first offer services that could prevent the family from needing to enter shelter, including crisis counseling and mediation that could help the family keep their current housing. After intake, families are assigned a conditional placement to a family shelter while DHS investigates the family’s history and needs. The investigation can take as long as ten days, after

8 https://www1.nyc.gov/site/dhs/about/shelter-repair-scorecard.page
which if they are found eligible they will stay at their conditional placement shelter. If a family is found ineligible, families can start the process over again by reentering the PATH shelter.

**Adult Families**

The adult family system supports roughly 1,500 families with no minor children, sheltering a total of 3,200 individuals. Adult families include childless couples as well as parents living with adult children. This system, like the families with children shelter system, is one-size-fits-all and does not have specialty shelters. Adult families stay longer in shelter on average than single adults and families with children, staying an average of 773 days in 2021. The adult family system is currently using 2 hotels with 212 units for shelter and 14 buildings with 1,400 units in traditional shelters.

**Safe Havens and Other DHS Short-Term Beds**

In addition to the standard shelters for people who are homeless who come into the system seeking temporary housing, DHS also has shelters that predominantly serve people who were recently living unsheltered—living on the street or other public places—rather than enter the regular shelter system. The most prominent of these types of shelters is the Safe Haven, which is referred to as low-threshold because they have limited rules and regulations, including no sobriety requirements or curfews. People who are chronically unsheltered are often much more willing to enter a Safe Haven than a traditional single adult shelter. Currently more than 1,300 people are staying in Safe Haven units.

Another option for people who are unsheltered funded by DHS are drop-in centers, which provide chairs and food, and sometimes showers and services, for people to come in temporarily. There are no beds, though people often sleep sitting up in the chairs. According to DHS stats, nearly 170 people stayed in their drop-in centers overnight on a recent night.

There are also faith beds—also called stabilization or respite beds—funded by the city, for people that need fewer supports, that are also used for people who were recently unsheltered and are tied to homeless outreach or drop-in centers.

There are another 200 short-term beds for veterans. Veterans experiencing homelessness who enter DHS intake can be referred to transitional housing at either the 243-unit Borden Avenue Veterans Residence for male and female veterans, or Porter Avenue, which serves 138 male veterans with an employment focus.

**HRA HASA Shelters**

The Human Resources Administration HIV/AIDS Services Administration (HASA) serves New Yorkers living with HIV or AIDS, including case management, assistance with benefits, and housing assistance. New or existing HASA clients who are homeless can request same-day emergency housing available temporarily at Service Line, located at 400 8th Avenue in Manhattan. After their emergency stay, clients

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may be placed into temporary housing in transitional supportive housing, commercial single room occupancy units, or family emergency apartments.

Transitional supportive housing is for single adults and provides a furnished private apartment with private or shared bathrooms, common spaces, meals in a common dining area, and on-site case management. Commercial SROs are for single adults or adult families and have private rooms with private or shared bathrooms. Finally, family emergency apartments are furnished private apartments. Stays in transitional housing are supposed to be temporary; a City Council report said stays are supposed to last just 90 days but sometimes are as long as two years.16

According to the census on one day in December 2021, HASA served over 2,000 people in their emergency housing and almost 800 in their transitional housing, including 64 children in families, 400 adults in families, and 2,300 single adults.17

During their temporary housing stay, HASA assists clients to secure permanent housing. HASA provides rental assistance for eligible clients, though clients have to conduct their own search and caseworkers will only provide a list of apartment brokers that have worked with HASA clients. HASA clients can also transition into permanent supportive housing, either in congregate units or scatter-site units in private apartments.18

HRA Domestic Violence Shelters

The Human Resources Administration (HRA) operates the city’s domestic violence shelters, which are specialized confidential shelters specifically for domestic violence (DV) survivors who are homeless. There are currently 2,451 emergency beds in the HRA domestic violence shelters system.19 There are several different ways a family can enter the DV shelter system, including after calling the 24-hour, seven-days-a-week domestic violence hotline operated by Safe Horizon (1-800-621-HOPE), by referral after entering the DHS shelter system (at PATH, or intake for single adults or adult families), or by referral from other city programs or community-based organizations. HRA’s domestic violence shelters have time limits, with families eligible to stay for no more than 180 days—90 days plus two 45-day extensions, if granted. Families who still lack permanent housing can transfer to DHS shelters or to the HRA Tier II transitional shelters.

In City Council testimony, HRA said that the services they provide to shelter residents include counseling, advocacy, psycho-educational groups, trauma-focused interventions with a focus on managing the crisis and trauma, strengthening coping skills, and enhancing self-sufficiency.20 Shelter locations are kept confidential to protect the survivors.

HRA has said that there are 362 units of transitional shelter, with another 100 planned to come online. According to one provider, most families stay in transitional housing for more than 8 months. On a single night in December 2021 the HRA DV shelter system housed 3,113 people including over 1,800 children.21

The time limit for emergency shelters is set by the state to ensure that the emergency units are for families at imminent risk, while the Tier II units are for families still in need of support beyond the 180 days

17 https://data.cityofnewyork.us/Social-Services/Local-Law-37-HRA-Report/e4ty-r26d
18 https://www1.nyc.gov/site/hra/help/hasa-faqs.page
21 https://data.cityofnewyork.us/Social-Services/Local-Law-37-HRA-Report/e4ty-r26d
of emergency housing. If there are no Tier II units available in the HRA system, families can transition to the DHS shelter system.

**DYCD Youth Shelters**

The Department of Youth and Community Development funds services for runaway youth and youth experiencing homelessness, including street outreach programs, drop-in centers, crisis shelters, and transitional independent living programs. Runaway youth and youth experiencing homelessness are often trying to escape neglect, abuse, conflict, forced work, sexual exploitation, and/or intolerance of their sexual or gender identity.

DYCD shelters serve youth up to age 24 that are unaccompanied by a parent or guardian and do not have a stable home. They have specialized services for young people experiencing homelessness who are pregnant and parenting; sexually exploited; or lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, or questioning. DYCD has both crisis beds and transitional independent living beds for unaccompanied youth, though the agency reports that they try to reunite youth with their families whenever possible. Crisis beds are short-term residential programs that attempt to reunite youth with their families or find transitional and long-term housing. The average time youth spend in crisis beds is roughly 20 days, according to city data.

Runaway and homeless youth transitional beds support youth experiencing homelessness between the ages of 16 and 21 for up to 18 months (or longer if the youth is not yet 18 years old when the 18-month limit is reached) and help them work towards independent living. They provide services including educational programs, vocational training, job placement assistance, counseling, and basic life skills training. The average time in transitional beds is roughly 165 days, based on city data. DYCD has 813 residential beds for runaway youth and youth and young adults experiencing homelessness.

Another concern among advocates that work with youth experiencing homelessness is the lack of housing options. According to the New York City Council report, unaccompanied youth who are homeless do not get priority for Section 8 or NYCHA and do not receive city rental assistance vouchers. More housing assistance and supportive housing for runaway youth and youth experiencing homelessness would help them leave homelessness and achieve stability.

**HPD Shelters**

The Department of Housing Preservation and Development’s (HPD) Emergency Housing Services unit serves households that have been displaced from their homes due to a fire or city-issued vacate order of their building.

HPD contracts with the American Red Cross to work with households, and the Red Cross subcontracts with hotels to place households for up to 48 hours after the emergency. The Red Cross can also continue to house clients with approval from HPD to address long-term housing needs. The average length of time a family is housed by the American Red Cross is roughly 30 days. After being housed with the Red Cross, HPD may place families with children in family living centers or single adults or adult families in single-room-occupancy hotels. HPD will also provide emergency relocation services and rehousing assistance.

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22 [https://www1.nyc.gov/site/dycd/services/runaway-homeless-youth.page](https://www1.nyc.gov/site/dycd/services/runaway-homeless-youth.page)
According to City Council-required reporting, 1,767 people were in the HPD shelter system on one night in December 2021 including, 112 housed through the American Red Cross, 855 in HPD shelters, and 800 in SROs.²⁷

**Prevention and Rental Assistance**

The city spends roughly $400 million on homelessness prevention and rental assistance programs each year. Expanding these programs would help people avoid homelessness and end episodes of homelessness much more quickly than the current system.

The city’s HomeBase program provides homelessness prevention and post-shelter support services. The program funds nonprofits in every neighborhood to provide services including assistance obtaining public benefits, emergency rental assistance and short-term financial assistance, education and job placement assistance, and financial counseling. The city spends roughly $50 million on the program citywide.

The city also provides legal assistance to help prevent people from being evicted. The City Council has passed “right to counsel” legislation which grants all people under a certain income (200 percent of the Federal Poverty Level) the right to legal representation in housing court. Before the “right to counsel” law, only one percent of tenants in housing court had an attorney. In late 2018, during the phase-in of the law, 30 percent of tenants had an attorney, including 56 percent of tenants facing an eviction in the original “right to counsel” zip codes. The city spends more than $125.6 million per year on anti-eviction legal services.

Finally, the city spends almost $284 million per year on rental assistance programs.²⁸ The City Family Homelessness & Eviction Prevention Supplement (FHEPS) program is available for families that are eligible for cash assistance and are facing eviction, have been evicted, lost housing due to domestic violence or have been in shelter for 90 days. Families must have income that is less than 200% of the federal poverty level. The rental assistance lasts for five years but households can apply for the assistance to continue. According to city data, since 2015 more than 36,600 households have received CityFHEPS, LINC (the city rental assistance program before CityFHEPS) or state rental assistance.

City records show that, of those who did qualify for CityFHEPS vouchers, only a small percentage were actually able to move out of shelters and into a new home.²⁹ In December 2021, of the 2,623 households that were approved by a landlord for rental through CityFHEPS vouchers, only 637—24 percent—actually secured an apartment. Bureaucratic hurdles create an undue burden on applicants and prevent qualified people from obtaining housing through CityFHEPS vouchers. Minor errors in a housing application often result in that application being rejected; applicants cannot correct their application and instead must resubmit the entire application to a new case worker. New York City and State must create an easier, more streamlined process for applicants seeking housing through FHEPS vouchers.

Providers have reported that it takes months for families to find housing with the voucher. Some landlords refuse to rent to tenants with the vouchers. While both city and state law prohibit discrimination against tenants because they use vouchers (called source of income discrimination), advocates have called for stronger enforcement, as the NYC Commission on Human Rights (CCHR) unit responsible for enforcement is severely understaffed. Additionally, the city’s administration of CityFHEPS, Section 8, and other voucher programs, is rife with bureaucratic inefficiencies that make even some well-intentioned landlords reluctant to rent to voucher-holders. A landlord who holds an apartment


open for months during the lengthy inspection and approval process is giving up on rent that they could otherwise earn by renting to another tenant. City payments to landlords are sometimes late or even fail to show up at all, as Shams DaBaron highlighted when he went public with his own story as a voucher-holder whose payment was stymied by a mailing error on the city’s part. One landlord told City Limits in January that the city still owed her more than $11,000 in rent on behalf of one of her tenants. These administrative obstacles limit the effectiveness of one of the city’s most critical tools for housing New Yorkers experiencing homelessness.

New York City’s tight and expensive housing market has also made it challenging for voucher-holders to find housing. Until recently, city and state vouchers had lower rent caps than the federal Section 8 program and advocates said this was a barrier to clients finding housing. Advocates fought for and won changes to the city voucher so that pricing matched pricing of the federal Section 8 housing vouchers.

Affordable Housing Production

Spending on affordable housing preservation and construction grew substantially under Mayor Bill de Blasio, from less than $500 million per year to nearly $1.7 billion per year (before the COVID-19 pandemic). In the next five years, New York City projects to spend roughly $1.5 billion on affordable housing development. The money is often paired with federal tax-exempt bonds and Low Income Housing Tax Credits.

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<th>Fiscal Year</th>
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<td>2014</td>
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</tr>
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</table>

This funding has not been coordinated sufficiently with homelessness and housing insecurity policy and so the housing that was being produced was not addressing the biggest housing affordability needs and therefore not effectively combating homelessness.

31 https://citylimits.org/2022/01/31/administrative-obstacles-jam-up-moving-process-for-nyc-shelter-residents/
In New York City, 368,000 households have very low or extremely low incomes and are severely rent burdened, paying more than half of their income in rent.\textsuperscript{36} Housing affordability problems are most concentrated at the lowest incomes, with 80 percent of all severely rent burdened households having very low or extremely low incomes.\textsuperscript{35} However, just 25 percent of the housing plan would provide housing for households that have extremely low or very low incomes.\textsuperscript{36}

![De Blasio housing plan compared to rent burdens](image)

**Number of planned Housing New York units under the de Blasio Administration compared to the number of severely rent burdened New Yorkers. Source: Citizens Budget Commission\textsuperscript{37}**

Under Mayor Bill de Blasio, the city financed 33,000 housing units for extremely low income households, including units that were newly constructed and units preserving affordability at existing housing. They financed more than 17,000 units for households experiencing homelessness, and roughly half will be through new construction leading to new supply.\textsuperscript{38} The administration increased production of housing for people at the lowest income levels in response to outside pressure, but much more needs to be done.

United for Housing, a coalition of more than 90 organizations that worked together to make consensus recommendations to address the housing and homelessness crisis, called on the next mayor to commit $2.5 billion per year for affordable housing. Among the more detailed recommendations was a call for 8,000 units per year of housing for extremely low income households and households experiencing homelessness, mostly through adding new supply. This would be a significant increase from the city’s current production of roughly 2,000 units of housing for extremely low income households per year.

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\textsuperscript{34} [https://ny.curbed.com/2018/10/12/17965416/nyc-rent-burden-households-affordable-housing](https://ny.curbed.com/2018/10/12/17965416/nyc-rent-burden-households-affordable-housing)

\textsuperscript{35} [Think Your Rent is High? Citizens Budget Commission. Oct. 11, 2018.](https://cbcny.org/research/think-your-rent-high)

\textsuperscript{36} [Housing New York 2.0, NYC Department of Housing Preservation and Development.](https://www1.nyc.gov/assets/hpd/downloads/pdfs/about/housing-new-york-2-0.pdf)

\textsuperscript{37} [New York Housing Conference analysis; Data from: Think Your Rent is High? Citizens Budget Commission. Oct. 11, 2018.](https://cbcny.org/research/think-your-rent-high); [Housing New York 2.0, NYC Department of Housing Preservation and Development.](https://www1.nyc.gov/assets/hpd/downloads/pdfs/about/housing-new-york-2-0.pdf)

\textsuperscript{38} [https://www1.nyc.gov/site/hpd/about/the-housing-plan.page](https://www1.nyc.gov/site/hpd/about/the-housing-plan.page)
The Cost of Shelter and Bureaucratic Barriers to Exit

The right to shelter should supplement a right to housing in New York City, which should be equally universal and guaranteed.

It is often said that it costs New York City more to maintain its expansive yet insufficient shelter system than it would cost to house every New Yorker experiencing homelessness. As is demonstrated in this report, this statement is, in many ways, quite true.

When it comes to thinking about the cost of homelessness, the most important cost to consider is the human one: the toll that housing precarity and unaffordability, homelessness and long-term shelter living can take on individual adults and children, on families and households, on neighborhoods and communities, and on our society as a whole. As demonstrated by the stories told by New Yorkers experiencing homelessness throughout this report, mass homelessness is a deeply destructive force that brutally and unnecessarily diminishes the lives of those directly impacted. With this human toll as a backdrop, this chapter explores some of the economic costs of maintaining the shelter system and some of the political roadblocks that prevent New Yorkers experiencing homelessness from exiting into permanent housing.

It is important to reiterate that criticism of the existing shelter system does not diminish the right to shelter, an essential component of our city’s legal framework that must be maintained and defended in full, nor should it be used opportunistically to protest the placement of emergency shelters when and where they are needed. The issue is not the right to shelter or siting of shelters, but rather the city’s over-reliance on, and misuse of, shelters as long-term housing, combined with the city’s lack of oversight over poorly run and hugely costly shelters—what the activist organization Picture the Homeless called “the shelter-industrial complex.” Even if everyone currently experiencing homelessness were rehoused, the phenomenon of homelessness would unfortunately still be a reality for some households in certain situations, but it should be brief and non-recurring, and people should never be placed in inhumane congregate settings. (See “Reimagining Shelter” later in this report.) Ultimately, New York City should connect all New Yorkers experiencing homelessness with safe, affordable and healthy housing. Effectively this would mean that the right to shelter should supplement a right to housing in New York City, which should be equally universal and guaranteed.

Record Shelter Costs

In January of 2010, there were over 53,000 people experiencing homelessness, with 38,500 in DHS, DYCD, HRA and other shelters. A decade later, just as the COVID-19 pandemic hit New York City, that number had skyrocketed to nearly 78,000. Meanwhile, the city has committed to opening 90 new homeless shelters and expanding 30 existing sites.

40. https://www.picturethehomeless.org/businessofhomelessness-page/
42. https://www.gothamgazette.com/columnists/other/130-opinion/10691-housing-human-right-slogan-reality-homelessness
New York City operates multiple shelter systems. The estimated annual cost of the largest shelter system, operated by DHS, is about $2 billion, with an additional $250 million spent to operate additional shelters for survivors of domestic violence (HRA); youth (DYCD); those with HIV/AIDS (HRA); and those needing emergency relocation after a fire, flood, or other disaster (HPD). The cost of running homeless shelters, then, is higher than the cost of any single housing program in New York City, including the massively expensive 421-A tax credit, the federal or city contributions to public housing, or HPD’s capital or operating budgets.

Shelter operations combine for-profit and nonprofit building owners, nonprofit service providers, and public funding. The system is complex, but shelters generally come about through this process: nonprofit service providers use the city’s Open Ended Request for Proposals (RFP) to apply to provide shelter services at a specific site, which is either (1) a city/state owned facility; (2) a site owned by the nonprofit shelter provider; or (3) a site owned by a for profit landlord. The city contracts with the nonprofit organization for shelter services, and via the contract the city provides funding that is used to pay for the rental costs for the site, which the nonprofit may pay to the for-profit landlords. (The city does not provide funding to pay rental costs for nonprofit-owned sites.) Service funding is determined by the number of units (families) or individuals sheltered (single adults) within a shelter facility. Some shelters for single adults are specialized to provide mental or behavioral healthcare services and receive additional funding for these specialized services. The largest driver of shelter costs is rent.

Costs vary widely across shelter locations and types. This, in fact, is part of the problem. A 2017 audit by the State Comptroller found that shelter providers often name their own prices, with little pushback from DHS. The rates charged by two comparable shelters might differ by as much as $225 per person, according to the audit. Taken as a whole, the average monthly cost per year to house a family in a shelter is about $6,000—almost three times the cost of an apartment renting at the HUD-calculated Fair Market Rent for New York City ($2,050).

Source: RxHome NYC

Sources:
- NYC Shelter Rate: MMR 2021: [p73](https://www1.nyc.gov/assets/operations/downloads/pdf/fmr/2021summary.odn)

Breakdown of Spending

In City Fiscal Year 2021, spending on operations, administration, and intake at single adult DHS shelters in New York City cost about $850.5 million. Of that, the majority—$592.7 million—was paid for by New York City, while $184.2 million was paid by the federal government (a large increase over previous years due to pandemic relief programs) and $73.6 million was funded by New York State. Meanwhile, family shelter operations, administration, and intake cost $1.2 billion, with $610.5 million paid by New York City, $483.7 million paid by the federal government (a decrease from previous years), and $98.3 million paid by the New York State government. Altogether, the city’s share of DHS shelter operating costs was $1.1 billion.

NYC Department of Homeless Services: Shelter Spending by Funding Type

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Final Spending</th>
<th>City Fiscal Year</th>
<th>Budgeted Spending</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2020</td>
<td>2021</td>
<td>2022</td>
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<tr>
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<td>State</td>
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<td>73,636,626</td>
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<tr>
<td>Federal non-COVID</td>
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<td>Adult Shelter Total</td>
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<tr>
<td>Family Shelter Administration, Intake, and Operations Costs</td>
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<td>Family Shelter Total</td>
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<td>Federal COVID-related shelter funding</td>
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<td>940,511,375</td>
<td>459,912,531</td>
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Notes:
Budgeted spending is reflective of the Preliminary 2023 Budget (Released January 2022).
Totals exclude intracty funds.
Family shelter costs reflect both families with children shelters and adult family shelters.
COVID-related federal is not broken out by type of shelter.

Source: NYC IBO

Prior to the pandemic, 55 percent of the cost of operating New York City family shelters was paid by the federal government through the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) program and other federal sources. TANF funds support costs for families on public assistance for up to five years in the shelter system, after which state safety net funding can kick in. The federal government does not currently allow the city to use TANF funds for housing vouchers, however, which limits the city’s ability to use the same federal dollars for permanent housing as it relies on for shelters. Meanwhile, the city’s share of the adult individual shelter system has been much higher—around 88 percent—with the remainder covered by the state and federal governments. Pre-pandemic, the state and federal commitments stayed fairly flat despite rapidly rising numbers of single adults experiencing homelessness.

In their 2018 report, The Business of Homelessness, Picture the Homeless members noted that the amount the city spent per month on their shelter stays ranged from $2,275 (Ward’s Island) to $7,700 (an unnamed Manhattan shelter) – figures that have only risen in the years since. Despite all this spending, services in shelters remain highly uneven. Shelter residents frequently complain about poor quality food,  

50  https://www.picturethehomeless.org/businessofhomelessness-page/
cleaning, and security, and the bodily and psychological harms that can result from all three. As Picture the Homeless wrote, “For our research committee members, it was hard to reconcile the services they receive in shelter—dilapidated conditions, lack of housekeeping or maintenance, packaged TV-tray style meals, and limited access to case management services—with the per diem cost of their stay, an average of between $99-171 per day.”

During the pandemic, the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) fully reimbursed the city for the cost of placing individuals experiencing homelessness into hotels. Thanks in large part to the activism of the “Homeless Can’t Stay Home” campaign, the city successfully used this program to provide far safer, healthier, and more dignified living quarters to thousands of New Yorkers. By the end of summer 2021, however, the city was evicting people experiencing homelessness from those hotels, months before FEMA payments were set to lapse and despite the important improvements in the lives of New Yorkers who are homeless—a policy that was both fiscally reckless and needlessly cruel.

### Administrative Burden and Barriers to Exit

One reason why shelter counts and costs remain so high is that placement into permanent housing remains punishingly slow. The shelter system’s operational goal—and therefore its top priority—is to meet the court-mandated requirements of the right to shelter, rather than to permanently rehouse New Yorkers. To illustrate this fact, The Business of Homelessness shows that of 290 shelters, only 39 percent had met DSS placement targets for any quarter of Fiscal Year 2017, and just 2 percent had met their targets for all four quarters.51

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Number of Shelters (Total)</th>
<th>Shelters that met DSS placement targets any quarter in FY2017</th>
<th>Shelters that met DSS placement targets in all quarters of FY2017</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Single Adults</td>
<td>90</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adult Family</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Families with Children</td>
<td>172</td>
<td>93</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Picture the Homeless. The Business of Homelessness.

Shelter service delivery is distributed by different organizations and therefore not uniform from site to site. Rehousing at some sites is done effectively and efficiently while at others New Yorkers in need are not provided adequate resources (such as internet access and computers), staff assistance to navigate the rehousing process, or help with being matched or referred to housing programs or available rental units. Single adult shelters rarely have internet or computer access, except in cases where the shelter includes a jobs center.

New Yorkers experiencing homelessness are put through endless hurdles during their pursuit of permanent affordable housing—mandatory months-long shelter stays as a precondition to qualify for rental assistance, repeated in-person meetings, endless forms, multiple verifications—just to prove that they need housing and cannot afford it. Some of these hurdles are put in place by higher levels of

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51 [https://www.picturethehomeless.org/businessofhomelessness-page/](https://www.picturethehomeless.org/businessofhomelessness-page/)
government, but most of them are self-imposed by the city. The system adds extra steps just to prove the negative—that people who are homeless do not have enough income to pay for housing—rather than allowing the documentation a person has provided for one program to stand in for another. Eligibility for programs like Supplemental Security Income, for example, is not used to prove eligibility for another, like CityFHEPS vouchers.

In their book *Administrative Burden: Policymaking by Other Means*, scholars Pamela Herd and Donald Moynihan argue that these kinds of hurdles present three different kinds of costs to applicants seeking assistance:

- **Learning costs:** “Citizens must learn about the program, whether they are eligible, the nature of benefits, and how to access services.”

- **Psychological costs:** “Citizens face the stigma of participating in an unpopular program, as well as the loss of autonomy and increase in stress arising from program processes.”

- **Compliance costs:** “Citizens must complete applications and re-enrollments, provide documentation of their standing, and avoid or respond to discretionary demands.”

New Yorkers experiencing homelessness face each of these costs due to the way our rehousing system is structured at the federal, state, and local levels.

In an interview, Homeless Can't Stay Home and Picture the Homeless leader Marcus Miller told us there seems to be far more scrutiny on people experiencing homelessness who are seeking housing—including any and every source of income, ever—than there is on shelter providers receiving city funding.52 In a separate interview, Jessica Katz, who at the time of this interview was the Director of the Citizens Housing and Planning Commission and is currently Chief Housing Officer in the Adams administration, contrasted the minimal proof needed for homeowners to claim a mortgage interest tax deduction with the maximal proof required for low-income tenants or people experiencing homelessness to prove eligibility to live in LIHTC-funded affordable housing.53 Meanwhile, the Mortgage Interest Tax Deduction is probably worth double the value of the LIHTC subsidy.

At the same time, city-financed affordable housing sits empty for an inordinate time while thousands of New Yorkers experiencing homelessness undergo extensive screenings. While the city advertises its impressive record of housing starts (development or preservation projects), it does not report as diligently on housing finishes (i.e., closings and rent-ups). According to data obtained by the Citizens Housing and Planning Committee, it takes HPD on average 371 days to fully lease an affordable housing building that goes through the HPD lottery.54 This is highly anomalous in the world of housing; most owners, be they nonprofit organizations or for-profit landlords, would seek to fill vacancies within 30 days. Under the Adams administration, HPD should prioritize filling vacant units as quickly as possible. Such a speed-up might cost money in terms of hiring people to do the work, but slow rent-ups also cost the city money now on mortgage payments for apartments that are not rented, and on unnecessarily long shelter stays. Ultimately this shift is about the way we spend, rather than the amount we spend.

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52 Interview with Marcus Moore, Scott Andrew Hutchins and Jenny Akchin, Interview with Jessica Katz, June 24th, 2021, conducted by Samuel Stein and Beatriz De La Torre over Zoom.

53 Interview with Jessica Katz, June 23rd, 2021, conducted by Samuel Stein and Beatriz De La Torre over Zoom.


Unjustifiable Justifications

There are many reasons for the city's unnecessarily high administrative burden on households seeking housing. Agencies and jurisdictions are imperfect and there are bureaucratic challenges at every scale of government. But these problems can be overcome with a combination of regulatory relief and streamlined inter-agency communication.

More fundamentally, agencies often justify high administrative burden by hyper-focusing on ensuring that all people receiving assistance do not make more than the top eligibility rate. This attitude comes from the idea of the “deserving” versus the “undeserving” poor, which is rooted in racist ideologies that place blame for poverty on individual flaws—largely in Black and Brown communities—rather than on systemic deficiencies and discrimination, as well as the equally discriminatory Victorian-era idea that government aid should only go to an idealized unblemished and highly industrious segment of the population. They dwell in the myth that people with the means to help themselves are scamming the system by pretending to be destitute.

Agencies and municipalities often justify this approach through the notion of “prioritizing the most vulnerable.” While this laudable idea seeks to ensure that those most harmed by the current system are prioritized by social services, it can also force people in need of help to constantly prove that they are, indeed, among the most vulnerable, which is, in practice, much more difficult for many people to do than it may sound. More so, the metrics used to determine vulnerability, which often include prior use of health care services or government benefits, are at best imperfect and at worst perpetuate racial and other inequities by prioritizing those with knowledge of or trust in government systems.

Ultimately, these ideological frameworks can punish the poor with unnecessary burdens to prove they are worthy of public support. As Rob Robinson, a human rights activist who was formerly homeless, and Jessica Katz have written, “We need to stop repeatedly asking people to prove poverty, searching for fraud where there is none to be found, or continually sending them from one government agency to another sharing the same information over and over again. These hoops force people who need it the most to stop asking for help. Access to services to get a family on the pathway to stable housing should not be an onerous process.”

Many government programs are designed to benefit business and property owners, like mortgage tax reductions, and often never require the same level of documentation required of those seeking housing assistance—and when they do, wealthy individuals can pay accountants, wealth managers, and others to complete them on their behalf. The poorest among us will always have the most difficulty proving their eligibility in terms of the time it takes to do so, the kind of documentation required to prove a negative (i.e. lack of income), and common complications such as immigration status and work in the informal sectors. The system as it stands today is more concerned with screening out an imagined scammer than it is with quickly filling vacancies and matching shelter residents with housing within a reasonable timeframe.

https://www.gothamgazette.com/columnists/other/130-opinion/10691-housing-human-right-slogan-reality-homelessness
From Shelter to Housing

Much like the conversations around reimagining public safety and establishing climate resiliency, policies aimed to end homelessness must seek permanent solutions that shift us away from harmful models of long-term shelter and toward sustainable models of permanent affordable housing.

In *The Business of Homelessness*, Picture the Homeless members laid out the following 5-point program to make such a shift:

1. Move money from the DHS capital budget to the HPD capital budget, targeted at households that are extremely low-income or experiencing homelessness. Use a pay-as-you-go (PAYGO) system to divert savings from shelter operations into housing capital investments. Work with the state to do the same.

2. Prioritize capital dollars for households earning 0-30% of the Area Median Income. Direct more subsidies (including LIHTC and bond financing) to neighborhoods with high rates of shelter entry in order to create more options for people who would otherwise enter the shelter system. Prioritize social housing models like Mutual Housing Associations and Community Land Trusts.

3. More public reporting on shelter spending and provider performance; seek corrective action from poor performing providers; withhold funding for providers with long-standing issues; no bids from providers until issues are fixed.

4. Better shelter inspection: anonymous phone number for resident tips, published reports on complaint patterns, prompt investigation; truly surprise inspections.

5. Establish one universal voucher; eliminate the temporary rental assistance model; better training for housing outreach workers and better data for them on landlord practices to prevent bad placements.

Achieving this vision will be far easier with increased support from the state and federal governments, particularly in the form of a universal rent voucher—either an expanded federal Section 8 program or a new state Housing Access Voucher Program. If vouchers were universalized at the state and/or federal levels, New York City would save an estimated $3 billion a year, all of which could be put into both capital

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58 [https://www.picturethehomeless.org/businessofhomelessness-page/](https://www.picturethehomeless.org/businessofhomelessness-page/)
and operating subsidies for deeply and permanently affordable housing.\textsuperscript{59} Such a prospect, however, is currently being held up by the U.S. Senate, with the future outcome unknown. Even without the full universalization, though, New York City can shift its own budgets to prioritize speedy placements in permanent housing.

While we can certainly argue that making the shift from shelter to housing is a more cost-effective way of spending public money, the most important metric to consider is human welfare. As discussed throughout this report, New York City’s homelessness epidemic exerts tremendous long-term personal, familial, communal and social costs. We can—and therefore we must—redesign our housing and social service systems to quickly and permanently transition households experiencing homelessness out of shelter and into permanent housing.

\textsuperscript{59} https://issuu.com/nyhc2020/docs/20210820_nyhc_hrauniversal_rental_assistance_repo
Getting to Zero: Modeling Shelter Census

New York City is suffering from a homelessness crisis that has increased under every recent mayor. The city was housing nearly 57,000 people in its homeless shelters in several different agencies in early January 2022, including 47,000 in Department of Homeless Services shelters. The city’s housing crisis is driven by a shortage of affordable housing with housing prices growing faster than wages, and several hundred years of discriminatory housing policies and ingrained inequities in the housing market, education and employment. The evidence is clear: housing ends homelessness and providing the resources for people to access affordable, permanent housing should be the goal. New York Housing Conference and United for Housing, among many other groups in the city and nationwide, advocate for this solution to homelessness.

New York City uses a combination of federal, state, city and philanthropic resources to provide access to stable housing for individuals who are experiencing homelessness or are at risk of homelessness. Federal resources include public housing apartments and Section 8 (Housing Choice) Vouchers. Federal tax-exempt bonds and Low Income Housing Tax Credits are also paired with city funding to build and preserve affordable housing. State resources include rental assistance and capital funding to build and preserve affordable housing, and city resources include rental assistance and capital funding for affordable housing preservation and construction. All of these sources are used to connect people who are homeless or at risk of homelessness to affordable housing.

New York City also funds a program to prevent people from experiencing homelessness, called HomeBase, with some of the same tools they use to help people leave shelter. The HomeBase program provides people at-risk of homelessness access to housing assistance and other resources, depending on their risk of losing their housing.

Affordable housing is the best tool both for preventing and ending homelessness. NYC spends more than any other jurisdiction on homelessness, yet the results are a growing shelter census since the 1980s, with a decrease during the pandemic that is unlikely to last. The average length of time people stay in shelter has grown from 476 days to 773 days, depending on the population. There are also thousands of people in the city living unsheltered, sleeping on the streets, public transportation, and other public spaces. Every New York City mayor has pledged to fight to end the homelessness crisis, reducing the incidences of homelessness and the time people spend in shelter. The shelter system, under the City’s control, has grown because more people have sought assistance, but also because as the time in shelter increases, more beds are needed to accommodate those entering the system. It is clear that to fight the crisis, the city has to prevent incidences of homelessness and reduce the time people spend in shelter.

Thus far, the most impactful city programs for reducing the incidence of homelessness have been Homebase, the right to counsel in housing court, and the recent eviction moratorium. The latter is a temporary fix related to the COVID-19 pandemic and expired in January 2022. One potential way to reduce the number of people in shelter is to offer a higher number of housing subsidies to those who currently reside in shelters. In consultation with Professor Dan O’Flaherty, a housing economist at Columbia University, and Judith Samuels at HOMEworks, the New York Housing Conference developed a model that examines the potential for a well-orchestrated distribution of housing assistance to shelter residents that would result in effective use of the resources and decrease the number of people in shelter. The model is based on historical data and academic analysis of previous shelter trends. This report uses a version of this model developed for this task force.

A frequent miscalculation of the impact of offering subsidies to the shelter population as a means of reducing the length of stay and size of the system is the assumption that the offering of every voucher will result in one fewer person or family in shelter. In the absence of vouchers and at current levels of

60  https://www1.nyc.gov/site/hra/help/homebase.page
availability many people leave shelter on their own, without a subsidy. When vouchers are made more available, the number of people who leave on their own decreases because some of these people decide to stay and try to obtain a voucher. At the same time, new people are entering the shelter system, further complicating the ability of the city to reduce the shelter census.

Below is an analysis that illustrates strategies for more effectively reducing the shelter census by maximizing the use of housing subsidies including vouchers and affordable housing. We developed models for three populations: families with children, adult families and single adults. The models include estimates for the number of people (or family units) currently in shelter, the number who enter every month, and the number who exit shelter with and without a subsidy, and the resulting shelter census. As the model shows, varying the number of subsidized housing placements available to shelter residents changes the impact of vouchers on the size of the shelter population.

We ultimately show what it would take to reduce the shelter population to nearly zero over the course of four years. In both cases, it would likely take more resources than we have – more subsidized housing and more staffing and support to help households use the new resources. But with this knowledge, we can see how many new housing resources we need to address the homelessness crisis.

Families with Children

In our model, we start with 10,000 families with children in the DHS shelters. While there are currently 8,600 families in shelter, we believe that 10,000 is a more realistic estimate based on long term trends. Prior to the pandemic, there were 12,000 families in shelter on average in DHS family shelters. The number of families with children in the DHS shelters has decreased 28 percent during the pandemic driven by a decrease in the number of families entering shelter due to two likely factors. First, there was an eviction moratorium in New York State that lasted from when the pandemic started to January 2022, which has been keeping people in their current homes even if they do not currently have money to pay the rent. Second, families may be avoiding entering shelter as much as possible due to fears about spread of the COVID-19 virus. Given that the pandemic is driving some part of the decrease in the shelter, we think the census is artificially low. We therefore used 10,000 families as a starting point that is between the historical average and the current situation.

We looked at three models for families with children in shelter. First, we looked at what would happen to the shelter system when there is no housing assistance. Second we looked at the state of affairs before the pandemic which we expect will be similar after the pandemic, with some housing assistance but not enough to decrease the shelter census. And third, we looked at how making more housing assistance available would decrease the number of people in shelter.

Scenario 1: No Subsidy Leads to Growing Family Shelter Population

When there is no access to vouchers and little housing assistance available for people in shelter, many people will still leave shelter on their own, often going to unstable situations where they are more likely to return to shelter again than if they had received housing assistance. When New York City canceled the Advantage program in March 2011 after the state cut their share of the program’s funding, there was no city voucher and few other housing assistance options available because then-mayor Michael Bloomberg’s administration was not using federal assistance (Section 8) for households experiencing homelessness.

The city did not release data on the number of families that were placed in housing during this time. However, data showing entrance and exits overall shows that during this time fewer people left shelter than the number of people entering shelter, causing the shelter population to increase by roughly 1,000 families per year. We see therefore a shelter population that increases when there is no housing assistance for families in shelter.
Scenario 2: Current (Pre-Covid): Modest Housing Assistance Available

Currently, roughly 6,000 families with children per year are leaving shelter to subsidized housing. These placements come from a variety of programs, including public housing, federal Section 8 rental assistance, state and city rental assistance programs including CityFHEPS, and a small but hopefully growing number of affordable housing units financed through the Department of Housing Preservation and Development (which often are paired with city rental assistance). This translates to roughly 500 subsidized housing exits per month.

Under these conditions, the number of families leaving to unsubsidized housing decreases. DHS data shows that between 150-200 families leave to unsubsidized housing per month. However, this data is missing other types of exits, including people that leave without telling the shelter provider where they are going. As the shelter census was relatively stable during this time before the pandemic, we believe that closer to 500 people were exiting to unsubsidized housing each month.

Academic research confirms that unsubsidized placements decrease as the number of subsidized housing options increase. This makes sense; people who would leave when there are no options for assistance will instead wait for assistance when it becomes available to achieve more stable housing.

We assume an equal number of families exiting to unsubsidized housing because the number of families with children, while fluctuating—sometimes increasing and sometimes decreasing—remained relatively constant (near 12,000 on average) over the long term.

In this model, the shelter population does not change. The city maintains this high level of shelter usage despite providing 6,000 units of subsidized housing per year because even as we are rehousing people from shelters, the general unaffordability of housing in New York City continues to produce homelessness every month at a level that is equivalent to the pace of placements and exits. Clearly something needs to change.

Scenario 3: Robust Housing Assistance – Getting to Zero

In our third model, we greatly increase the number of subsidized placements. Again, we assume based on past research that the number of subsidized placements increases, families will leave shelter for unsubsidized housing as families that otherwise might have given up hope and left to unstable situations would wait for subsidized housing instead. This is rational and to be expected. Research shows that families that receive housing assistance are much less likely to return to shelter in the future. Families know this and may wait for assistance if it is available. Therefore, to decrease the shelter population and help more people find housing, we need to provide enough vouchers to meet the needs of most people who otherwise are leaving to go to unsubsidized and often unstable housing.

Most importantly however, we need to provide more subsidized housing than there are people entering the shelter system each month. In a model where the city maintains 1,200 subsidized placements per month, the city can decrease the shelter population by 2,400 families with children in 12 months.
This model shows that decreasing the number of families with children in the shelter system will require increasing the number of subsidized placements from 6,000 per year to 14,400 per year.

This level of resources each year is projected to reduce the number of families with children in shelter to zero after 4 years – after the first year there would be 7,360 families with children, after the second year there would be 4,720 families, after the third year 2,080 families and zero by the end of the fourth year.

### Adult Families

There are currently 1,500 adult families in DHS shelters – families with no minor children including couples or a parent with one or more children over the age of 18. However, much like with families with children, the pre-pandemic average census was higher at 2,500 families. The number of adult families has decreased as fewer families are entering shelter, likely also due to the eviction moratorium and fear of contracting COVID in shelter. It is unlikely that the number of adult families in shelter will remain low after the eviction moratorium expires. In this model, we are using the previous average to be conservative.

Once again, we looked at three models: one model where there is no housing assistance for people in shelter; a second model based on the situation before the pandemic; and a third model that assumes increased housing assistance enough to have almost zero adult families in shelter after four years.

### Model 1: No Vouchers

When the city and state canceled the Advantage program in March 2011, it affected adult families like it affected families with children, leaving them with very few supports to find stable housing to leave shelter.
The city did not release data on the number of adult families that were placed in housing during this time. However, historical census data shows that the census increased by 200 families on average per year for the three years after the program was canceled. Many families did leave shelter, but they left to unstable situations, and fewer left shelter than entered. Once again, we see that the number of people in shelter increases when there is no housing assistance.

### Model 2: Current

Before the pandemic, city data showed that less than 400 adult families leave shelter to subsidized housing per year. During the last few years under these conditions, the shelter census was roughly stable at around 2,500 families. This model shows a relatively stable situation where 100 families enter shelter each month and 35 families per month leave to subsidized housing while 65 leave to unsubsidized housing.

### Model 3: Robust Housing Placements

In our third model for adult families, we project enough housing assistance to support 155 adult families to leave shelter to subsidized housing each month. This level of support will allow the adult family shelter census to decrease by 660 families over the course of a year, a 26 percent decrease. Over the course of four years, this will decrease the adult family shelter census to zero – decreasing from 2,500 to 1,840 after one year, to 1,180 after the second year, 520 after the third year, and to zero before the end of the fourth year.
Single Adults

While the two shelter systems serving adult families and families with children had relatively stable populations for several years before the pandemic, the number of single adults in shelter had grown every year before the pandemic, growing 150 percent over ten years from roughly 7,000 in 2010 to more than 17,000 in 2020 before the pandemic and peaking at 18,500 during the pandemic.

City data shows that almost 20,000 single adults enter the shelter system every year while 4,000 to 5,000 leave with subsidized housing placements each year. City data only shows roughly 4,000 unsubsidized exits each year, but as is explained below, this undercounts total exits, which are more likely roughly 1,200 per month.

We did not model a system with no subsidized housing because there has not been a time in the past two administrations when there was no assistance for single adults. Even when the city canceled the Advantage program after the state cut their funding for the program, the city continued finding subsidized housing placements for single adults using supportive housing and other programs.

Shelter providers and experts we talked to said that single adults who are experiencing homelessness can have varied experiences, and many come in and out of shelter, making it difficult to model and predict without better data from the city, which was not available. While working with limited data, we developed two models for the current situation before the pandemic and for how the census could change with more housing placements.

Before the pandemic, with roughly 1,700 shelter entrants each month and 400 people placed into subsidized housing, roughly 1,200 leave to unsubsidized housing, leading to a shelter system that has 1,200 more individuals at the end of the year than at the beginning of the year. This is roughly what was happening in the single adult DHS shelters before the pandemic.

The single adult shelter system is large and growing. In order to achieve a shelter system with zero single adults in shelter, the city would need to significantly increase housing placements. We estimate that if the city placed 2,060 single adults in subsidized housing per month, it could reduce the number of people in single adult shelters to zero after four years. By placing 24,720 single adults from shelter into subsidized housing each year, the census could shrink from 17,000 to 12,680 after the first year, to 8,360 after the second year, 4,040 after the third year and to zero by the end of the fourth year. Getting to zero single adults according to this scenario will require a major increase in housing placements. Assuming the city is currently placing roughly 400 single adults per year into subsidized housing, this model requires placing 2,060 people per year – going from 4,800 placements per year to 24,600 placements.

In order to have adequate housing for all single adults, the city’s housing placements will need a combination of robust supportive housing for people with barriers to staying in stable housing independently in addition to other affordable housing resources for single adults that do not need additional support.

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<th>Single Adults</th>
<th>Month 1</th>
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<th>Month 5</th>
<th>Month 6</th>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Exit without Subsidy</td>
<td>1,200</td>
<td>1,200</td>
<td>1,200</td>
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<td>1,200</td>
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<tr>
<td>In Shelter: End</td>
<td>17,100</td>
<td>17,200</td>
<td>17,300</td>
<td>17,400</td>
<td>17,500</td>
<td>17,600</td>
<td>17,700</td>
<td>17,800</td>
<td>17,900</td>
<td>18,000</td>
<td>18,100</td>
<td>18,200</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
In each of the three populations, we projected how many housing placements would be required to decrease the city's Department of Homeless Services shelter census to zero. After the population reaches zero, the city would need to continue housing placements at the same rate as the number of people that seek to enter shelter to maintain a shelter population that functionally remains at zero. At this point, the city may need some shelters to temporarily house people in crisis, but if they rapidly rehouse each family and single adult that is homeless, it can maintain functional zero where homelessness is rare and brief.

### Housing Placements

In order to decrease the shelter census as described above the city will need to greatly increase available subsidized housing and necessary resources to help people use the resources and find housing.

Currently, the city places roughly 11,220 households per year, including families and single adults, into housing using a variety of housing programs.\(^{62}\) They place roughly 2,000 families and adults into public housing per year and more than 600 receive federal Section 8 vouchers. In addition, roughly 5,500 homeless households get city or state rental assistance, while 1,500 move into HPD affordable housing and 1,600 move into supportive housing.

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In order to increase placements significantly, the city could expand city programs and take advantage of federal resources. For example, the city could use more NYCHA vacancies for households experiencing homelessness, yielding 3,000 units per year. In addition, the city has received nearly 7,800 emergency Section 8 vouchers in the American Rescue Plan Act, and Congress is considering further increases to Section 8 that could lead to 6,300 additional vouchers from the 2022 appropriations bill.

The city could also expand the use of CityFHEPS and state FHEPS vouchers. Both the city and state have increased the highest rent that their programs will pay to match federal Section 8 subsidies. This change was pushed by many advocates so that there are more housing options available to people that are homeless. This should allow more people that have vouchers in shelter but could not find housing to be able to find housing.

The city could also expand eligibility so that more people can have vouchers by allowing people who work and earn up to 50 percent area median income (AMI) to qualify (it is currently restricted to people earning less than 200 percent of the federal poverty level) and waive the work requirement for people who are not employed but are on public assistance to qualify (it also currently requires people to work 30 hours per week). Both changes would allow more people to use city and state vouchers to leave shelter. In order to achieve such increases in voucher placements, the city will also likely need to increase staffing of housing specialists and voucher administration.

The increased placements also depend on availability of housing in the private housing market. Data from StreetEasy made available to Councilmember Stephen Levin from July to December 2020 found that there were 71,934 apartments on StreetEasy affordable for Section 8 voucher holders compared to only 564 for CityFHEPS voucher holders. While that shows there is more availability at the higher rents, we do not know how many people are competing for those units.

The city can place more people in shelter into the affordable housing created and preserved by HPD. The United for Housing campaign, which is a coalition of more than 90 organizations that developed consensus recommendations to address the housing and homelessness crisis, calls for 8,000 units per

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Subsidy</th>
<th>Placements per year</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>NYCHA</td>
<td>2,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Section 8</td>
<td>620</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>City / State FHEPS, et al</td>
<td>5,500</td>
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<tr>
<td>HPD + City FHEPS</td>
<td>1,500</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Supportive Housing</td>
<td>1,600</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hotel Conversions</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>11,220</strong></td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Source: Department of Homeless Services

year of affordable housing for households that are experiencing homelessness and extremely low-income, including 3,000 units for households experiencing homelessness.

The United for Housing plan also calls for 2,000 units of supportive housing each year, and a group of advocates are calling for robust state production as well. Increasing supportive housing production would allow more single adults and families to exit homelessness to stable housing. Finally, Mayor Eric Adams has called for turning 25,000 hotel rooms into housing for people experiencing homelessness.

All of these resources would allow the city to increase subsidized housing placements for people living in the city’s shelters. However, our scenario for getting the city to zero people in the Department of Homeless Services shelters calls for over 41,000 housing placements per year, nearly 30,000 more than are currently placed each year. Placing this many people into subsidized housing each year will require far more resources than are currently available. The city can add resources and use new federal resources to decrease the number of people in the city’s shelter, but the city could address the problem much better with more resources from the federal government.

**Entrants to Shelter**

This model assumes a constant number of people entering shelter every month, rather than a rising or falling rate. Providing more housing resources in shelter could theoretically change how many people seek shelter in the future, however, which would affect the model.

First, and most importantly, providing more permanent housing to people in shelter would reduce the number of people who enter shelter in the future. On this point, the research is clear: people who leave shelter for subsidized housing are much less likely to return to shelter than people who leave shelter without subsidized housing. In the scenarios where everyone is leaving to subsidized housing – as we are modeling here – far fewer people will return to shelter. This, in turn, should mean fewer people are entering shelter in future years. Unfortunately, factoring that into account was beyond the scope of our model, but it means that in this respect our model is too conservative.

The model should also be considered in relation to the many other recommendations made throughout this support concerning eviction prevention measures, ongoing rental assistance to remain housed, and increased production of deeply affordable housing. While we focus here on subsidies to exit shelter and obtain permanent housing, the shelter should not be the only – or even the primary – means of obtaining life-saving housing resources. People should not have to enter the shelter system in order to obtain the support they need to remain housed. In addition, while there is a right to shelter in New York City, the city can determine whether families are homeless and eligible for shelter. The city can be more or less restrictive about accepting families into shelter. This model assumes that the city will not become more restrictive and deny services to people that need support. Recent reports suggest that in the past year, the city was more restrictive for families, rejecting three out of four families applying for shelter last year, causing difficulty for families.64 This approach must be reversed in order to ensure that all who need shelter are able to access it.

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64 [https://www.thecity.nyc/2022/1/30/22909663/family-shelter-applications-rejected](https://www.thecity.nyc/2022/1/30/22909663/family-shelter-applications-rejected); [https://data.cityofnewyork.us/Social-Services/PATH-and-AFIC-Monthly-Eligibility-Rate/985h-mtct](https://data.cityofnewyork.us/Social-Services/PATH-and-AFIC-Monthly-Eligibility-Rate/985h-mtct)
Prevention

This section shows how additional subsidized housing can reduce the shelter census for the city's Department of Homeless Services. The city will also need to increase resources to continue to prevent people from needing shelter and should likely expand these supports.

A way to prevent housing resources being a draw to shelter is to provide resources outside of shelter. This means having robust prevention and housing assistance outside of shelter for people who are at risk of needing to enter shelter. Expanding prevention programs will not only prevent an increase in people entering shelter as we increase housing resources for people in shelter, but can decrease the volume of people entering the shelter system compared to the number that were entering before the pandemic, which would decrease the amount of placements out of shelter needed to reduce the census.

The city currently funds the HomeBase prevention program, which provides housing resources, financial support, counseling, and budgeting support to people at risk of homelessness. Research shows that Homebase reduces the average number of nights in shelter by an estimated 22.6 nights, reduces the percentage of families who spent at least one night in shelter by 6.5 percentage points, and the percentage who apply for shelter by 8.9 percentage points. Expanding this program with robust housing resources will prevent more people from entering shelter and decrease the number of people in shelter every month.

Prevention / Permanent Housing Solutions

New York City has been in an unprecedented pandemic for two years, which exacerbated an affordable housing shortage that already existed. With unemployment rates still high and the eviction moratorium lifted on January 15th, 2022, homelessness could soon reach a new level of crisis. There are few safety nets to keep people struggling to pay their rent in their apartments. Many people will require long-term assistance and the city and state must be prepared to meet these needs. It is unknown how many people will become homeless when the eviction moratorium is lifted, data that is critically important at both the city and state levels.

The Family Homelessness and Eviction Prevention Supplement (FHEPS) is a rent supplement for families who are moving from homeless shelters to stable housing, or who are in danger of losing their current housing. The program has also been expanded to cover survivors of domestic violence and their children. FHEPS, whether provided by the city or the state, provides a subsidy based on the size of a family and their apartment. New York State FHEPS and CityFHEPS (New York City's FHEPS program) are limited to families with minor children experiencing homelessness. While the amount a FHEPS voucher will cover has recently increased at both the city and the state level, many people struggling to find or retain their housing have been left out.

CityFHEPS must include more people in the community, especially those in rent-regulated apartments that are below the FHEPS level. New York City should expand CityFHEPS to households involved in


66  https://furmancenter.org/coredata/directory/entry/family-homelessness-and-eviction-prevention-supplement
housing court with rent-regulated apartments that do not meet Section 8 levels. Rather than assisting families and individuals once they have become homeless, the city must take action to create a safety net to keep people from becoming homeless in the first place. There is no current housing subsidy for rent-regulated apartments available aside from State FHEPS. New York State should create a Section 8 program, which would help a much larger number of people requiring housing assistance; additionally, this would create a way for undocumented people living in shelters to exit shelters. Previously, CityFHEPS had capped renewal eligibility at 250 percent of the federal poverty line, or $32,200 for a single adult and just under $55,000 for a family of three. While this cap has since been raised following pressure from advocates, families may still be forced to choose between a job that pays a living wage and their housing. No family or individual should lose their housing because of a job opportunity before they are ready to fully finance their housing themselves.

The American Rescue Plan will provide 8,500 emergency housing vouchers, with approximately 5,500 designated for those who are homeless. The remaining vouchers must be prioritized for households who are going to lose their homes.

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Permanent Housing Solutions

The solution to homelessness is permanent housing. In many cases, the cause of homelessness is an inability to afford housing on the private market. Therefore, programs that provide affordable housing are the best solutions to homelessness. Research consistently shows that subsidized housing decreases homelessness and improves mental and physical health and education outcomes. We know that people who leave homelessness for affordable housing are less likely to return to shelter than people who leave shelter and move into unsubsidized housing.

Below are affordable housing programs that have helped or will help people experiencing homelessness find affordable and stable housing.

Hotel Conversions

Before the pandemic, New York City’s hotel industry had expanded significantly seeking to capitalize on robust tourism. Even before the pandemic, there may have been an oversupply of hotels in New York City.

During the pandemic, the hotel industry was extremely challenged. As people sheltered from the COVID-19 virus, tourism declined to nearly zero and people mostly avoided hotels. While hotel use is increasing as we try to get back to a state of normal, hotel usage is still much lower than before the pandemic and many hotels have closed and will not reopen.

Hotels were used to temporarily house individuals and families experiencing homelessness during the first year of the pandemic. While hotels are not ideal for families with children that are experiencing homelessness, many advocates and individuals who are homeless favored hotels over congregate shelters where as many as one dozen people share the same room. Hotels could become permanent housing for people – particularly single adults – that have experienced homelessness. If the hotel is out of business and not viable as a hotel, it could be purchased at a price that makes it possible for developers to buy it and convert it to supportive housing – affordable housing with services – for individuals who are formerly homeless.

In 2021 and 2022, the New York State legislature dedicated $100 million to such conversions through the Housing Our Neighbors with Dignity Act, which aims to support nonprofits in converting distressed hotels into permanently affordable and supportive housing, with at least half of the units reserved for people experiencing homelessness. In 2022, the program was expanded and improved to provide regulatory relief to non-profits seeking to undergo such conversions. Mayor Eric Adams has called for converting thousands of hotels into supportive housing, and now the city has the tools to do so.

Supportive Housing

Increasing our stock of supportive housing – or affordable housing with on-site services – is an essential component to ending homelessness, particularly for those facing intensive mental illness, physical disability, or substance use. They are usually operated by either a single non-profit operator or a partnership between a non-profit owner and a social service provider. Services are offered but not required, and most of the time units are rent stabilized and made affordable to residents through a mix of capital subsidies, operating subsidies, and vouchers.

70 https://www.nysenate.gov/legislation/bills/2021/S5257#:~:text=S5257B%20%2D%20Summary,maintaining%20or%20increasing%20affordable%20housing.
United for Housing has called on the city – in partnership with the state – to support the production of 2,000 new units of supportive housing per year. At the same time, additional public resources must be devoted to supportive housing in order to ensure both fair pay and benefits for workers within the system (including both building service workers and social service staff) and to ensure high-quality conditions and enforced tenants rights for residents.

As Shams DeBaron and Ann-Marie Foster wrote recently, “Hotel conversions and investments in supportive housing developments that offer mental health and substance use treatment will not just get people off the street; they will also get vulnerable New Yorkers on paths to healthier, more productive lives. That is the right thing to do for our fellow New Yorkers in crisis, and for the city as a whole.”

**CityFHEPS**

Former mayors Michael Bloomberg and Bill de Blasio both experimented with city-funded rental assistance programs to help New Yorkers pay their rent – from Housing Stability Plus and the Advantage programs, to LINC and now CityFHEPS.

When de Blasio was sworn in as mayor in 2014, the city had no rental assistance program – as then-mayor Michael Bloomberg had canceled the Advantage programs after then-governor Andrew Cuomo had eliminated state funding. De Blasio created the LINC program, which became the CityFHEPS program. Under the program, tenants pay 30 percent of their income in rent, with the city paying the rest up to a rental limit which is now the city’s Fair Market Rent. The program lasts for five years but can continue longer with waivers from the city. Modeled on the federal Section 8 Housing Choice Voucher, the two programs have helped almost 24,000 households during de Blasio’s tenure. However, the vouchers are difficult to use and eligibility is limited. Recently, the City Council forced the city to raise the rent limit for CityFHEPS to match Section 8 rates, which should open up more places for tenants.

To further increase usage, the city should expand eligibility for CityFHEPS. Currently CityFHEPS is restricted to people earning less than 200 percent of the federal poverty level, but it also requires people to work 30 hours per week. This means some people earning above minimum wage but unable to afford housing will be ineligible for this program. The city should expand eligibility to allow people who work and earn up to 50 percent of the city’s Area Median Income (AMI) to qualify, and waive the work requirement for people who are not employed but are on public assistance to qualify.

When giving vouchers in the community to people that are not in shelter (which can prevent people from becoming homeless), the city requires that people have prior DHS shelter history and have an eviction letter. The city should waive the requirement for prior DHS shelter history and waive the requirement for an eviction letter – tenants should be able to use a rent demand letter or other evidence about looming eviction.

**NYCHA Housing**

New York City Housing Authority (NYCHA) public housing is an important source of affordable housing. Residents pay no more than 30 percent of their income on rent, providing stable housing no matter their income. Roughly 3,000-5,000 NYCHA units turn over every year and some people experiencing homelessness move into NYCHA from city shelters. While NYCHA housing is affordable, conditions at NYCHA are sometimes unhealthy, and those managing the buildings are often slow to respond or entirely unresponsive to tenants’ reported problems. The housing authority needs $40 billion in capital repairs to fix conditions like failing boilers that limit heat and hot water, leaking pipes and roofs, mold, and pest infestations.

**Section 8 Vouchers**

Federal Section 8 Housing Choice Vouchers is among the most stable and robust housing programs to promote affordability and stability. Under the program, households pay 30 percent of their income in rent and the government pays the rest to the landlord up to the Fair Market Rent (FMR), which is HUD’s payment standard or maximum covered rent. If a tenant secures an apartment with rent above FMR, the tenant must pay the amount above FMR.

In New York City, there are roughly 130,000 households using tenant-based Section 8 vouchers. While this is a critical program, it is underfunded by the federal government so that just 21 percent of eligible households in New York City receive the voucher, with 38,000 households on a waiting list (nationwide just 25 percent of eligible households receive a voucher). While the federal government has not been increasing the number of vouchers each year, some vouchers that are being used become available to new households when a previous user leaves the program. Approximately 3,000-5,000 vouchers become available each year in New York City.

Section 8 vouchers can be a powerful tool to end and prevent homelessness by helping people with very little or no income to afford housing. According to DHS data, the city uses roughly 600 vouchers to help families and individuals move out of city shelters. The American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA) included 70,000 emergency Section 8 vouchers, with almost 8,000 for New York City. These vouchers can help people leave homelessness or prevent them from becoming homeless. The city has been slow to utilize these emergency vouchers and should work to expedite usage.

During his presidential campaign, President Joe Biden called for the federal government to fully fund the Section 8 program and make housing assistance universal. Fully funding the program would have profound effects on housing stability and homelessness. A report by the New York Housing Conference found that universal availability of Section 8 would lead to a 77 percent decrease in the number of families

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72 https://thenyhc.org/universal-rental-assistance/
73 https://thenyhc.org/universal-rental-assistance/
75 DHS data provided to New York Housing Conference: Special Initiatives Move Out and Placements
becoming homeless, while leaving families and individuals with an additional $7,680 per year in spending capacity, which they would spend on necessities like food, medicine, transportation, and childcare.\textsuperscript{76}

There is legislation in Congress sponsored by Reps. Maxine Waters and Ritchie Torres, the Ending Homelessness Act of 2021, to make Section 8 universally available, though currently there is no sign that it can be passed.\textsuperscript{77} However, there are efforts to expand the number of vouchers. The Build Back Better legislation proposed adding $26 billion for Section 8, which would have created an estimated 300,000 new vouchers nationally and roughly 15,000 new vouchers in New York City. In addition, in the Presidential and Congressional budgets there are proposed expansions of Section 8. The House budget calls for funding for 125,000 additional vouchers, likely bringing 6,300 new vouchers to New York City. More federal rental assistance would significantly help the city prevent and end homelessness and existing vouchers should be used as much as possible to assist people in unstable housing or homelessness.

\textbf{Affordable Housing – HPD}

New York City has the largest affordable housing program in the country, using local money to create new affordable housing and preserve existing affordable housing. Over the past eight years, the city has produced 61,000 new units of affordable housing and preserved 80,000 units of affordable housing, part of former mayor Bill de Blasio's plan to create and preserve 300,000 units over 12 years. Former mayor Michael Bloomberg implemented a plan to build or preserve 165,000 units of affordable housing over 10 years. While these plans were ambitious, they were not focused on using the city's affordable housing to address the homelessness crisis, instead building and preserving housing that was often unaffordable to people that were homeless or had extremely low incomes.

For example, de Blasio's plan would have included just 31,500 units over 12 years for extremely low income households\textsuperscript{78}—those making $25,150 per year or less—but there are 254,000 severely rent-burdened households paying 50 percent or more more of their income in rent,\textsuperscript{79} and tens of thousands of households experiencing homelessness.

\begin{figure}
\centering
\includegraphics[width=\textwidth]{De_Blasio_housing_plan_compared_to_rent_burdens.png}
\caption{De Blasio housing plan compared to rent burdens}
\end{figure}

\textit{Source: NYC Department of Housing Preservation and Development\textsuperscript{80}}

\textsuperscript{76} [Link to Department of Housing Preservation and Development]

\textsuperscript{77} [Link to Congress.gov]

\textsuperscript{78} [Link to Housing New York 2.0]

\textsuperscript{79} [Link to Citizens Budget Commission]

\textsuperscript{80} [Link to New York Housing Conference]

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During his administration, de Blasio did increase the number of units that would be set aside for extremely low income households, responding to pressure from advocates, and he signed legislation passed by the City Council requiring that 15 percent of affordable housing be set aside for households experiencing homelessness.

Clearly more needs to be done. United for Housing—a coalition of more than 90 groups that developed consensus recommendations to address the housing and homelessness crisis—called for the next mayor to set aside 8,000 units per year for extremely low income households, including 3,000 for households experiencing homelessness and 2,000 units of supportive housing. An investment at this scale is necessary to meaningfully address the crisis and help people experiencing homelessness find stability.

**Rent-Regulated Housing**

New York State law created rent-protected housing in New York City, requiring owners of one million units to offer a new lease each year and limiting how much they can raise the rent each year. There are two types of rent protected housing in New York City. First, there are rent-controlled units, which are units in buildings with six or more units built before February 1, 1947, and the tenant has been in continuous occupancy prior to July 1, 1971.

Rent-stabilized units are apartments in buildings of six or more units built before December 31, 1973. However, 175,000 units in such buildings were able to leave rent stabilization under previous state laws where tenants with high incomes or units with rents that increased above a certain threshold through legal increases and upon vacancy could be removed from the program. In 2019 the state passed laws largely removing the ability of owners to take units out of rent stabilization.

In New York City, there are roughly 22,000 rent-controlled apartments and 966,000 rent stabilized apartments. While rent regulation is not tied to a household’s income, it remains an important source of stable and affordable housing for almost one million households. The housing allows tenants to stay in their home and see only relatively minor increases in rent, decided each year by the City’s Rent Guidelines Board. Rent-protected housing is also an important source of housing for people using housing assistance like vouchers, though many households also move into unprotected housing. It is an important source of affordable housing that needs to be protected.

**Reimagining Shelter**

As Maddox Guerilla, a youth homelessness activist, told us, “True prevention would mean that a person is able to have intervention in their life... and they don’t [have to] enter a shelter.”

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82 [https://rentguidelinesboard.cityofnewyork.us/resources/faqs/rent-control/](https://rentguidelinesboard.cityofnewyork.us/resources/faqs/rent-control/)
What would this look like? Shelters would be laser-focused on getting people into permanent housing, bringing the average length of stay down to six months or less. They would apply aspects of the Safe Haven model system-wide, focusing on having smaller shelters with a less institutional and more humane approach that respects the dignity and privacy of residents—emphasizing good staffing rather than policing and penalizing residents—and they would have ample on-site services to support residents as they work to regain stability. Single rooms for residents—which were historically a central part of low-barrier models like Safe Havens but in recent years have sometimes been eschewed in those settings in favor of “congregate-style” Safe Havens—would be the norm throughout the shelter system, not just in a minority of shelter settings.

With more robust services and policies in place to prevent homelessness, fewer people would enter the shelter system than they do today. As Maddox Guerilla, a youth homelessness activist, told us, “True prevention would mean that a person is able to have intervention in their life... and they don’t [have to] enter a shelter.” For the small number of people who would still need to enter a shelter, their time in the shelter system would look very different than it currently does.

A Vision for a Shelter System That Works

Imagine that someone loses their housing. They go through a streamlined intake process and are able to be placed directly in an appropriate shelter. At the shelter, they are given access to private space, sleeping in single-occupancy rooms or rooms with just one or two other residents. They feel—and are—safe. They connect with a team of clinically trained staff, who work with a small enough number of clients and have enough experience to be able to give meaningful attention to each one. Significant resources are dedicated to finding housing for them. They have access to healthy food that meets their dietary needs. In addition to case management and housing specialists, ample services are available on site at the shelter, including on-site medical and mental health staff, substance use treatment, and consistent support for school-age students. They are not constantly moved from shelter to shelter. Their lives are not unnecessarily restricted—if they need to visit a family member or a friend out of town, they do not lose their bed. If they work a night shift, they do not need to obtain special permission to return after curfew, because there is no curfew. They are not penalized simply for being homeless, and they are welcomed as neighbors by the other residents of the neighborhood where the shelter is located. They look forward to being in their own home, but in the meantime, they feel respected and supported at the shelter and in the neighborhood—and after a few weeks or months, their housing specialist finds an apartment for them that they are excited to move into.

The inspection and approval process for their new apartment is quick, and after moving in, they stay in contact with shelter staff who ensure that they can continue to access any support that they need and help them troubleshoot any issues that come up that could threaten to push them back into homelessness, such as a problem with their voucher or a change in their eligibility. When they look back on their few months in the shelter, they are glad to have been able to easily access the support they needed during a challenging time.

Challenges of the Current Shelter System

A more humane shelter system must address the core reasons why our current one fails so many New Yorkers experiencing homelessness. Evidence of this failure abounds: we see it in the nearly 70 percent of families with children who were rejected when they tried to enter the shelter system in 2021, and in the thousands of New Yorkers experiencing homelessness who choose to sleep unsheltered rather than entering the shelter system.83 Far from being “service resistant,” as they are often labeled, many

individuals living on the streets are eager to access housing and services—but what the shelter system offers them does not meet their needs. In the spring of 2020, at the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, the city drastically increased the number of stabilization beds—low-threshold private rooms in commercial hotels—available for individuals living on the streets. With this option available, 74 percent of individuals who were offered stabilization beds accepted the placement and stayed in their placement. Just nine percent of individuals offered a bed in a traditional shelter did the same.\(^\text{84}\) The fact that most families who want to enter shelter struggle to do so, and the fact that many individuals who are able to enter shelter avoid it instead, is an indictment of the shelter system’s track record in meeting the needs of New Yorkers who are homeless.

For New Yorkers experiencing homelessness, the challenges begin as soon as they start the intake process. “You have every aspect of your life dissected,” said Shamaya, who has lived in several different types of shelters in the DHS system. “If they find out you got a place you stayed at two years ago, and this person has a living room that nobody’s staying in and you can stay there, you’re not going to get shelter.” Many of the people with lived experience of homelessness whom we spoke to recalled that the intake process felt designed to weed out people who were “undeserving” of services, rather than making it easy for people to access the assistance they needed. “We have a big problem with not believing people,” Jayden-Avery said of the intake process. As a result of this approach, the process is tedious and inefficient. When Shamaya and her children were exiting a domestic violence situation, she did not have the paperwork on hand that was required for placement. “Instead of calling somebody who could just fax it over or email it over, I had to repeatedly go back there, day after day after day, because I was denied until I got it,” she said. Maddox experienced similar challenges during intake at a youth shelter. “Oftentimes, you’re asked for identification or for documents that…a lot of homeless youth don’t have,” they explained.

For families, all children must be present at PATH for the intake process—an unnecessary and disruptive requirement that was temporarily suspended during the pandemic and should not be reinstated. Shamaya remembered that her children had to sit in hard plastic chairs all day, and not all areas of the facility had chairs available. Families who need shelter are forced to prove they are homeless, as family shelter eligibility is narrow and restrictive. The “conditional” status that they are given allows them to stay in shelter while reapplying—but it leaves them without access to many of the resources that would otherwise be available to families in shelter.

Young people seeking shelter in the city’s runaway and homeless youth system, which is run by the Department of Youth and Community Development (DYCD), face an additional challenge: those who are 18 or older do not have a right to shelter unless they choose to enter the adult shelter system, and there are not nearly enough beds to meet the need. As of December 2021, there were 813 total beds for runaway youth and youth experiencing homelessness in New York City.\(^\text{85}\)

For single adults, the problem is often that the dehumanizing environment in large congregate shelters, particularly in the city’s intake and assessment shelters, can deter them from entering the system. “I went to a shelter one time, and it was so terribly unclean and unsafe, I couldn’t fathom staying there,” said James, who lived on the streets for several months before entering a Safe Haven. “There was no soap in the bathrooms—this was in the midst of COVID, so you would think there would be increased

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84 https://twitter.com/humandotnyc/status/1293973295629467648?s=10
85 Conversation with Jamie Powlovich of the Coalition for Homeless Youth, December 13, 2021.
attention to cleanliness but there’s not.” When shelter residents raise concerns, “no one wants to hear [you],” remembered Shams DaBaron. “When [staff] tells me I can’t have WiFi because I’m going to watch porn, that’s dehumanizing. How about, I want to call my kids and let them know that I’m safe?” While individuals who make the decision to stay on the streets are often labeled “service resistant,” the choice not to enter an intake shelter can be a rational response to an environment that requires people to give up their privacy and dignity and often puts their safety and health at risk.

It is all too easy to become homeless and far too difficult to exit into housing.

mental health. With no private space and sleeping in rooms with dozens of other shelter residents, many shelter residents reported feeling unsafe. “There are people there all night screaming, crying, laughing, talking—and not in a good way,” Nathylin Flowers remembered. Felix Guzman described developing a sense of “hypervigilance” during his time in the city’s intake and assessment shelters: “Constantly being on guard... that just wears you down after a while.” People who voice complaints often face retaliation from shelter staff. “They search your locker, they misplace your belongings... if you escalate [a complaint], they will move you to another shelter,” Felix said. Indeed, frequent transfers—whether retaliatory or arbitrary—were a common complaint among the former shelter residents we spoke with, who described these transfers as both physically and emotionally draining. “Going from place to place to place, it’s like rejection, every single time,” explained Lyndon, who spent time in the youth shelter system. “You just want one thing, and it’s permanency.”

Exiting shelter is another challenge. The lack of affordable housing and limited number of rental assistance vouchers both play a role. Ms. Flowers stayed in shelters for five years, struggling to find an affordable apartment with a landlord who would accept her voucher. Vouchers also have excessively narrow eligibility requirements. Althea, who landed in an HPD shelter after her home was destroyed in a fire, noted, “I didn’t know there was a difference between the HPD and DHS shelter system until I got into advocacy. I was advocating for the CityFHEPS vouchers, and come to find out, I wasn’t eligible for it because I’m in an HPD shelter—they take Section 8.”

For some New Yorkers experiencing homelessness, there are additional barriers to exiting shelter and accessing housing. Those in need of supportive housing need to provide significant amounts of documentation to prove chronic homelessness. People with disabilities and complex health needs find themselves limited to an even smaller pool of affordable housing options, sometimes because of the physical inaccessibility of many buildings. People who are undocumented are ineligible for housing subsidies, and people with a conviction record also struggle to access housing—even with vouchers, they frequently face discrimination. The Fortune Society, an organization that works with people with histories of involvement with the criminal legal system, notes that many of their clients stay in transitional housing longer than needed because of the difficulties they have finding housing. The youth activists we spoke with also described difficulty getting approved for apartments: “It's ageism,” said Lyndon. “[Landlords] see these young people...and they’re fearful to rent [to them].” For New Yorkers who fit into any of these categories, it is all too easy to become homeless and far too difficult to exit into housing.

Envisioning a Better Shelter System

The length of time it takes to move from shelter to housing must be drastically reduced.

Two fundamental changes need to happen for the shelter system to improve: First, the length of time it takes to move from shelter to housing must be drastically reduced. As Felix Guzman, like many other activists directly impacted by homelessness, has long emphasized, “The only solution [to homelessness] is housing.”

In conjunction with making policy changes that increase access to permanent housing for New Yorkers experiencing homelessness, the city must reorient its existing resources to prioritize housing placement. DHS has previously utilized financial incentives to encourage shelter providers to move people into housing, but without a concurrent increase in well-trained housing specialists and affordable housing options, these incentives have been ineffective at best and damaging at worst. One provider reported that incentives like these can lead overburdened caseworkers to place clients in substandard housing. Indeed, Ms. Flowers recalled caseworkers taking her to visit single-room occupancy units (SROs) that “stank, the bathrooms were dirty, they had rusting stuff, it was horrible. When I said I’m not taking it, they brought the big guns in from HRA to say, you know, you signed the paper, and when we find something for you you’re going to move.” This often came with a threat: if she refused to accept the housing they found, she would be moved to a shelter with a worse reputation. A better approach to getting people into housing more quickly would be encouraging shelter providers to shift money in their personnel budgets away from security costs and towards hiring more—and paying a living wage to—housing specialists and case managers whose job it is to help people move out of shelters. These in-shelter changes must be pursued concurrently with policy changes that make it easier for people to access housing.

Second, a better shelter system must be built and managed in a way that recognizes the humanity of New Yorkers experiencing homelessness. People who are unhoused face stigmas both in and outside of shelters. “You go to speak to someone and... they won’t listen to your concerns,” James explained. In the shelter system, “there’s no emotional support—no ‘do you need to talk to somebody about anything, how are you feeling?’” Althea added: “They just want to know if you’ve been looking for a place.” Will remembered that when he first arrived at a shelter, he felt embarrassed by the way people in the neighborhood looked at him. “Sometimes I wouldn’t go to the train station that’s near the shelter, for fear that people who would see me on the train would know I’m from the shelter,” he recalled. Many aspects of the Safe Haven approach offer a model for what a truly humane shelter system might look like, though the quality of individual Safe Havens tends to vary by provider, and the term has recently been applied to congregate-style settings that, despite the appeal of other aspects of their approach, lack the privacy that was fundamental to the original intent of the Safe Haven model.

Size

Size is an important part of making a shelter more humane. Smaller environments help create a sense of care and community. In our conversations, many stakeholders noted that at Safe Havens—which tend to be smaller than traditional congregate shelters—the staff knows every resident’s name, a contrast to their experience in larger shelters. Working with fewer people in a less institutional environment allows staff to provide more individualized attention to each client. For many people, smaller environments

can also be more conducive to mental health—with less noise and chaos and fewer people around, the environment can feel more manageable.

**Privacy**

The lack of privacy in traditional congregate shelters for single adults is one of the concerns New Yorkers experiencing homelessness most often express, and a more humane shelter system needs to prioritize privacy for residents. “Privacy is important because there’s a dignity aspect to just being able to have your own space for yourself,” Shams explained. DHS already provides a measure of privacy for some types of households: in Tier II shelters, each family gets their own sleeping space, bathroom, and cooking space. They are treated as a household unit. However, single adults are often placed in settings with upwards of 20 other people in barracks-style accommodations. When many New Yorkers experiencing homelessness were moved into hotels during the COVID-19 pandemic, the increased privacy was a significant benefit. Most urgently, this privacy saved lives and limited the spread of a deadly illness; more broadly, it gave New Yorkers experiencing homelessness a sense of dignity and stability that, for many, had transformative impacts on other aspects of their lives. Project Renewal, which moved clients from traditional shelters to hotels, saw a drop in overdoses at their sites after the hotel program began. Clients also reported positive improvements to their health: over 75 percent reported that their physical and mental health had improved, and 72 percent said their drug and alcohol use had declined. This data lines up with the accounts of the New Yorkers directly impacted by homelessness whom we spoke with, all of whom emphasized the importance of having a space to themselves. “It’s different to live in [apartment-style living] than it is to live in a shelter,” Maddox said. “It does something to your psyche.”

Privacy is a critical part of ensuring shelter residents feel safe. “The beds are three feet apart—you’re three feet from someone you don’t know,” explained Ms. Flowers. “You have no control—I felt so powerless.” Multiple currently and formerly homeless individuals we spoke with recalled times when they were placed with roommates who threatened to kill them. “My first roommate [in the Safe Haven] threatened to slit my throat in my sleep,” James remembered. On her first night in one shelter, Ms. Flowers was told by a roommate, “I wouldn’t go to sleep tonight if I were you. Because when you close your eyes, I could just kill you.” Ms. Flowers was sufficiently afraid that she called 911. James noted that LGBTQ+ individuals often feel particularly at risk of violence: “I know that I would feel much more safe... if I were housed in a location with other people who are LGBTQ, or in a location where there aren’t people who are actively homophobic or threatening towards you.”

This lack of privacy can also make shelter residents approach all interactions with a sense of wariness, even when no harm is intended by the other person. Shams remembered one incident that happened when he was living in a dorm in close proximity to many other people, separated only by a short divider between beds. It was an environment where everyone slept “with one eye open” to avoid having their items stolen or being bothered by others, and when Shams sensed that someone had entered his space one night, he jumped up and grabbed the person, yelling, “I will kill you!” “Everybody looked shocked...
no one [had ever seen] me react in a violent or any type of threatening way," Shams recalled. It quickly became clear that the person had walked into Shams's space by mistake when he was looking for someone else and misidentified the numbers on the bed. But in a moment of fear, Shams had reacted to the danger he perceived in a way that could have caused harm if it had escalated further.

It is crucial to give single adults the privacy of their own bedrooms. Bathrooms and kitchens, if shared, should only be shared with a small group of people, such as others on the same floor or hallway depending on the layout of the building.

Privacy is also important beyond sleeping space. Particularly if shelter residents do not have their own bedrooms, there should be private rooms available to reserve for working, studying, and taking phone calls. During her time in the shelter system, Ms. Flowers continued her routine of participating in prayer meetings by phone each morning, but was unable to find a private space to do so. “I would go in the hallway and the guards would say, ‘you can’t stand there,’” she said. “There was no place to be alone, there was no place to be quiet, ever, in any of the shelters I was in.” One advocate we spoke with who works with families who are homeless mentioned that having open spaces available to book for children's birthday parties and visits from friends and relatives is also important.

Similarly, it is crucial to make sure residents have a space to store their belongings that is truly secure. While shelter residents are given lockers, these lockers are easy to break into. Shams remembered that it would take someone “less than a minute to pop a lock and pull everything out of there.” Security staff frequently encouraged him to leave his laptop with them, and residents often advised newcomers to avoid using their phones out in the open. Shelters should consider options for storing non-traditional items like bikes; one service provider noted that many of their clients work as couriers and need a safe place to store their bikes when they are not working.

**Eliminating Unnecessary Restrictions**

Crucially, the value of privacy must guide shelter policies in addition to dictating their physical layouts. One reason Safe Havens can be more effective than traditional shelters is because they typically take a non-restrictive approach, allowing residents the freedom to come and go at any time and avoiding punitive approaches to substance use. In traditional shelters, curfews and requirements to leave the shelter during the day are dehumanizing and logistically challenging for shelter residents. During his time in the shelter system, Will left the building each day to take classes. When he graduated from his program, he received an award: never late, never absent. “You know why I was never late, never absent?” Will noted. “Because [the shelter] kicked me out at 7:30 am—where am I gonna go?” Ms. Flowers remembered the requirement to leave each morning as particularly challenging when she had just been transferred to a new shelter, a process that often happened overnight because “they don’t want the neighbors to be upset.” “You get in there [to the new shelter], and you barely sleep, but then they want you to get up and get out of that room at 7:30,” she said.

During her time in one shelter, Althea experienced the impact of these restrictive policies when she asked a staff member if she could leave for several days to attend her father’s funeral in California. “[The staff member] said, well, you’ve got to give up the room. I said, I have to give up the room? I’m coming back in 10 days! She said, I don’t care, you have to give up the room,” Althea recalled. “So I gave it up, I went to California, buried my dad—and in order to get another room when I came back, I had to show the death certificate and my plane ticket.”

Ms. Flowers remembered that when she was in a traditional shelter, the restrictions extended to the items she was allowed to bring into the shelter. “They searched your bag like airplane security, through
the metal detectors and everything,” she said. “You couldn't bring in a bottle of water if it was open. If the
bottle was closed, you could bring it. You could not bring in a bottle of juice, you couldn't bring in Chinese
food. You couldn't bring in a sandwich—if they found it in your bag, they took it out and threw it away.”

Shelters should eliminate curfews and requirements to leave during the day that place unnecessary
restrictions on residents. Treatment and supportive services should always be available, but they should
not be a prerequisite for getting shelter. Maddox emphasized the importance of creating a system that
is “not rooted in disposability”—one that does not rush to kick people out for minor infractions, but
instead focuses on healing. As Lyndon Hernandez and Jamie Powlovich noted in a 2019 op-ed about youth
experiencing homelessness, “We must demand that providers move away from punitive approaches.”

**Staffing**

Overreliance on security personnel and metal
detectors, which is the norm
in many shelters, has the
opposite effect, creating a
carceral environment that
makes it difficult to build
trust and community bonds.

A shelter's approach to staffing plays a
critical role in creating a humane environment.
As Charmel Lucas, who lives in a shelter in
Manhattan, recently told THE CITY, the “number
one” way to make shelters safer is by hiring “the
right staff.” Shelters must see staff as being
there to serve clients, not to maintain order.
Shams remembered that in one shelter he lived
in, a security guard refused to leave his post to
assist a client because he said his job was “to
guard the property.” Importantly, shelters should
recognize that safety is not achieved through
overreliance on security guards and other security
measures. “I've seen DHS police throw women on the ground, drag them out of their rooms in their
underwear,” Ms. Flowers said. “That's the power they have.” This approach, which escalated the situation,
is deeply misguided. When people do not feel safe, they try to scare other people into not harming them,
one shelter provider explained to us, reflecting on what causes disruptive incidents in shelters. Creating an
environment where shelter residents feel safe, respected, and cared for is the key to reducing disruption
and violence. Overreliance on security personnel and metal detectors, which is the norm in many
shelters, has the opposite effect, creating a carceral environment that makes it difficult to build trust and
community bonds.

In a better, safer shelter system, clinical staff rather than any sort of law enforcement would take the
lead in responding to incidents. Spending on security should be limited and instead directed towards the
resources and staff that can more effectively address the causes of violence and other disruptive behavior.
At Center for Urban Community Services’s (CUCS) Kelly Safe Haven in Harlem, for example, more money
is allocated towards other staff than towards their “safety specialists” who serve as security. Increasing
clinical staff can reduce the “need” for a heavy security presence and is a crucial step to making shelters
places of wellness and support, rather than places that residents often describe as similar to prison.

The Fortune Society offers an instructive example of a humane and effective approach to security.
Their transitional housing facilities serve a client base that might be expected to have the biggest
challenges with violence: people who are formerly incarcerated, including those convicted of violent
offenses. But Fortune is able to keep its housing facilities very safe with a combination of a low-threshold
approach and “high expectations.” Despite the profile of its clients, Fortune does not use any traditional
security guards or metal detectors—residents can go in and out freely. At the same time, they maintain a

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91 [https://www.thecity.nyc/2022/3/14/22978285/how-can-nyc-make-shelters-safer-we-asked-four-people-on-the-front-lines](https://www.thecity.nyc/2022/3/14/22978285/how-can-nyc-make-shelters-safer-we-asked-four-people-on-the-front-lines)
kind of reversible zero tolerance policy for violence, in which any violence results in the client being asked to leave—but the client is allowed to return when they stop behaving violently. Because of the right to shelter, any policy that asks clients to leave would not be feasible in DHS shelters, but the Fortune Society example demonstrates that treating New Yorkers who are homeless with dignity and humanity plays a crucial role in keeping people safe.

As a result, turnover is high, which has serious consequences for the quality of assistance that staff can provide residents; when a client goes through several case managers in the span of a few months and each one is newly hired, they face both a lack of continuity in services and a lack of experience.

Any security guards who are hired should be required to undergo the same training that other staff members receive, including training in de-escalation, basic clinical skills, social services, and trauma-informed care. Currently, “it’s so easy to just have someone without any kind of people skills” as a security guard, Felix said, noting that an emphasis on communication skills and de-escalation training would be an important improvement. Hiring security in-house rather than through a subcontractor would allow shelters to more fully oversee their training and approach. Several providers noted that in-house security is typically more effective than subcontracted security.

Good case management is equally crucial. When asked about the obstacles people experience in the shelter system, particularly with regard to finding housing, Shamaya said, “It literally boils down to case management.” When hiring program staff, shelters should prioritize clinical skills and a background in social work rather than finding people to serve as “warm bodies.” In many shelters, staff are “not trained to take care of people,” said Ms. Flowers. CUCS offers one model of a more clinically focused approach. Its executive-level staff has program experience, and at each shelter, the Program Director and Assistant Program Director are Licensed Clinical Social Workers. They oversee teams of clinical supervisors, who are Masters-level social workers and who in turn supervise four to five caseworkers. One of the caseworkers on each team is also a Masters-level social worker. Additional staff include psychiatrists, medical staff, and a specialist in activities of daily living. No staff member is just a Residential Aide, and many case management staff end up pursuing MSW degrees. “Everybody that is going to do case management work in a shelter should have some [level of social work training],” Shamaya said. “It doesn’t have to be a degree… but you have to have some experience.” Felix recommended requiring a certification for housing specialists. In order to avoid laying off current residential aides, some of whom are homeless themselves, Shams suggested offering a certification in clinical skills to any residential aides who wanted it, and incentivizing participation in the certification program by offering a higher pay grade for certified aides.

Case managers also need to have the skills to work with the specific populations in a given shelter, particularly around language access. While DHS offers a phone number for translation services, Shamaya reported that that process can take a long time, so she often saw caseworkers relying on Google Translate to communicate with clients speaking in other languages. One caseworker at a Bronx shelter Shamaya stayed in kept two tablets on her desk: one for regular uses, and one just for Google Translate. “It was needed at least once through every intake session,” Shamaya remembered. “Google is godsend in situations like those, but it’s not the same as being able to have a conversation with a caseworker who can really communicate back and forth.”

Low pay and high workloads are a significant barrier to hiring and retaining good program staff. Staff are poorly paid and are typically overloaded and under-resourced. As a result, turnover is high, which has serious consequences for the quality of assistance that staff can provide residents; when a client goes
through several case managers in the span of a few months and each one is newly hired, they face both a lack of continuity in services and a lack of experience. When Althea first entered the shelter system, a housing specialist called her to ask for information about her income. She never heard from the housing specialist again. Althea has also dealt with case managers whose inexperience means they can offer little help: “One time [my case manager] texted me about an apartment for $2,300. You’ve got to be kidding me… I can’t afford that!” she remembered. “You’re on your own.”

Lyndon dealt with similar challenges while living in youth shelters, noting that one case manager he had was not very familiar with the SOTA and CityFHEPS processes. The shelter system should be a place where good program staff want to work and want to stay. Increasing pay for case managers is essential, as is reducing caseloads—another benefit of the Safe Haven model, which typically has fewer clients per case manager than traditional shelters.

Even once those baselines are met, shelter jobs are challenging. Supporting staff in meeting those challenges is important—it increases retention and allows staff to better support residents. Women in Need (WIN), a family shelter provider, offers one model for this kind of support, integrating trauma-informed care into their staff assistance. When a staff member witnesses a trauma, they are offered support from a social work team, including one-on-one conversations, called “traumatic incident support sessions.” In 2020, all supervisory staff were offered training in how to support their staff through compassion fatigue.

Peer specialists who have experienced similar challenges as shelter residents can also play a crucial role on staff. “Peer support goes a long way,” Felix said. “It helps you to humanize yourself further. And it also gives you a model.” Peer specialists should be integrated into clinical teams and coordinate closely with case managers, housing specialists, and other staff, but they are able to provide a unique type of emotional support and guidance from a trusted source. “There are certain conversations that we will never have with our case managers,” explained Shams, noting that peer specialists can be more equipped to have those conversations. As youth activist Elizabeth Sutter told City Limits last year, peer navigation programs are crucial because “some people are more likely to take to important information when it’s coming from someone who has been in the system,”

Jayden-Avery, who is currently in the process of being certified as a peer specialist, remembered the difference between the staff with lived experience and those without lived experience whom she encountered in the youth shelter system. Staff members with lived experience would really “go in” for shelter clients, she said. “The love is palpable.”

**Food**

Food is an important but often overlooked aspect of the shelter system. Food quality, portion sizes, and lack of attention to dietary accommodations are frequent complaints among shelter residents, particularly those living in single adult shelters, which often provide food through contracted vendors. Shamaya remembered that both she and her children got sick from the food in shelters they stayed in. Others felt similarly: “The food was so bad, people told me it was worse than prison,” said Ms. Flowers. As a vegetarian, she had particular difficulties getting the food she needed, and lost weight as a result. Lunches were typically meat. “When I met City Councilmembers, they’d say, how are you, Ms. Flowers?” she recalled. “And I’d say, hungry.” When one Councilmember intervened to ensure residents of the shelter got boiled eggs once a week, “That was like a big treat.” Althea, who is borderline diabetic, also

92 https://citylimits.org/2021/09/22/nyc-receives-long-sought-grant-to-tackle-youth-homelessness/
emphasized the importance of ensuring dietary accommodations are provided for. With no ability to cook and strict rules against bringing food into the shelter, shelter residents are left with few options. Those options become even narrower after an individual spends a certain amount of time in the shelter, at which point their food stamps are decreased because the shelter is theoretically providing them with three meals a day. When she entered the shelter, Ms. Flowers was getting $194 in food stamps. When she left after five years, that allocation was down to $67.

People in shelters that give clients cooking facilities rather than serving food also experience difficulty getting the food they need. Shamaya was once placed in a shelter in Queens where her room had two hot plates and a mini-fridge, but she had no pots and pans to use. Another time, she and her children were moved to a shelter in the Bronx that had cooking facilities, but the night they moved in, she had not yet had a chance to buy groceries. “The only thing I had that night was a couple of packets of peanut butter and jelly that I got from PATH, and some bread—two, three slices of bread for four kids and an adult... and I had to take my daughter’s formula and mix it with the peanut butter for my kids to be able to be full.” She was reprimanded for knocking on her neighbors’ doors to ask for food that night, and when she asked staff for food to give to her children, she was told that there was nothing available.

Shelters and DHS should implement the changes recommended in 2019 testimony submitted to the New York City Council Committee on General Welfare by the Coalition for the Homeless:

- Where possible, food should be made on-site rather than shipped in.
- People should have access to microwaves and refrigerators to make and store some of their own food, and there should be enough of those appliances to serve all the shelter residents (Ms. Flowers remembered that in one shelter she lived in, 200 women had to share one microwave, leading to fights.)
- Dietary needs must be accommodated, and portion sizes, which are often too small, should be improved.

Additionally, home-cooked meals—which are often found in Safe Havens—make a big difference in making the environment feel home-like and welcoming rather than institutional and dehumanizing.

On-Site Services

One shelter provider reported that since adding nurses on site, their clients’ trips to the emergency room have decreased, and on-site healthcare providers have been able to build consistent and sustained relationships with shelter residents.

Better shelters have better on-site services. Health services should be a critical component of this. While not all healthcare needs to be provided on-site, every shelter—including those not specifically designated as MICA shelters—should have some medical and psychiatric staff on site. Many shelter residents come in with chronic medical conditions and mental health challenges, but unless these challenges are considered very serious, they are not given access to on-site care. At the assessment shelter he stayed in for six months, Felix remembered that the only medical staff on site were there to facilitate the required psychosocial evaluations. “Having access...
to wraparound services would have been beneficial,” he said. Given space and funding constraints, it likely is not feasible for every shelter to have its own fully equipped clinic, but even having a few on-site medical staff can make a big difference in triaging cases, providing referrals, and building trust. On-site nurses and doctors can check a resident’s vitals, provide guidance if someone feels sick, and get a resident up to date on their shots. They can also help shelter residents address longstanding health issues. “When you’re homeless, a lot of times, you overlook [medical issues] until it gets worse,” Shams said, noting that gangrene and other foot problems can be particular issues for people who are homeless, with potentially devastating consequences. “You’re so used to it that you learn how to live with it... [but if] you live with it, they have to chop your foot off.” One shelter provider reported that since adding nurses on site, their clients’ trips to the emergency room have decreased, and on-site healthcare providers have been able to build consistent and sustained relationships with shelter residents. Shelters should also look for creative ways to supplement their regular on-site care, such as health vans that come to a shelter a few times each month.

Substance use treatment and recovery programs should be available on site for shelter residents who want to engage in them, with as few barriers as possible. Shams noted that at one location he lived in, residents had to sign up ahead of time to participate in recovery groups, and it made a big difference at the Lucerne when people could “just walk in and access [the groups].” He started to see residents who typically hung out outside and avoided going to the recovery groups coming upstairs to take advantage of these programs. “People who never thought about going into a therapeutic environment... you start to see them feeling more comfortable, and they feel more warm,” Shams said, remembering that some residents who had previously never participated started reminding him to come to meetings when he missed one.

Strong coordination among staff members and with partner providers is essential to ensure that shelter residents get the services they need. Shams remembered that even in shelters that provided access to good off-site services, the lack of coordination between providers meant that people could easily slip through the cracks. A resident with a history of alcohol use who walked in one day and was clearly intoxicated and belligerent might be told by the security staff at the front entrance that they needed to sit in the lobby and calm down before heading upstairs to their room, but “that’s as far as that goes,” Shams explained. Even if this happened three days in a row, there were no protocols that would have required security staff to let the resident’s case manager know about the incident.

What would better coordination look like? In a better system, Shams said, a staff member who notices that a client is struggling would reach out to the case manager immediately. The case manager would talk with the client to find out what was going on and would contact their substance use counselor, who would encourage them to come to a meeting. Through these conversations, they would learn what caused the recent change in behavior. If the client had started drinking again because a friend had died, for example, they would help them set up a meeting with a psychiatrist for support handling their grief. Ideally, this kind of coordination would not even require an incident as a trigger—it would be happening proactively. Goddard Riverside is currently piloting an approach like this across four of their supportive housing sites through their Clinical Integration Project, which could easily be replicated in a shelter setting. Using a “vulnerability index” measuring factors like physical and mental health, substance use, and hospitalization rates, Goddard identifies the tenants who are “most vulnerable” from a health perspective and then consistently tracks their use of services. Each week, staff teams across all four pilot sites review the index. This not only creates a structure for consistent coordination about tenants’ needs, but gives Goddard insights on the needs of their population as a whole.
At family shelters, childcare is an especially important on-site service because it allows parents to work. Childcare should be provided on-site during the day for children too young to go to school, and after-school supervision should be provided for school-age children, including homework help and recreational activities.

Family shelters also need better educational support for school-age children. Communication between the Department of Education (DOE) and shelters should be streamlined, and the DOE unit responsible for this communication should be fully staffed. One provider reported that because the DOE communicates through DHS and then DHS communicates to shelters, it creates a “roundabout” process that leads to lags in communication. During the pandemic, there were many instances—including around the process for requesting iPads—where shelters did not find out time-sensitive information until several days had passed. While the DOE does provide staff liaisons to support families who are homeless, these liaisons are limited in capacity: they are spread out throughout the family shelter system and typically move between shelters. Each family shelter should have a dedicated DOE staff member on-site, and this role should be restructured to ensure the liaisons have sufficient credentials to effectively serve students experiencing homelessness. As Shams DaBaron noted in the Daily News last year in support of state legislation to require all homeless shelters to provide WiFi, educational support also means ensuring all units in family shelters are WiFi-enabled (as units in all types of shelters should be) so students can complete virtual classes and homework. Computer labs should also be available.

Depending on the population served, additional on-site services should include re-entry help for people with histories of incarceration, assistance signing up for and navigating benefits, and legal support. Shelters should also offer programming, including classes, employment programs, and community groups. At most shelters, “they don’t offer anything, there’s no programming, nothing for you to do,” said Ms. Flowers. “I just kept walking the halls. When it’s cold out, what do you do?” Urban Pathways uses a model at their supportive and transitional housing sites that encourages residents to build tenant advisory groups, advocacy groups, wellness groups, and more, all of which contribute to building a sense of community and care. Remembering one youth shelter she lived in, Jayden-Avery noted that despite the shelter’s other deficiencies, the shelter did a good job of “encouraging community so it didn’t feel like you were institutionalized.” She cited an improv group as one example.

### Community Integration

Shelters must be a gateway to housing, not a permanent, absorbing state.

In 2020, when the city moved many individuals in the shelter system to hotels as part of the its effort to de-densify congregate shelters in the midst of the pandemic, a supportive group of housed neighbors came together with shelter residents at the Lucerne Hotel on the Upper West Side to counter backlash and ensure shelter residents were supported. The partnership they built at the Lucerne brought additional services on site for residents and showed that shelters can be integrated into communities in ways that are beneficial for shelter residents and neighbors alike. Neighbors can offer their time, skills, and resources to support shelter residents. Licensed social workers from the neighborhood can offer Alcoholics Anonymous meetings. Families and friends can come together to organize Free Stores and toy or winter gear drives. Community organizations and businesses can provide job opportunities, just as Lucerne

residents were able to help with neighborhood cleanup through Goddard Riverside’s Greenkeepers program. Community support can also be informal and fun—Shams remembered that one volunteer on the Upper West Side offered a free outdoor fitness class that shelter residents and anyone else in the community could participate in. Activities that provide an opportunity for housed and unhoused neighbors to get to know each other, like community art events, can be especially helpful in building the kinds of positive relationships that make a neighborhood thrive.

For both parties, these connections can be transformative. For Lucerne residents, Shams said, feeling welcomed and appreciated by the community—and having access to the additional services the community provided—helped to create a warmer environment and break down the wariness and hostility with which shelter residents often approached interactions with each other. They went from fighting with each other to greeting each other “like, ‘Yo, what’s up, brother, how’s everything?’” Shams remembered. For neighbors who are housed, connecting directly with shelter residents helped to break down stigmas and misconceptions about homelessness.

All of these changes can make the shelter system stronger, healthier, and most importantly, a place where people stay for a short time rather than one where they languish for years. Shelters must be a gateway to housing, not a permanent, absorbing state.
The New York City Council should pass the following bills:

- **Intro 0190-2022** (Public Advocate Williams, Salamanca, Cabán, Stevens, Hanif, Ayala): This bill would require the Department of Homeless Services (DHS) to produce a homeless bill of rights, which would inform people experiencing homelessness about their rights and services available to them. In addition, DHS would be required to make this document available on its website and to provide it to shelters and social services offices for distribution to people experiencing homelessness.

- **Intro 0062-2022** (Public Advocate Williams, Cabán, Won, Louis, Restler): This bill would require the Commissioner of Social Services to establish a program in which homeowners or apartment leaseholders with a spare private bedroom in their home share their living accommodations with individuals who are homeless in exchange for rent, companionship and/or assistance with household chores. In establishing the program, the Commissioner, in consultation with relevant agencies, would develop and administer eligibility criteria; develop and implement the application, selection, matching, and move-in processes; conduct outreach; and provide services such as home visits, conflict resolution and social services assistance. The bill would also require the Commissioner to report annually on the program to the Mayor, Speaker of the Council, and Public Advocate.

- **Intro 0124-2022** (Salamanca, Stevens): This bill would require the Human Resources Administration (HRA) to designate housing specialists within all temporary shelters and to submit an annual report on housing specialists. This bill would also update requirements for housing specialists in Department of Homeless Services (DHS) transitional housing facilities and would require DHS to submit an annual report on housing specialists.

- **Intro 0092-2022** (Ayala, Ung, Stevens, Won): This bill would require the Department of Homeless Services (DHS) to create an accessibility advisory board to advise the Mayor and the Council on issues relating to accessibility in city shelters. The bill would also require the advisory board to submit an annual report on its review and recommendations.

- **Intro 0013-2022** (Louis, Riley, Ossé, Stevens, Brewer, Narcisse, Menin, Avilés, Ung, Schulman, Joseph, Williams, Sanchez, Krishnan, Fariás, Barron, Feliz, Ayala, Hanif, Brooks-Powers, Gennaro, Jordan, De La Rosa, Bottcher): Resolution calling on the New York City Department of Education to partner with nonprofit organizations to provide on-site pro bono legal assistance at schools to help students and their families with housing issues.

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Intro 0123-2022\(^{100}\) (Salamanca, Stevens, Won): This bill would require that the Department of Social Services submit to every council member and community board and post on its website quarterly reports on the number of shelters, supportive housing, including both single-site supportive housing and scattered-site, and cluster sites. The total number of shelters, supportive housing facilities and cluster sites would be disaggregated by council district and community board.

Intro 0054-2022\(^{101}\) (Louis, Cabán, Yeger, Restler): This bill would require the Department of Youth and Community Development (DYCD) to include financial literacy training as part of all youth employment programs and programs for runaway and homeless youth. Such training would include instruction on banking, budgeting, credit, debt, saving, and taxes. DYCD would be required to issue an annual report on how many participants received financial literacy training, the methods and manner in which the topics were covered and the amount of time spent covering such topics. The first report would be due on January 1, 2023.

Intro 0276-2022\(^{102}\) (Ossé, Avilés, Narcisse, Bottcher, Hanif, Hudson, Joseph, Sanchez, Brooks-Powers, Velázquez, Dinowitz, Stevens, Yeger, Williams, Hanks, Schulman, Riley, Ung, Barron, Cabán, Richardson Jordan, Gutiérrez, Louis, Ayala, Restler, Abreu, Krishnan, Marte, Nurse, Won): This bill would require the Department of Homeless Services to conduct trainings on techniques to improve professionalism, increase cultural sensitivity, de-escalate conflict and use trauma-informed theory for all DHS employees and contractors providing services to the public. DHS would be required to report annually on the number of individuals who have received such training. The first report would be due on January 31, 2024.

Intro 0229-2022\(^{103}\) (Cabán, Ayala, Hudson, Brewer, Stevens, Williams, Restler, Abreu, Krishnan, Nurse, Won, Riley): This bill would prohibit the Department of Social Services from deducting a utility allowance from the maximum monthly rent when calculating the monthly rental assistance that DSS provides to an owner or landlord on behalf of households with rental assistance vouchers, setting the assistance at the monthly rent of an apartment or a single room occupancy, up to the maximum monthly rent, minus a household rent contribution. It would also require DSS to conduct outreach on this requirement.

Intro 0522-2022\(^{104}\) (Bottcher, Ayala, Rivera, Ossé, Hanif, Abreu, Brewer, Louis, Ung, Gutiérrez, Won, Brooks-Powers, Hudson, Nurse, Joseph, Williams, Krishnan, Holden, Schulman, Velázquez, Gennaro, Narcisse, De La Rosa, Restler, Riley, Stevens, Moya, Sanchez, Menin, Marte, Dinowitz, Cabán, Powers, Avilés, Salamanca, Farias, Paladino): This bill would require mental health professionals to be available in each families with children shelter to provide on-site mental health services. The Department of Homeless Services would be required to maintain a ratio of at least one full-time mental health professional for up to every 50 families with children. The bill would also require DHS to annually report to the Mayor and the Speaker of the Council on the provision of mental health professionals and post such reports on its website.


\(^{101}\) https://legistar.council.nyc.gov/LegislationDetail.aspx?ID=5465033&GUID=D3F2FA3C-F71D-4A4D-9825-55AF41158A64&Options=Advanced&Search=

\(^{102}\) https://legistar.council.nyc.gov/LegislationDetail.aspx?ID=5570514&GUID=E338CA76-8DD0-466C-88E4-65D196072A98&Options=ID|Text&Search=0276


Conclusion

More than 40 years after the issuance of the consent decree establishing the right to shelter in New York City, the city’s shelter system is clearly not the solution to homelessness. While shelters are necessary to respond to people who are in immediate need of temporary shelter, the city must turn its focus from shelters to permanent, affordable housing with the supports necessary to help people keep their housing. For too long, New Yorkers experiencing homelessness have had to navigate a complex system of inhumane, overcrowded, and poorly maintained shelters, with numerous barriers to exit into permanent housing. The city's approach to housing must be holistic and focused on preventing people from losing their housing in the first place, with effective, supportive temporary safety nets to quickly get people back on their feet in a crisis. All people deserve to be treated with dignity and respect, regardless of their housing status. With a new mayoral administration and City Council session, the time to implement serious change to end the homelessness crisis in New York City is now.

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