

Testimony of
Coalition for the Homeless
And
The Legal Aid Society

On

Oversight: An Examination of the Department of Homeless Services 90-day Review

Presented before

The New York City Council
Committee on General Welfare

Giselle Routhier
Policy Director
Coalition for the Homeless

Joshua Goldfein
Staff Attorney
The Legal Aid Society
Homeless Rights Project

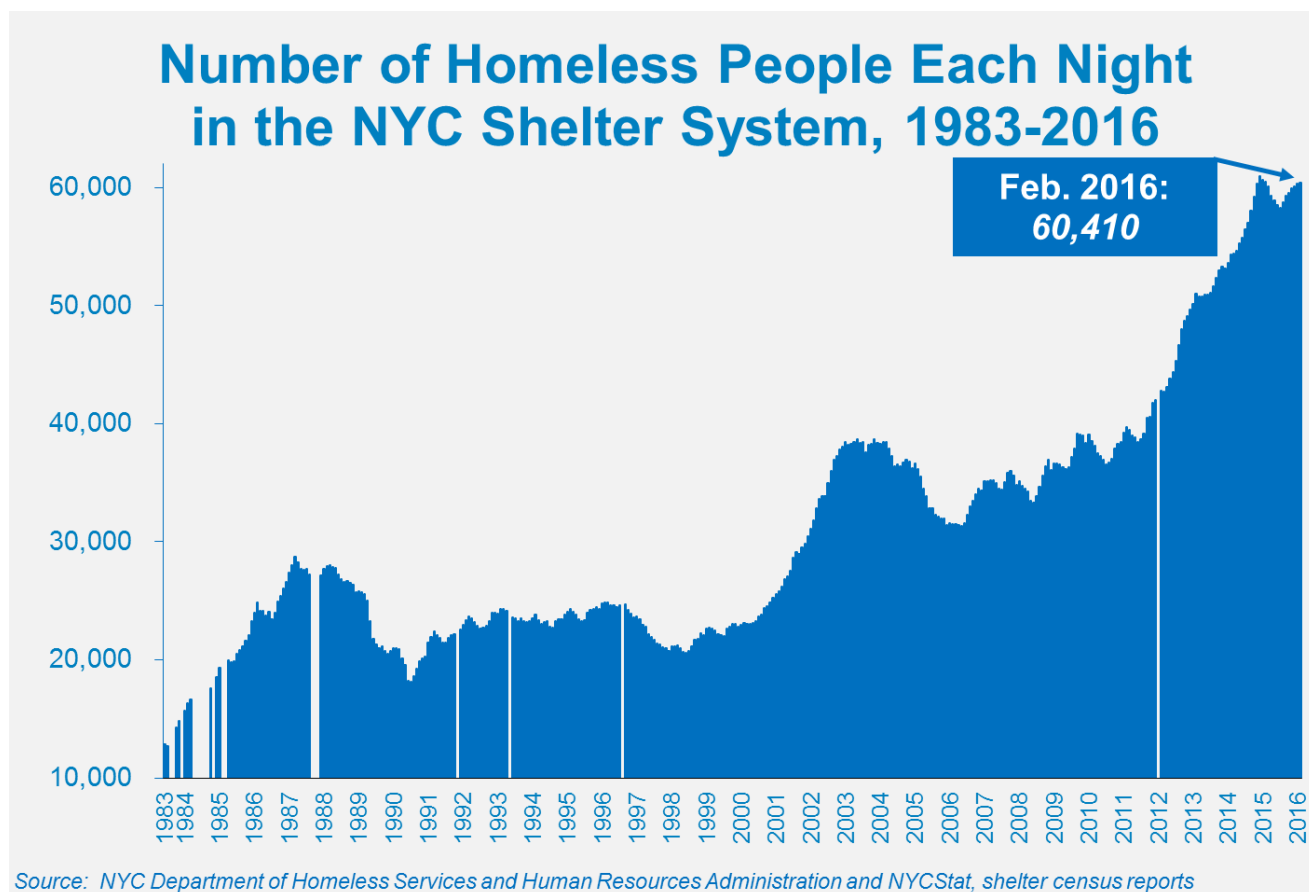
April 21, 2016

The Coalition for the Homeless and The Legal Aid Society welcome this opportunity to testify before the New York City Council Committee on General Welfare regarding the Department of Homeless Services 90-day review.

Background: The Homeless Shelter System in New York City

Homelessness in New York City remains at near-record levels, with over 60,400 people sleeping each night in the City's municipal shelter system including nearly 24,000 children and a record 14,300 single adults. Between 2006 and 2014, the number of homeless men, women, and children increased by 93 percent, fueled by the removal of all permanent housing resources in 2011 and the ongoing affordable housing crisis. Following initial changes put in place by the de Blasio administration and a return to a focus on housing-based solutions, the state of homelessness over the past year has shown positive improvements in some areas and a need for further investment in others. Specifically, while a series of new rental assistance and eviction prevention subsidies have shown promise in leveling the catastrophic increases in homelessness among families with vulnerable children, the de Blasio administration's efforts to address the growing crisis for single adults and those living on the streets have, to date, been less successful.

The Mayor's recent announcement of system-wide changes to be made following a 90-day review of homeless services acknowledges that problems have plagued the shelter system for many years and affirms this administration's commitment to proven-effective solutions. The proposed changes focus on key areas of concern for many homeless New Yorkers, including homelessness prevention, shelter conditions and safety, and access to permanent affordable housing.



90-Day Review and Proposed Reforms

Last week, the Mayor announced the results of the 90-day review of homeless service provision that was initiated in December. The results pointed to the need for reforms in many areas and proposed actions targeting both structural and programmatic deficiencies. The main structural change proposed will integrate management systems for DHS and HRA. This reform is intended to improve communication and streamline service delivery for homeless individuals and families who access benefits and services from both agencies. Additionally, the proposed Interagency Homelessness Accountability Council will bring in representatives from other key agencies, including NYCHA and HPD, who play a vital role in providing permanent housing resources for homeless families and individuals.

Programmatic reforms include changes to prevention services, street homeless outreach, shelter conditions, and rehousing programs. Many of these reforms will address significant obstacles experienced by homeless New Yorkers over the past several years, with particular emphasis on shelter safety and greater access to permanent affordable housing.

A few important changes should be noted specifically:

- Aligning eligibility procedures for adult families with those for families with children will remove excessive bureaucratic barriers adult families too often face when attempting to access life-saving shelter, as many have disabilities.
- Rescinding the requirement that children of applicant families be physically present at PATH for multiple intake-related appointments is a significant step in the right direction and will help homeless youngsters avoid missing an inordinate amount of school. However, removing children from school even for the family's initial application interview (which typically takes several hours) is unnecessary. We strongly urge the City to remove that barrier as well.
- The City has also proposed joint task forces with the State to help address myriad concerns regarding discharges from prisons and jails to shelter – as well as improving mental health service delivery for every homeless person in our city. We believe the improved communication and better-quality services resulting from these efforts will prove critical to addressing major systemic problems which have plagued the single adult shelters for literally decades. We urge the State to work cooperatively with the City in these efforts.

Despite the historic and wide-ranging effect of these proposed reforms, there are still actions the City can take to improve upon the work it has begun. As Coalition for the Homeless noted in its most recent State of the Homeless Report (released last week), housing-based solutions are the cornerstone to ending this unprecedented crisis and absolutely MUST be our top priority. The good news is that family homelessness in NYC has begun to level off – thanks to the administration's sensible utilization of NYCHA public housing units for homeless families. Building upon this recent success, it is imperative that the administration increase the NYCHA public housing allotment directed towards homeless families from 1,500 to 2,500 units per year, and in addition, make 2,500 placements utilizing Section 8 and HPD units in the coming Fiscal Year.

To address homelessness among single adults, – which is not only at record rates, but unlike the trend in family homelessness, continues to increase monthly – the City must work to open additional units of supportive housing as quickly as possible. Specifically, bringing online several hundred scattered site supportive housing units, will allow us to make quick progress in permanently ending the suffering of homeless men and women with profound psychiatric and physical impairments – those bedding down tonight in congregate shelters, as well as those languishing on our streets.

We also need to highlight that budget bills released following Governor Cuomo’s stirring State of the State address do not reflect the urgency of his words. Most troubling, there is scant detail accompanying the Governor’s budget bills, which lock in funding for the State’s share of housing for our mentally-ill neighbors. Put simply, it appears that we may be forced to wait three long years before a single unit of newly-funded supportive housing units from New York State are built and opened to ameliorate the suffering we see each day on our city’s streets. Governor Cuomo must designate significant resources immediately to underwrite scattered site units of supportive housing and must move with all due speed to reach closure on the MOU with the New York State legislature, which he specifically stipulated in relevant budget bills.

We commend the de Blasio administration for taking these long-awaited steps critical to ending the nightmare of homelessness among New Yorkers by enacting a more compassionate, humane, and – perhaps most important – effective service delivery system for our neighbors in greatest need. We look forward to continuing to advocate for the speedy implementation of these goals in the coming months.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify and we look forward to working with the Council towards our mutual effort to end homelessness in New York City.

About the Coalition and The Legal Aid Society

Coalition for the Homeless: Coalition for the Homeless, founded in 1981, is a not-for-profit advocacy and direct services organization that assists more than 3,500 homeless New Yorkers each day. The Coalition advocates for proven, cost-effective solutions to the crisis of modern homelessness, which now continues past its third decade. The Coalition also protects the rights of homeless people through litigation around the right to emergency shelter, the right to vote, and life-saving housing and services for homeless people living with mental illness and HIV/AIDS.

The Coalition operates 11 direct-services programs that offer vital services to homeless, at-risk, and low-income New Yorkers. These programs also demonstrate effective, long-term solutions and include: supportive housing for families and individuals living with AIDS; job-training for homeless and formerly-homeless women; and permanent housing for formerly-homeless families and individuals. Our summer sleep-away camp and after-school program help hundreds of homeless children each year. The Coalition’s mobile soup kitchen distributes over 900 nutritious meals each night to homeless and hungry New Yorkers across the streets of Manhattan and the Bronx. Finally, our Crisis Intervention Department assists more than 1,000 homeless and at-risk households each month with eviction prevention, individual advocacy, referrals for shelter and emergency food programs,

assistance with public benefits as well as basic necessities such as diapers, formula, work uniforms and money for medications and groceries.

The Coalition was founded around the effort to bring the landmark litigation on behalf of homeless men and women in Callahan v. Carey and Eldredge v. Koch and remains a plaintiff in these now consolidated cases. In 1981 the City and State entered into a consent decree in Callahan through which they agreed that, “The City defendants shall provide shelter and board to each homeless man who applies for it provided that (a) the man meets the need standard to qualify for the home relief program established in New York State; or (b) the man by reason of physical, mental or social dysfunction is in need of temporary shelter.” The Eldredge case extended this legal requirement to homeless single women. The Callahan consent decree and the Eldredge case also guarantee basic standards for shelters for homeless men and women. Pursuant to the decree, the Coalition serves as court-appointed monitor of municipal shelters for homeless adults.

The Legal Aid Society: The Legal Aid Society, the nation’s oldest and largest not-for-profit legal services organization, is more than a law firm for clients who cannot afford to pay for counsel. It is an indispensable component of the legal, social, and economic fabric of New York City – passionately advocating for low-income individuals and families across a variety of civil, criminal and juvenile rights matters, while also fighting for legal reform.

The Legal Aid Society has performed this role in City, State and federal courts since 1876. It does so by capitalizing on the diverse expertise, experience, and capabilities of more than 1,100 lawyers, working with some 800 social workers, investigators, paralegals and support and administrative staff. Through a network of borough, neighborhood, and courthouse offices in 26 locations in New York City, the Society provides comprehensive legal services in all five boroughs of New York City for clients who cannot afford to pay for private counsel.

The Society’s legal program operates three major practices — Civil, Criminal and Juvenile Rights — and receives volunteer help from law firms, corporate law departments and expert consultants that is coordinated by the Society’s Pro Bono program. With its annual caseload of more than 300,000 legal matters, The Legal Aid Society takes on more cases for more clients than any other legal services organization in the United States. And it brings a depth and breadth of perspective that is unmatched in the legal profession.

The Legal Aid Society's unique value is an ability to go beyond any one case to create more equitable outcomes for individuals and broader, more powerful systemic change for society as a whole. In addition to the annual caseload of 300,000 individual cases and legal matters, the Society’s law reform representation for clients benefits more than 1.7 million low-income families and individuals in New York City and the landmark rulings in many of these cases have a State-wide and national impact.

The Legal Aid Society is counsel to the Coalition for the Homeless and for homeless women and men in the Callahan and Eldredge cases. The Legal Aid Society is also counsel in the McCain/Boston litigation in which a final judgment requires the provision of lawful shelter to homeless families.