



Testimony of

Coalition for the Homeless

on

COVID-19 Vaccine Distribution & Accessibility in
NYC

submitted to

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Giselle Routhier
Policy Director
Coalition for the Homeless

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Homeless New Yorkers and COVID-19

Homeless New Yorkers, who have no homes in which to practice social distancing and protect themselves from COVID-19, face serious risks of exposure to the virus. While the Department of Homeless Services placed many residents of shelters into de-densification hotels, thousands of homeless single adults remain in congregate settings or in double-occupancy hotel rooms, and homeless families have routine contact with other households and staff in the common areas of their shelters. Ten months into the pandemic, unsheltered homeless New Yorkers who bed down in public spaces still face a critical lack of access to bathrooms, food, and clothing. Many are enduring a particularly dangerous winter with significantly reduced access to warm spaces, fewer resources to obtain essentials like warm clothing, reduced capacity at drop-in centers, and a late and inadequate availability of warming centers. A substantial percentage of homeless New Yorkers is considered to be at high risk of death or serious COVID-19 illness, particularly seniors and those with a growing list of underlying health conditions such as respiratory conditions, obesity, diabetes, heart ailments, and compromised immunity.

In recent weeks, the number of homeless New Yorkers sleeping in the DHS shelter system who are testing positive for the virus has been on the rise, mirroring broader trends in New York. The recent increase is an issue of great concern, given the toll COVID-19 has already taken on this vulnerable population: Between March and October 2020, the age-adjusted COVID-19 mortality rate for homeless New Yorkers sleeping in DHS shelters was 75 percent higher than the rate for NYC overall, with single adults and members of adult families experiencing the highest mortality rates.¹

Vaccine Distribution and Accessibility for Homeless New Yorkers

First and foremost, homeless shelter residents, unsheltered New Yorkers, and staff who serve people who are homeless should be offered immediate access to available vaccines. We are grateful that members of priority group 1b, which includes homeless people in congregate settings and those who serve them, are now eligible to receive vaccines. Several other important steps must be taken to ensure a successful vaccination effort:

1. Eligibility and the process for accessing the vaccine must be transparent and clearly communicated. Giving homeless individuals and the staff who serve them clear, consistent, culturally competent, and accessible guidance and information is essential in order to gain and maintain the trust of New Yorkers and ensure the vaccination of a critical mass of people.
2. The process of offering and administering vaccines must always be guided by informed consent, which hinges on the success of clear and consistent information.
3. The City, State, and Federal governments should mobilize every available resource in order to distribute a sufficient quantity of the vaccine to reach all homeless individuals and families, as well as the staff who serve them.

¹ View our calculations and methodology here: <https://www.coalitionforthehomeless.org/age-adjusted-mortality-rate-for-sheltered-homeless-new-yorkers/>

As a city, we cannot afford to mishandle the implementation of this extraordinarily important step in controlling the COVID-19 pandemic. Lives are at stake. This is particularly important for those populations that have suffered disproportionately from COVID-19, including homeless New Yorkers. We thank the Council for the opportunity to testify today, and for your steadfast commitment to addressing homelessness.

About Coalition for the Homeless

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 and at-risk New Yorkers each day. The Coalition advocates for proven, cost-effective solutions to the crisis of modern homelessness, which is now in its fourth decade. The Coalition also protects the rights of homeless people through litigation involving the right to emergency shelter, the right to vote, the right to reasonable accommodations for those with disabilities, 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, scalable solutions and include: Permanent housing for formerly homeless families and individuals living with HIV/AIDS; job-training for homeless and low-income 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, which usually distributes about 900 nutritious hot meals each night to homeless and hungry New Yorkers on the streets of Manhattan and the Bronx, is now regularly serving more than 1,100 meals per night and distributing PPE and emergency supplies during the COVID-19 pandemic. Finally, our Crisis Services 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, and assistance with public benefits as well as basic necessities such as diapers, formula, work uniforms, and money for medications and groceries. In response to the pandemic, we are operating a special Crisis Hotline (212-776-2177) for homeless individuals who need immediate help finding shelter or meeting other critical needs.

The Coalition was founded in concert with landmark right-to-shelter litigation filed on behalf of homeless men and women (*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: "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, and the City has also authorized the Coalition to monitor other facilities serving homeless families. In 2017, the Coalition, fellow institutional plaintiff Center for Independence of the Disabled – New York, and homeless New Yorkers with disabilities were represented by The Legal Aid Society and pro-bono counsel White & Case in the settlement of *Butler v. City of New York*, which is designed to ensure that the right to shelter includes accessible accommodations for those with disabilities, consistent with Federal, State, and local laws.