



Testimony of

Coalition for the Homeless

before the Committee on Criminal Justice
of the New York City Council

on

Oversight – Examining Recommendations from the Independent Rikers
Commission's Blueprint to Close Rikers

submitted by

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The Coalition for the Homeless (“Coalition”) is the court- and City-appointed independent monitor of the DHS shelter system and counsel in the historic *Callahan*, *Eldredge*, and *Boston* cases that created the right to shelter in NYC. We are actively engaged in assisting and defending the rights of homeless New Yorkers advocating for the resources needed to end mass homelessness by ensuring access to permanent housing. Our Keys Program supports single adults with mental illness and other disabilities, who are too often overlooked or ignored, helping them secure safe and stable housing. We work collaboratively with our clients through the lengthy and complicated process of applying for and locating placements in permanent supportive housing. This empowers them to be able to live with the same dignity that every human being deserves.

Jail is Not a Home: Introduction 1100-2024

Introduction 1100-2024 would remove the barriers that prevent thousands of people from accessing supportive housing after incarceration. NYC 15/15, the city’s primary supportive housing program, requires applicants to meet the federal definition of being chronically homeless, which mandates that an individual qualify as homeless for 12 or more months in the past 3 years, or have 4 or more separate episodes of homelessness that total 12 or more months in the past 3 years. However, the rule excludes any jail or prison stay longer than 90 days from the homelessness time calculation. This effectively precludes most people with serious mental illness exiting jails and prison from accessing supportive housing upon release.

NYC 15/15 was launched in 2015 to create 15,000 units of supportive housing over 15 years for individuals with serious mental illness and/or substance use disorder who also have a history of homelessness. The program adopted the federal chronic homeless eligibility described above even though it is not required; NYC 15/15 is entirely City-funded, and it need not follow the federal criteria. This unnecessary rule excludes thousands of individuals with serious mental illness and/or substance use disorders exiting jails and prisons from accessing supportive housing, leaving them with nowhere to sleep but on the streets and in shelters. For most homeless people leaving jail who have a mental illness or substance use disorder, NYC 15/15 is the only supportive housing option. New York City’s only dedicated supportive housing program for justice-involved individuals, Justice Involved Supportive Housing (JISH), remains underfunded and incomplete. As part of the plan to close Rikers Island, the City committed to funding 500 JISH units, yet only 120 have been opened.¹ This is entirely insufficient to meet the need.

The Independent Budget Office reported that 33% of people admitted to NYC jails in 2023 were homeless prior to their jail stays.² The average length of time in custody for people detained

¹ “A Path Forward: The Blueprint to Close Rikers.” (March 2025). Independent Rikers Commission. https://bit.ly/Independent_Rikers_Commission_Blueprint_to_Close_Rikers.

² *In Custody: Length of Stay and Population Demographics at NYC Jails, 2014–2023*. (2023). New York City Independent Budget Office. <https://ibo.nyc.ny.us/iboreports/in-custody-length-of-stay-and-population-demographics-at-nyc-jails-2014-2023-march-2024.html>.

pretrial at Rikers is 269 days, and it is 98 days for the entire population, as of February 2024.³ Thus, most people who are homeless when they enter Rikers do not qualify for supportive housing upon release because the City is choosing to exclude jail and prison stays when it calculates the length of a person's homelessness. In addition, every year since 2015, between 41 and 54 percent of people returning to New York City from state prisons were discharged directly into city shelters.⁴ As a result, too many people with serious mental illness are released from jails and prisons directly to shelters or the streets – with little or no services to meet their needs.

By passing Introduction 1100-2024, an estimated 2,600 people would be eligible for supportive housing upon release.⁵ The bill ensures that City-funded supportive housing programs include individuals who are homeless or at risk of homelessness, have had justice system involvement in the past 12 months, and have a diagnosed serious mental illness and/or substance use disorder. This change would ease the burden on shelters, support the City's commitment to closing Rikers by 2027, and reduce incarceration rates – ultimately, it would make New York City safer.

Supportive housing is an evidenced-based and cost-effective way to reduce jail, hospital, and shelter stays for homeless people with serious mental illness. New York City's FUSE Pilot Program provided supportive housing for individuals with frequent jail and shelter stays and mental health and/or substance use disorders. A 10-year study showed 63% of participants avoided jail and shelters, compared to 37% of a control group, and a 40% reduction in the average number of hospital inpatient days.⁶ If all 1,000 FUSE participants had received supportive housing and services, NYC could have saved an estimated \$45 million. Based on those findings, providing supportive housing for the estimated 2,600 eligible people incarcerated on Rikers each year would cost just \$108 million annually. By comparison, in 2021, it cost over \$556,000 to incarcerate one person for one year, or \$1.4 billion to incarcerate the 2,600 people who would be made eligible for supportive housing if Introduction 1100-2024 were law.⁷

While it is true that current demand for supportive housing exceeds the supply, this is not a reason for limiting eligibility. The categorical exclusion of people exiting jails and prison after stays of 90 days or longer is a missed opportunity to connect the most vulnerable people to the housing and services they need, thereby increasing public safety. Furthermore, NYC 15/15 was a commitment to develop 15,000 new units of supportive housing over 15 years. Yet, two-thirds of

³ "A Path Forward: The Blueprint to Close Rikers." (March 2025). Independent Rikers Commission. https://bit.ly/Independent_Rikers_Commission_Blueprint_to_Close_Rikers.

⁴ *State of the Homeless 2024: Rights Under Attack, Leadership in Retreat*. (2024). Coalition for the Homeless. <https://www.coalitionforthehomeless.org/state-of-the-homeless-2024/>.

⁵ *Advancing Supportive Housing Solutions to Reduce Homelessness for People Impacted by the Criminal Legal System*. (2022). Corporation for Supportive Housing. <https://www.csh.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/02/Reduce-Homelessness-for-People-Impacted-by-the-Criminal-Legal-System.pdf>.

⁶ *FUSE 10-Year Follow-Up Report: Initial Findings*. (April 2023). Corporation for Supportive Housing. <https://www.csh.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/10/FUSE-10-Year-Report-Initial-Findings.pdf>.

⁷ "Cost of Incarceration per Person in New York City Skyrockets to All-Time High". New York City Comptroller. December 6, 2021. <https://comptroller.nyc.gov/newsroom/comptroller-stringer-cost-of-incarceration-per-person-in-new-york-city-skyrockets-to-all-time-high-2/>.

the way through that timeline, only half of those units have been brought online. The city's focus should be on speeding the timeline for new units, not limiting eligibility.

Supportive housing is an essential tool for reducing homelessness in New York City. The Coalition supports Introduction 1100-2024 as a commonsense way to streamline eligibility for supportive housing and ensure that people exiting incarceration have access to the housing and services needed to support successful re-entry and end the revolving door of jails, hospitals, and homelessness.

About Coalition for the Homeless

The Coalition, 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 address the crisis of modern homelessness, which is now in its fifth 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 illnesses 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 distributed nearly 400,000 hot, nutritious meals to homeless and hungry people on the streets of the city this past year – up from our usual 320,000. 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 (1-888-358-2384) 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 independent monitor of

municipal shelters for homeless single adults, and the City has also authorized the Coalition to monitor the municipal shelter system 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 Legal Aid 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. During the pandemic, the Coalition worked with Legal Aid to support homeless New Yorkers, including through the *E.G. v. City of New York* Federal class action litigation initiated to ensure Wi-Fi access for students in DHS and HRA shelters, as well as *Fisher v. City of New York*, a lawsuit filed in New York State Supreme Court to ensure homeless single adults gain access to private hotel rooms instead of congregate shelters during the pandemic.