



**Testimony of Commissioner Gary P. Jenkins
New York City Department of Social Services**

**Before the New York City Council, Committee on General Welfare
Oversight Hearing: Unsheltered Homelessness in New York City
May 3, 2022**

Good morning, I want to thank the General Welfare Committee and Chair Ayala for holding today's hearing and for the opportunity to testify about the Department of Homeless Services' (DHS) work to support unsheltered New Yorkers.

My name is Gary P. Jenkins and I am the Commissioner of the New York City Department of Social Services (DSS). I am joined by Department of Homeless Services (DHS) Administrator Joslyn Carter and DHS Assistant Commissioner for Partnership, Capacity Building and Strategy Shane Cox.

We look forward to updating the Committee today on the work of DHS and our partner agencies in addressing unsheltered homelessness. As Mayor Adams has stated and made clear from the beginning of this Administration, every New Yorker deserves dignity and safety, and there is neither when living unsheltered. That is why we have been laser-focused in implementing the Mayor's initiatives to encourage vulnerable New Yorkers to come inside and off the streets and subways, and enter safer settings with dedicated supports. This approach is reinforced by our commitment to aggressively expand our low-barrier resources and capacity, which was highlighted by the Mayor's recent announcement to allocate unprecedented resources for New Yorkers experiencing homelessness.

As part of this investment, the Adams Administration will add more than \$170 million in the Fiscal Year 2023 Executive Budget to provide high-quality services for unsheltered New Yorkers. As mentioned, this would be the largest investment made by any City Administration to fund and expand street outreach programs and low-barrier programs. As announced by Mayor Adams, this investment will fund around 1,400 low barrier Safe Haven and Stabilization Beds, which would bring the total of these beds to over 4,000, opening up more opportunities for our vulnerable neighbors to access our services and get the support they need.

This administration has already made significant progress on its commitment to increase the capacity of low-barrier beds dedicated to serving New Yorkers experiencing unsheltered homelessness as part of the Subway Safety Plan. As of today, the City has opened new high-quality sites which will offer dedicated supports to more than 400 New Yorkers as part of nearly 500 specialized beds announced in the plan earlier this year.

More than 100 beds are expected to come online in the coming months, exceeding the goal originally announced in the plan. The City will fund another nearly 900 more beds, bringing the total number of new capacity funded by this investment to more than 1,400 beds. The Mayor's recent announcement includes \$19 million to create three additional Drop-In Centers (DICs), in addition to funding for specialized staff such as nurses, psychiatrists and social workers to support the wellbeing of our clients. Lastly, \$12 million of this investment will be allocated to DSS's expanded outreach programs, which will increase the number of staff conducting subway outreach and placements, thus intensifying our reach, and add transportation services and other resources to help streamline the process of connecting clients to placement opportunities.

As we begin our discussion today on unsheltered homelessness in New York City, we should acknowledge that the vast majority of people experiencing homelessness in our city are sheltered indoors across our shelter system because we have a right to shelter. That stands in stark contrast with other jurisdictions around the nation, particularly on the West Coast, where the proportion of unsheltered individuals experiencing homelessness on the street is greater than in New York City.

Our work to reach and support unsheltered New Yorkers happens each and every day, weekends and holidays and at all hours of the day and night. Our approach to reaching and helping unsheltered New Yorkers is centered around building trust over multiple interactions – work that is carried out with care and compassion by our staff and providers surveying our neighborhoods for unsheltered individuals in need. This work is deeply personal to me: as I discussed with this committee in the past, I experienced homelessness and spent time in a shelter as a child, and so I understand first-hand that our work changes lives and that we have a responsibility to provide our clients with resources that they need to not just survive, but to thrive in our city. We are the safety net of last resort for many New Yorkers, and I take our responsibility to shelter our most vulnerable neighbors with the upmost seriousness.

Before we summarize our work to support unsheltered New Yorkers and our strategies to help those in need, I want to provide important background on DHS and homelessness.

Overview of DHS and homelessness in NYC

DHS is committed to preventing and addressing homelessness across the five boroughs. Our staff and providers employ many innovative strategies to help individuals who are in temporary shelter or are unsheltered to come in off the streets and to successfully transition to permanency. The mission of DHS is to prevent homelessness when possible, address street homelessness, provide safe temporary shelter and connect New Yorkers experiencing homelessness to suitable housing. We carry out this mission with care and compassion for each client and their circumstances.

We also remain committed to meeting our legal and moral mandates to provide temporary emergency shelter at request to all eligible New Yorkers who need it. Our staff and providers also help these individuals access a variety of social services, employment opportunities, work supports and other public benefits. We also help clients increase their financial literacy and search for permanent housing, to ensure a seamless transition back to independent living and stability.

As we continue our discussion today, it is important to contextualize the environment in which we do this work. In recent years, New York City has seen significant decreases in affordable housing. In the decade between 2005 and 2015, household rents in the city increased by 18.4%, while at the same time incomes failed to keep pace, increasing only by 4.8%. Looking at affordable housing supply, between 1994 and 2012, the city suffered a net loss of about 150,000 rent-stabilized units. As a result, by 2015, the city had insufficient housing for millions of low-income New Yorkers.

These trends, along with factors such as an economy that leaves too many living paycheck-to-paycheck, domestic violence, overcrowding, housing evictions, untreated mental health challenges and inadequate discharge planning from mental health institutions and state correctional facilities have resulted in homelessness and displacement across the five boroughs over the past decades. While these challenges persist, we are steadily working to address the multifaceted drivers of homelessness.

Overview of Street Outreach Strategies

Now, I would like to walk the Committee through the multi-pronged strategies that we've had in place to support New Yorkers experiencing unsheltered homelessness, starting with our street outreach strategies. These outreach strategies are proactive, and we are proud of the work our staff perform to actively identify and connect with vulnerable New Yorkers.

Our outreach teams canvass the five boroughs 24 hours a day, 7 days a week and 365 days a year as part of our efforts to identify and support individuals experiencing unsheltered homelessness. Our strategies place trust at the center of our work; building trust can take several years and often requires multiple interactions as we encourage unsheltered New Yorkers to accept services so they can in due course transition off the streets.

Ending unsheltered homelessness is a citywide effort and we need everyone to pitch in to support the City's proactive outreach efforts. To New Yorkers that are listening, if you are traveling our streets, subways, and parks I implore you to not walk by a fellow New Yorker who is unsheltered— contact 311 immediately and be part of the solution. If the person appears to pose an immediate risk to themselves or others, New Yorkers should call 911 for assistance. This is a critical step in helping the City identify individuals experiencing unsheltered homelessness, and we ask that you inform your constituents about ways they can help given our collective responsibility to assist our neighbors in need.

Once someone contacts 311 to report an unsheltered New Yorker in need of assistance, a 311 Service Request is created. That Service Request is then routed to a social service provider or a partner agency, which results in an outreach team being dispatched to the reported location. The outreach teams then attempt to locate that individual, and if found, directly engage the person, assess for safety and encourage them to accept services and transition off the streets or subway.

To implement and organize our outreach work, the City launched the Homeless Outreach and Mobile Engagement Street Action Teams, or better known as HOME-STAT. Through this system, we have built the City's first by-name list of individuals who are known and currently

engaged by HOME-STAT outreach teams, and are confirmed to be experiencing unsheltered homelessness.

New Yorkers experiencing unsheltered homelessness face many barriers to transitioning indoors. Many of our unsheltered neighbors have fallen through various safety nets, experienced trauma or are dealing with mental health or substance use challenges. All of these factors make these New Yorkers our most vulnerable population. As mentioned, it can take multiple interactions and persistent and compassionate engagement to successfully encourage someone experiencing unsheltered homelessness to accept City services. Given these circumstances, it is important to understand that there is no one-size-fits-all approach to ending homelessness. However, HOME-STAT and our approach allows our outreach teams to engage New Yorkers experiencing unsheltered homelessness, person by person, directly and repeatedly, working to gain their trust and ultimately encourage them to accept services.

Shifting to the services available to New Yorkers experiencing unsheltered homelessness, I want to highlight the specialized facilities DHS oversees to support these individuals. Along with our providers, DHS operates Drop-In Centers, stabilization beds and Safe Havens, which provide low-barrier programs that specifically target individuals who may be resistant to accept other services, including traditional shelter.

For the Committee's background, I want to provide a more detailed overview of these resources. Drop-In Centers offer baseline services with the goal of meeting immediate needs for unsheltered New Yorkers, such as meals and showers. Drop-In Centers have case management services on-site, which provide the immediate option for individuals who want to transition off the streets. In the case of Safe Havens, we provide a transitional housing model with specialized overnight beds, more intimate and hands-on case management, along with lower-barrier program requirements. To build on the success of the Safe Haven model, we have expanded the number of these specialized beds across the city, with more coming online to support New Yorkers in need, as highlighted by the Mayor's historical investment in low-barrier beds. Lastly, like Safe Havens, stabilization beds are small-scale and low-barrier programs aimed at helping individuals experiencing unsheltered homelessness who may be resistant to accepting services. Moreover, our stabilization beds are aimed for clients who are more able to live independently and include several services to ensure they are supported.

These facilities are equipped with on-site services and staff who work closely with clients to build trust, stabilize their living circumstances, and encourage transitioning from unsheltered homelessness and into permanent housing. The services provided here are frequently the first step in helping New Yorkers experiencing unsheltered homelessness on a path to stability, and we are proud of this work and the results we achieve each day.

Another key resource available to help New Yorkers experiencing homelessness is supportive housing – a model of affordable housing with supportive social services in place for individuals who are homeless or at risk of homelessness. These services are overseen by the Human Resources Administration's Office of Supportive and Affordable Housing and Services (OSAHS), whose focus is on developing permanent housing solutions for formerly homeless individuals. Our supportive housing teams work closely with our partners to develop new

housing programs and refer applicants to housing so they can stabilize their lives and improve their circumstances.

Subway Outreach

Now, I would like to shift to update the Committee on our recent initiatives taken on by this Administration, starting with our subway outreach efforts, through which DHS and our provider organizations work to reach and support New Yorkers experiencing unsheltered homelessness in the subways. As Mayor Adams has stated, it is inhumane to allow our fellow New Yorkers to sleep and live on the subway, and we must not turn a blind eye towards their plight. As part of this initiative, our outreach teams who are out canvassing every day, day and night, have enhanced access to clinicians, providing outreach staff with new tools and resources, to further strengthen our outreach efforts in the subway system.

The subway outreach initiative is centered around interagency and City and State collaboration, with the aim to assist New Yorkers experiencing unsheltered homelessness in the subway. The initiative includes the following features:

- Deploying Joint Response Teams made up of DHS, Department of Health and Mental Hygiene, New York Police Department and community-based providers in high-need locations across the city. They work in partnership with the State's Safe Options Support Outreach Teams, also known as SOS Teams, which consist of outreach workers and clinicians.
- Incorporating medical services to individuals experiencing unsheltered homelessness.
- Streamlining the placement process into supportive housing and minimizing the amount of paperwork required to show eligibility; and
- Creating new Drop-In Centers to provide a direct route for New Yorkers to come indoors, and exploring opportunities to place Drop-In Centers closer to key subway stations to more seamlessly transition individuals indoors.

Since the inception of this initiative, our teams have canvassed subway platforms, subway cars, transit hubs and end-of-line subway stations, to offer services and supports to New Yorkers experiencing unsheltered homelessness. When a person in the subway is engaged by an outreach team, they are evaluated to address their individualized needs. Recognizing that there is no one-size-fits-all solution to address the circumstances that may have resulted in the person's homelessness, our outreach staff and clinicians offer a range of services and supports.

As we have stated previously, these efforts are all about repeated engagements to build trust with New Yorkers in need, with the goal being to connect them to long term permanent housing, mental health and substance use treatment, and community-based services. For the Committee's awareness, every day, outreach teams conduct on average 700 engagements with individuals in need on the subway platforms, at prioritized end-of-line stations, and in subway cars. This does not include the ongoing work of responding to 311 calls and other outreach during daytime hours which have reached thousands of New Yorkers. From these interactions, we can report that more than 700 individuals accepted services into shelter. Our work continues, and we look forward to

collaborating with our partners in and outside of government to help New Yorkers in need in our city's subways.

Street Outreach Initiatives

This Administration is redoubling its efforts to serve and support New Yorkers experiencing unsheltered homelessness. The Mayor's recent initiatives are focused on encouraging vulnerable New Yorkers to come in off the streets and subways and into safer settings. Additionally, this work is reinforced by this Administration's commitment to aggressively expand our low-barrier resources such as Safe Havens and stabilization beds which are dedicated to serving this population, and provide the critical capacity needed to bring individuals indoors and closer to support services.

Regarding the City's latest interagency collaboration efforts to address encampments, the Mayor has been clear from the onset that we are not going to abandon our neighbors who are suffering, particularly when the City has the ability to help and improve their conditions. It is our moral obligation to use the resources we have to help our fellow New Yorkers who are experiencing unsheltered homelessness, and not just ignore our neighbors in need.

It is critical that we provide services for our vulnerable neighbors who need our help – and thanks to this initiative, our city will become more equitable for all. At every cleaning, DHS outreach teams are there on the ground to connect New Yorkers experiencing unsheltered homelessness with services and help facilitate the connection to provide shelter, food, and support. As the Mayor has stated, we will not be deterred from offering the help and services to our unsheltered neighbors that they deserve and are entitled to, all while ensuring that our public spaces remain clear and clean and available to all.

We also appreciate the Committee Chair's recent acknowledgement about the effectiveness of our low barrier programs such as Safe Havens and stabilization beds, which are specifically tailored for unsheltered individuals who may be resistant to accepting services, or who may not be best served by other services, including traditional transitional housing settings. That is why, as of today, we have approximately 3,000 specialized beds dedicated to serving the unique needs of New Yorkers experiencing unsheltered homelessness. And as mentioned earlier, with the historical investments we are making, including funding for around 1,400 low barrier beds, which would bring the total of these beds to over 4,000, opening up more opportunities for our vulnerable neighbors to access our services and get the support they need and deserve.

We also want to take this opportunity to highlight the various shelter models used by DHS and our partners to support New Yorkers in need. All our facilities, from dormitory shelters to Safe Havens, maintain strict protocols to ensure the safety of our clients. Our staff and providers receive the necessary training, some of which we have worked with the City Council to craft, to ensure they have the tools and knowledge to address any safety concerns and de-escalate matters in a professional manner. Specifically looking at our dormitory settings and safety, all of our shelter sites have 24/7 security, we have cleared more than 90% of violations and have added tens of millions of dollars annually for programming for our clients to participate in.

Legislation:

Moving on to legislation, the bills being heard today present several ideas that we are reviewing. As we continue these discussions, we encourage the Committee to consider the fiscal and staffing resources that would be necessary to carry out these proposals, and the impact on our agencies' programming.

Introduction 212 proposes to update Local Law 37 of 2011, which requires a monthly report on emergency housing assistance usage and require a cover page listing the total number of all individuals utilizing emergency housing. We look forward to discussing this proposal further with the bill's sponsor to ensure we present an accurate view of clients in DHS shelter and other emergency shelters, while at the same time ensuring reporting does not duplicate pre-existing requirements.

Introduction 211 would require reporting on exits from City-administered facilities and the financing, starts and completions of permanent housing meant for individuals exiting these facilities. This bill presents similar challenges as Introduction 212. We want to ensure the reporting required by this bill is not onerous or repetitive of existing requirements, and we look forward to working with the sponsor to understand the intent.

Lastly, today's preconsidered introduction proposes that the Department of Homeless Services and Human Resources Administration track and report data on rental assistance programs. We are reviewing the legislation and we look forward to discussing and clarifying the information being requested in this proposal, with the goal being to ensure the data's accuracy and efficiency. Based on an initial review, as currently drafted, the bill would pose a substantial administrative burden on the agency, as it requires resource intensive data collection and seeks information that is anticipated to be untraceable.

Closing

As we close our testimony today, I want to briefly summarize our key takeaways on how the Adams Administration is working to address unsheltered homelessness across our city:

- Homelessness is a decades-long challenge that has persisted due to many factors, from stagnating wages and a lack of affordable housing, and the Adams Administration is laser-focused on connecting unsheltered New Yorkers to the services they need to get back on their feet;
- Every New Yorker and elected official shares the responsibility of proactively helping unsheltered New Yorkers; from taking a few minutes to contact 311 to help us identify an unsheltered neighbor, to helping us find and site shelter facilities across the five boroughs;
- Our outreach teams are out in the field, 24 hours a day, 7 days a week and 365 days a year supporting New Yorkers experiencing unsheltered homelessness, in our streets and subways, and we are not leaving any stone unturned in our efforts to bring them indoors with the care and compassion they deserve.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify today about our efforts to address unsheltered homelessness in our city. We look forward to partnering with the City Council on these efforts and I welcome any questions you may have.