

Department of Homeless Services Hearing Testimony

State Assembly Committees on Social Services and Oversight, Analysis, and Investigation *Homeless Services in New York State* Tuesday, December 9, 2014, 11:00 a.m.

Good morning Chairs Titus and Hevesi, and members of the standing committees on Social Services and Oversight, Analysis, and Investigation. Representing DHS--the Department of Homeless Services of the City of New York-- are Jody Rudin, Deputy Commissioner of Adult Services; Jahmani Hylton, Deputy Commissioner of Family Services; and Camille Rivera, Deputy Commissioner of Communications and External Affairs.

I want to thank you for the opportunity to testify before you today, and to provide you with information and insight into New York City's homeless shelter system and population, as well as the significant needs of this vulnerable population. In this testimony, I will share this administration's vision, mission, and goals to address the many drivers of homelessness. I will outline the challenges we face as income inequality and wage disparity continues to deepen, even as the economy recovers. And I will detail various initiatives this administration is taking to address the growing homeless census in New York City.

Growing Inequality is Our Biggest Challenge:

New York City, like many cities across the country, is experiencing an economic crisis that is the pervasive reality in American life right now. Increasingly, income inequality in this city has hit hardest those on the precipice of housing instability. These are families with children. These are single parents one sick child away from losing their job. Over the past several years, this inequality has led to a growth in the homeless shelter census, the likes of which the City has never seen. Indeed, homelessness is a symptom of unaffordable housing, especially when paired with stagnant wages and unemployment. Nearly 46-percent of people live at or near the poverty level in New York City -- that's the greatest income disparity in this country in 100 years. Moreover, the cost of housing in New York continues to increase, while wages have stagnated or decreased. One in three people work low-wage jobs, and a person who works 40 hours a week at minimum wage only makes \$18,720 a year and cannot afford basic living costs. More than three-quarters of low-income households spend at least 30-percent of their income on rent; half of low-income households spend 50-percent of their income on rent. And with the City's legal mandate to provide shelter to all eligible families and adults, we provide essential, emergency services not only to homeless New Yorkers, but to people from across this State, the county, and the world. This makes New York City unique, and distinct from anywhere else. It also means that we have a significant number of individuals requiring our care, and we must have the resources to meet their needs.

Many factors contribute to homelessness, but the two most common reasons that families enter shelter are eviction and domestic violence. In most situations, those who enter shelter are simply unable to afford housing. In our system, more than a quarter of the homeless families living in shelter are working. In some cases, two adults are working and still cannot afford the necessary down payments for an apartment. This cycle has trapped families in our system --- indeed, the

number of families entering shelter continues to exceed the number exiting. This is the primary reason the average length of stay in shelter is 412 days for families with children. The growing shelter census in NYC has led us to experience severe shelter capacity constraints. In this calendar year, the homeless shelter census has grown from 50,689 individuals to 58,706 individuals, including 12,313 families and 25,396 children.

In order to reach our goal to ensure that all New Yorkers are stably housed, we must continue to expand our rental assistance programs, prevention initiatives, aftercare programs, and street outreach solutions. This year, the State has supported us in pursuing both prevention and rental assistance. The budget enacted during the last legislative session allowed us to strengthen and expand our prevention efforts and to assist long staying shelter clients in exiting shelter to permanent housing.

DHS' Mission and Vision:

The mission of the Department of Homeless Services is to prevent and to reduce homelessness whenever possible. We provide safe and secure temporary housing to individuals and families who are in need of the same. To meet these goals, we collaborate with city agencies and community partners to assist our clients in achieving housing permanency. New York City is governed by a unique right to shelter, and our legal mandate is to provide temporary emergency housing for people experiencing homelessness. This mandate sets New York apart from other cities that can turn homeless individuals and families away once available shelters have reached capacity.

DHS has 2,000 employees and an annual operating budget of approximately \$1 billion. DHS is the largest homeless service agency of its kind committed to preventing and addressing homelessness.

DHS Takes Care of Thousands of Families and Individuals:

There are approximately 58,706 individuals in shelter in New York City. This number comprises single adults, families with children, and adult families. There are approximately 12,000 families with children in shelter including over 25,000 children. We are using over 250 locations in all five boroughs of NYC to shelter all individuals and families in our system. The majority of our shelters are in the Bronx, closely followed by Brooklyn and Manhattan, and thereafter Queens, and Staten Island. DHS directly operates three shelters; the others are operated by non-profit providers. We also operate drop-in centers and safe haven shelters for unsheltered homeless individuals.

The administration's preference for sheltering families with children is to use purpose-built tier II shelters that provide dedicated onsite social services to support clients in moving to housing permanency.

State Support has Been Extremely Valuable:

The State's support and investment in DHS' efforts has been extremely valuable and helpful in our work. The 2014-2015 state budget provided real support for our homeless services programs, including supportive housing, eviction prevention, and transitioning to permanency. Thanks to the partnership with the Assembly, Senate, and Governor, we were able to amend the language in the

state budget with regard to the use of TANF (Temporary Assistance for Needy Families) to support rental assistance in New York City. This, and other funding, has allowed for a pool of resources to create a rental subsidy program for families residing in shelter.

Enhancing Prevention Services:

DHS is strengthening its prevention initiatives. The best outcome for families at risk of becoming homeless is to ensure that families with children remain stably housed. The State-funded Homebase Prevention Program is the cornerstone of our agency's efforts to prevent homelessness. It is a five-borough network of neighborhood-based services that are nationally-recognized and proven to help families remain stably housed in their own homes. The recent \$20 million investment in the Homebase Program is the greatest increase in funding for the program since its inception in 2005, bringing total funding from \$22 million to \$42 million. State assistance has allowed us to increase our presence on the ground, in the very communities that most need Homebase's robust services, which include homeless prevention services, rental arrears assistance, and eviction prevention advocacy. This fall, we opened nine more Homebase offices, in addition to our already existing 14 offices, for a total of 23 offices across all five boroughs.

Homebase provides customized assistance for individuals and families such as eviction prevention, landlord mediation, short-term emergency funding to prevent evictions and address rent arrears, financial counseling, assistance in obtaining employment and public benefits, and help relocating if necessary. Legal services are also available in collaboration with the City's Human Resources Administration (HRA). These services include anti-eviction legal services and rent assistance for struggling families.

Street and Subway Outreach Expansion:

DHS continues to focus on those individuals living on the street and on the subway. We have outreach teams in every borough that work around the clock to assist those in need. DHS has expanded its homeless street outreach efforts and is now overseeing outreach in the subways including stations and subway cars themselves. Beginning this July, DHS took over the responsibility for outreach services in all 468 subway stations. We believe that this change will significantly reduce the number of homeless individuals living in the subway system by linking them to safe haven shelter and ultimately to housing. In doing this work, DHS will adopt the best practices established throughout the years in our street outreach efforts and yield greater efficiencies in service delivery for this population.

Improving Shelter for Better Client Outcomes:

A key focus for this administration has been to address shelter conditions across the system. I believe that our clients need a safe place to stay while they rebuild their lives. Furthermore, access to rich, comprehensive social services is essential for families to ultimately exit our system. We are moving toward a system that reduces its reliance on placing families with children in individual apartment buildings, otherwise known as cluster siting, and placing families in Tier II shelters where DHS is better able monitor the provider and facilities. This also ensures clients are in well-maintained units, and are closer to core social services, including employment and housing placement services.

Housing Permanency and After Care:

State support of our LINC (Living in Communities) rental assistance programs has been extremely helpful to us providing resources to move our long stayer clients to housing permanency. LINC is tailored to serve three specific long stayer populations in shelter: working families, episodically homeless families, and survivors of domestic violence. LINC certified families pay 30-percent of their income toward rent and receive financial rental assistance and aftercare services as part of LINC. LINC certification is renewable each year for up to five years.

LINC will assist over 4,000 families per year to achieve housing permanency outside our system. LINC 1 is for families that have been working 35 or more hours per week for at least 90 days. LINC 1 will assist 1,101 families in its first year. LINC 2 is for people who are currently in shelter and have been in shelter multiple times over a period of two years. LINC 2 will assist 950 families in its first year. These families have more intensive needs and DHS has been piloting a model that works with these families with a comprehensive aftercare component. LINC 3 is for domestic violence survivors who will soon time out of HRA shelters or are already residing in DHS shelters because they have timed out of HRA or because HRA-DV shelter had insufficient capacity. The program will assist 1,000 families in DHS shelters and 900 in HRA-DV shelters.

Another part of our overall homeless reduction strategy is our work with the New York City Housing Authority (NYCHA). The City is working with the NYCHA to offer homeless families apartments in public housing. To identify appropriate families, DHS has looked at families with children who are currently in the New York City shelter system and who are on NYCHA's waitlist. The goal has been to use the New York City Housing Authority (NYCHA) resources selectively and in a targeted way, focusing on working families.

Conclusion:

DHS is committed to reducing homelessness throughout New York City and is focused on homelessness prevention and moving individuals and families to housing permanency. It is our hope that in continuing our partnership with the State, we can assist an even greater number of families from shelter to permanent housing, and allow them to remain stably housed in the community. I will be happy to answer any questions and address any concerns that you have about our vision to improve services for homeless New Yorkers.