

Department of Homeless Services Hearing Testimony

New York City Council Committee on General Welfare

Oversight - Interagency Coordination Between DHS and ACS to Protect Homeless Children

Friday, February 27, 2015, 1:00 p.m.

Introduction:

Good afternoon Chairman Levin and members of the New York City Council Committee on General Welfare. Thank you for the opportunity to testify today. My name is Jahmani Hylton, and I am the Deputy Commissioner of Family Services at the Department of Homeless Services (DHS). It is my responsibility to make sure we are doing all that we can for families and children in our system, in addition to managing more than 12,000 units of shelter at 150 locations for families with minor children. Joining me today is Jody Adams, a former judge of the Family Court who now serves as the Special Advisor for Children and Families in Shelter to Commissioner Gilbert Taylor. She is currently engaged in an internal review of DHS policies and procedures. Judge Adams has more than four decades of experience focused on serving the most vulnerable populations of children in the city. In her role, Judge Adams personally visits shelters and conducts in depth assessments. Her reports have led to the removal of individual units from our shelter stock, repairs of units, transfers of families to different units, and enhanced supervision by ACS and the Family Court, of families with children who appear to be at risk. Later on you will hear testimony from the Administration of Children Services (ACS) Executive Deputy Commissioner Jacqueline McKnight and Deputy Commissioner Andrew White.

In today's testimony, we will discuss the actions that have been taken to protect children living in shelter, agency wide reforms we are implementing to ensure safety and well-being across the system, and details of collaborative efforts between DHS, ACS, as well as sister agencies and external partners.

Overview:

New York City is facing pronounced economic inequality because of low wages, the lack of affordable housing, and the increased cost of living. Today approximately 46-percent of New Yorkers live near poverty and approximately 22-percent live below the poverty line. One-in-three New Yorkers work low-wage jobs: someone working full-time at a minimum wage will earn less than \$20,000 a year. The reality of this income inequality, combined with the drivers of homelessness such as eviction, domestic violence, and overcrowding, manifests itself in the City's shelter system, which currently houses approximately 58,000 individuals, including 11,900 families with children.

Income inequality and these drivers have led more families with children to shelter than ever before, which is why this Administration made a deliberate decision to identify DHS leadership through the lens of child welfare practice. In December 2013, Mayor de Blasio appointed Commissioner Gilbert Taylor, a former Executive Deputy Commissioner in the Division of Child Protection for ACS who has spent more than two decades in various leadership capacities serving low-income children and families. This appointment set a clear tone that families with children would be a focus of the Commissioner's agenda, and that child safety would be at the top of it. Since his appointment Commissioner Taylor has put together a senior leadership team that is steeped in the practice of child welfare work and social service delivery.

Child-Centered Reforms:

As I mentioned, Commissioner Taylor's appointment was followed by immediate change throughout the agency to direct greater attention to children and families. First, DHS instituted a series of changes at the Auburn and Catherine Street Shelters, transferring the 400 children and their families to more appropriate Tier II shelters.

He also initiated a new stage of our partnership with ACS to center on families that needed additional services. Specifically with ACS, we began doing joint case reviews of high-risk families and are developing methods of accessing criminal histories, enhanced domestic violence information, and more detailed child welfare histories of applicants in our system. We further strengthened our communications by creating standing bi-weekly meetings to focus on those families that have cases with both agencies. We are taking a deliberate approach to refining both policies and practices that impact these families. We have also created leadership provider forums as a means of learning more about each other's work. This builds upon the previous efforts of DHS and ACS, such as the safe sleep initiative, which remains an essential component of DHS' operational practice.

Working in tandem with ACS, DHS realized that we could make a course correction around the issue of safe sleep and child well-being. With guidance from ACS, DHS trained its providers to create clear expectations of what is mandated to be in units for mothers with infants. And DHS frequently reminds providers that all rooms of families with infants less than 6 months old are inspected weekly, with specific attention to the infants sleeping environment.

Additionally, City agencies, including the Department of Mental Health and Hygiene (DOMHH), Human Resources Administration (HRA), Department of Education (DOE) and ACS are working together on a holistic approach to address the many drivers of homelessness and how it affects families and children.

Finally, we have reduced our reliance on cluster site shelters, where there are not built-in supports for children. Our goal is to move families into purpose-built shelter with stronger on-site social services that meet the needs of high-risk families.

Challenges:

In the midst of these early reforms, we experienced two tragedies: On Saturday, October 18th, 2014 a 3-year old died. She had been in shelter with her mother, 5-year old brother and

stepfather. Then, four days later, on Thursday October 23rd, we experienced another tragic loss of life, this time a 4- year-old. Both of these children died, allegedly at the hands of their caretakers, leading our agency to examine, from a system's perspective, what elements may have contributed to these incidents in shelter. Commissioner Taylor has tasked Judge Adams and me with leading an internal review of the agency's work as it relates to family sheltering policy and practice. This internal review is currently underway and is multi-pronged in nature. Building on our initial efforts, these deaths have further served as an impetus to strengthen our social service delivery to families and to ensure that New York City's children in shelter are in a safe and nurturing environment.

Learning from these two tragedies, our reaction was swift and immediate. Using established research-based criteria; DHS identified over 2,500 high-risk families that could potentially benefit from enhanced social service supports. That criteria includes single parent households with more than three children, households with children under the age of 4, young parents (ages 18-24), the presence of an unrelated male in the household composition, medically fragile children, and families with past or current child welfare system involvement. After identifying these families, DHS committed to hiring 33 social workers as part of a Safety First Team that would engage families and carry out ongoing assessment. These social workers monitor family and child safety and well being while in shelter, and they provide qualitative and quantitative feedback to DHS to inform policy and practice. They continue to screen, assess, and refer families for enhanced services.

Furthermore, we recognized that in order to identify high-risk families, we needed to begin this process at intake, our Prevention Assistance and Temporary Housing (PATH) Center in the Bronx. At PATH, each family goes through a comprehensive diversion, intake, and evaluation process. Working together with ACS, we created new procedures to gather broader and richer information on each family, and to immediately flag families who fall into one of the high risk categories for priority placement and service intervention. We are developing instruments, based on the case reviews and enhanced information, to assign risk categories to families so that they can be placed in shelters most appropriate to their needs. Depending on available capacity, DHS will prioritize high risk families for placement in Tier II type shelters where they will be surrounded with enhanced social services and supports. The families will receive on-going monitoring and service interventions beyond the currently required weekly Independent Living Plan (ILP) meetings.

DHS will also participate in Child Safety, Elevated Risk and Preventive Conferences for families with ACS history being placed in shelter. ACS and DHS have plans to further increase ACS' involvement at some of our locations, as they will report to you in greater detail.

DHS Continues to Expand Its Partnerships:

At DHS we recognize that we can and must do even more to improve the lives of children in our shelters. With input from the Casey Family Programs, a nationally recognized policy institute committed to the well-being of children, we have engaged in conversations with other municipalities across the country to further refine our own practices. We are also in the process of developing a risk assessment instrument to identify families in which children may be at risk for maltreatment.

Our partnership with DOMHH has led to a sustained collaboration with the Nurse Family Partnership (NFP), who engages women that are pregnant with their first child and living in shelter. Studies have documented the program's effectiveness in preventing child abuse and neglect, improving a child's readiness for school, and helping mothers become more self-sufficient. However, our commitment to children in shelter continues even after children age out of the Nurse Family Partnership Program.

We are also working very closely with the Department of Education. DOE has education specialists on site at many of the families with children shelters to assist parents with children in school. More recently, DHS created the Director of Educational Services position of to serve as the agency's primary liaison with DOE. This position is responsible for creating policy to ensure children residing in shelter receive the services they are entitled to under the federal McKinney Vento Homeless Assistance Act, and coordinates with DOE, shelter, and DHS staff to address educational issues such as immediate enrollment, attendance, transportation, access to free meals and services available to children in schools and the community. The Director of Educational Services will represent DHS at city and state-wide education-related meetings and conferences, in addition to participating as a member of interagency task forces and workgroups involving educational and homelessness issues as determined. In this role, the director will coordinate with sister agencies and external partners to develop and provide training to a wide range of audiences, and create policies and best practice guidelines to assist youth and adults with educational and vocational services.

Finally, this administration is committed to all of its agencies working in concert to prevent families and individuals from becoming homeless. DHS has begun to engage its sister agencies to enlist them in these prevention efforts. We are sharing information with ACS so their staff is aware of the resources available to keep families in their homes.

Conclusion:

As outlined today, the new leadership team at DHS is committed to improving the safety and security of all children residing in shelter. DHS recognizes that it is imperative that we keep our children safe and secure. We are proud to collaborate with ACS and all our sister agencies to better serve our children, and will continue to look for ways to increase our connection as well as expand our partnerships across the city and the nation.

Thank you for all your support and attention. I will now turn it over to my colleagues from ACS.