

**Testimony of Joslyn Carter, Administrator
Department of Homeless Services**

**Before the New York City Council General Welfare and Education Committee
Oversight - Support for Homeless Students**

October 11, 2017

I would like to thank the City Council's General Welfare and Education Committees and Chairs Stephen Levin and Daniel Dromm for giving us this opportunity to testify today about the Department of Homeless Services and our work specific to students. My name is Joslyn Carter and this summer I was appointed by the Mayor to serve as the Administrator for the Department of Homeless Services. I look forward to getting to know you and working together in this new role after thirteen years working at DHS.

Over the past four decades, the shelter system was built up in a haphazard way to meet the needs of homeless New Yorkers. Since the 1980s, the face of homelessness substantially shifted from the largely single adult population struggling with justice system involvement, mental health challenges, substance use disorders and inconsistent employment to what we see today – 70% of those in shelter are families, and 34% of the families with children in shelter have a working adult in them. As of October 6, 2017 our Census included 22,987 children. Of these children, 14,548 are aged 3-18, and in school as of October 4, 2017.

The Mayor's plan to end the use of all cluster sites and commercial hotel facilities and replace them with a smaller number of high-quality borough-based facilities will reduce the number of Department of Homeless Services' facilities by 45 percent across New York City. Our goal is to maintain a vacancy rate to ensure the flexibility we need to implement a more equitable, borough-based system that takes into account the individual needs of the children and adults we must shelter. The plan's guiding principle is community first: giving homeless New Yorkers, who come from every community across the five boroughs, the opportunity to be sheltered closer to their support networks and anchors of life, including schools, jobs, health care, family, houses of worship, and communities they called home, in order to more quickly stabilize their lives.

Prevention at PATH and Family Intake

In June, Department of Social Services Commissioner Banks provided comprehensive testimony concerning the process by which families enter and move through the DHS system, beginning with family intake at DHS's Prevention Assistance and Temporary Housing (PATH) Intake.

To briefly review: Upon arrival, reception staff members inquire about the family's reason for coming to PATH and are engaged by PATH social workers to provide crisis counseling, mediation services, and referrals to community-based resources as an alternative to shelter. Along with HRA Homeless Diversion Unit (HDU) caseworkers, and Homebase offices, these Social Workers identify services to assist families in retaining or securing independent housing without having to enter shelter including family mediation, legal services, HRA emergency grants, and rental assistance.

In City Fiscal Year 2016, PATH family intake center handled applications from nearly 18,000 unique households – numbers which have remained steady since 2013. In addition to HRA's Homelessness Diversion Unit, co-located at PATH is HRA NoVA ("No Violence Again"), Department of Education (DOE) family assistance liaisons, Administration for Children's Services (ACS) liaisons and a contracted medical provider, The Floating Hospital. DHS's partnerships with our sister agencies are important to holistically respond to the needs of our clients.

For example, ACS staff stationed at PATH conducts a nightly clearance of all families with children who present at PATH to apply for temporary emergency shelter; matches are then provided to DHS identifying families with open ACS cases. DHS staff members also learn of ACS involvement through the standardized intake interview, where a family has the opportunity to self-disclose this information. Additionally, shelter staff has access to information fields in the DHS CARES system that identifies a family's ACS involvement.

When PATH staff members learn of a family's ACS involvement through these means, they contact ACS staff on-site at PATH or the ACS staff assigned to the family to inquire further regarding the family's housing needs and to assist with service continuity.

Recognizing that supporting students extends beyond both the classroom and schoolyard, we've improved our collaboration with the Department of Education so that we are identifying and troubleshooting families' unique needs, including their special education requirements and transportation options as well as needing to register children for school and relaying information to families in real time.

In partnership with the DOE, we created and now maintain the DHS's first-ever comprehensive daily digital data feed of all school-aged children in shelter to improve DHS/DOE's information sharing to ensure the educational needs of families experiencing homelessness are met as

immediately and effectively as possible. This feed is updated every day to include new students entering shelter and any status changes for current families (i.e. change in shelter or transition to permanent housing). The feed provides real-time information on specific families' needs based on shelter location and current schools to our two agencies.

Upon arrival at a shelter, families are assigned a case manager in CARES, the DHS system of record. The case manager meets with the family to address any immediate needs and makes appropriate referrals. During this time, there are specific discussions with clients that focus on the needs of children within the household, including school enrollment. The case manager refers the client to the Department of Education (DOE) family assistants or the DOE Students in Temporary Housing borough contact.

We have also worked closely with the DOE to improve transportation options for students across the system. And beginning the week before the first day of school this year, DHS provided families applying for shelter at PATH Intake with MetroCards to ensure they have a transportation option immediately to get to school, including those families who may ultimately be determined ineligible for shelter.

We believe training is a key element to increasing awareness and collaborations among stakeholders. Trainings are provided throughout the year to engage the schools and shelter community. For instance, last year, PATH staff conducted several trainings to DOE Attendance Teachers and arranged several tours for DOE staff to visit PATH. Also, DHS participates in the citywide annual McKinney-Vento Workshops facilitated by the New York State Education Department (SED) and the New York State Technical and Education Assistance Center for Homeless Students (NYS-TEACHS) and Advocates for Children for NYC DOE schools.

Shelter Placement

In the FY17 MMR, we reported that during FY17, there was a decline in the percentage of families with children who were placed in shelter according to the youngest school-aged child's school address.

DHS makes every effort to place families at shelter locations that correspond to the youngest school-aged child's school address, but due to constraints in shelter capacity this is not always possible. And this is exactly why the Mayor's Turning the Tide plan envisions an approach to shelter that focuses on placement close to a family's community.

As we continue to implement our new borough-based approach, we will be able to create the necessary capacity to address need. Further, implementing this borough-based approach allows us to prioritize placement for those families from the community where the facility is located and then for families from the surrounding area and borough. Since the announcement of

Turning the Tide, we have opened or announced the opening of 8 new shelters, 4 of which serve families with children. These facilities will soon be giving households, including families with children, an opportunity to stabilize their lives nearer to their existing support networks. The closer proximity to schools will be particularly beneficial for families whose children continue to attend schools in the communities they last called home: often, they must now commute long distances, sometimes across multiple boroughs to remain in those schools.

Social Workers in Shelters

In addition to DHS' close partnership with DOE, DHS has also taken important steps to improve educational stability and enhance access to opportunity for those students residing in shelters. Because our guiding principle is community, we believe it is critical to offer homeless New Yorkers the opportunity to be sheltered closer to the essential anchors of life, like schools, in order to stabilize their lives.

Moreover, DHS acknowledges the unique needs of children experiencing homelessness and the fact that they need wrap-around services.

In 2015, the Mayor and the First Lady announced ThriveNYC to guide the city towards a more effective and holistic system to support the mental well-being of New Yorkers, especially those among us who are most vulnerable. This included significant investment to support our families in shelter.

As part of this initiative, we have expanded the staff resources needed to help our clients. We have hired over 180 Client Care Coordinators who are Licensed Master Social Workers deployed in shelters to work with families as they navigate multiple systems and cope with the stressors and anxiety associated with homelessness.

Client Care Coordinators work to enhance the delivery and coordination of services to families with children in shelter, which includes identifying and responding to the needs of students. With a goal of strengthening the overall permanency outcomes for families with children in shelter, Coordinators are working to promote and model best practices for shelter social service provider staff, and improve linkages to mental health and community-based services. They are also tasked with increasing the ability of shelter social services staff to address mental health issues in a culturally and linguistically sensitive manner that incorporates strength-based, family-driven and youth/child-guided care. I also would like to note that the agency issued a new LGBTQI Policy in April of 2017, which includes directions for shelter staff and providers on how to follow up on many common LGBTQI issues, including placement concerns, medical needs such as gender-affirming health care, and where to reach out for mental health counseling and support.

Through our partnership with the Department of Health and Mental Hygiene (DOHMH), we are focusing on early interventions. This initiative will support families with children ages zero to three who have disabilities or developmental delays. The goal of the Early Intervention Program is to support families in helping their children learn and develop, as well as helping families understand their children's strengths and abilities, using everyday activities to help their children develop. DHS provides shelter staff and clients with the information and tools needed to apply, as well as provide direct technical assistance where needed, via workshops and trainings. It is worth noting that through coordinated outreach efforts with DOHMH, Early Education enrollment rates have doubled for enrollment in Pre-K.

Child Care in Shelter

As part of the 90-day review of homeless programs and resulting reforms, the City examined all aspects of the services provided to families in shelter. During the summer of 2016, the City convened a Task Force on Child Care and Day Care in Homeless Shelters to examine child care services available to homeless children and develop recommendations. The Task Force includes the Department of Homeless Services (DHS); the Department of Social Services/Human Resources Administration (DSS/HRA); the Department of Health & Mental Hygiene (DOHMH); the Administration for Children's Services (ACS); the Department of Education (DOE); and the Office of Management and Budget (OMB). In the fall of 2016, the City conducted a system-wide review of drop-off child care programs. Our Task Force members visited shelters across the five-boroughs, and, as a result of these visits, recommended that the city create a new permit category in the New York City Health Code regulating on-site drop off child care programs in family shelters in order to be able to consistently enforce and regulate standards that assure child safety and sufficiently mitigate the risk of harm. Developed in partnership with DOH/BOH/ACS and service providers, the proposed regulations for this new permit category were adopted by the Board of Health in early September.

Following that, last month, we announced that, together with our partners in government and partners in providing social services, we finalized regulations to enhance drop-off child care at shelters for families with children, implementing more effective standards to ensure this programming is high quality across the board. These additional regulations will improve drop-off care by enhancing on-site staffing and strengthening health, safety, and physical space guidelines. With these regulations, we are adding training in child development and standardizing staff-to-child ratios, increasing that ratio for infants and toddlers so that homeless children receive the attention and supervision they deserve in drop-off childcare settings. And we are also establishing strict expectations for physical spaces, including health and safety standards, like window guards and sprinklers, to ensure that drop-off childcare spaces are appropriate and our young clients are safe. These are the same standards applied to

regulated day care programs throughout New York City — we should provide no less to homeless children.

Currently, there are 37 sites operating drop-off childcare programs in shelter and an additional 8 sites that operate on-site DOHMH licensed day care. These are separate business entities from the shelter programs. There is one site that operates both drop-off childcare and licensed full-time care.

DHS, in conjunction with the NYC Children’s Cabinet, NYC Department of Education, NYC Service and with book donations from Scholastic Inc. also developed a pilot literacy program in family shelters. As a result, 30 shelter-based libraries have been created featuring reading materials to school age children (K-12) residing in shelter, serving over 2,000 families.

Additionally, in partnership with the New York, Queens and Brooklyn Public Libraries, the shelters have been linked to the nearest library branch for book loans. The public libraries also provide reading, story time, library card drives and read aloud activities at the shelter-based libraries. Introducing our shelter families and children to the beneficial programs Public libraries have to offer leads them to view libraries as a vital community resource they can rely on after exiting shelter.

The Shelter-based Libraries received the 2016 Library of Congress Literacy Award Best Practice Honoree in recognition of our innovative approach to providing literacy services to homeless children and their families.

Legislation Before the Committee

As the committees consider this package of legislation, we want to provide some initial feedback. We look forward to working with the Council to ensure that the bills align with the good work currently underway so as to not duplicate resources and to ensure appropriate outcomes for our clients.

Intro 1714-2017 - The bill would establish an educational continuity unit at PATH and every shelter applicant (family with children) would be offered an opportunity to meet with such unit while applying for shelter.

Currently at PATH, we have DOE staff onsite from 8am to 8pm, Monday through Friday who distribute education and transportation guides to families. However, PATH is not the only opportunity for families to obtain information concerning the educational needs of their children. For families that are losing their homes and entering into the shelter system the intake process at PATH can be a completely overwhelming and stressful process for adults and children. We do not believe that PATH is the ideal location for parents to absorb critical

information about their child's education and future. At all shelters, families have assigned case workers who are able to address the educational needs of the children in a more comfortable setting. This dialogue with families is ongoing and included in their individual Independent Living Plan (ILP). We believe this is a more appropriate DHS intervention to address the needs of students in temporary housing as case managers are able to work with the client in an ongoing way.

Creating such a unit at PATH would be a duplication of efforts already occurring at shelters.

Intro 1497-2017 - The bill would require DOE to publish an annual report concerning students in temporary housing including DYCD and HRA administered housing.

This bill among other things will require the Department of Education to report on metrics provided by the Department of Homeless Services and Human Resources Administration. Paragraph 2 would require disaggregated reporting on the number of students residing in all city-administered shelter including those in HASA and Domestic Violence shelters, reporting on the number of students in each of these programs may present privacy and confidentiality concerns.

The bill further requires the department to report on the rate of placement of students residing in shelter operated by DHS in the student's school of origin and borough of origin. We currently report through the MMR the percentage of families placed in the shelter services system according to their youngest school-aged child's school address.

Intro 0572-2014 - The bill would require the department of homeless services to post daily shelter census data by borough.

DHS currently posts a daily census report on our website, which includes the total shelter census broken down by adults and children, and further disaggregated, by type of shelter. We also report on the number of families reporting temporary housing at PATH and Adult families requesting temporary housing at AFIC. There are a number of operational challenges that we have in this kind of real-time reporting and we are prepared to work with the Council on the best way to address the Council's concerns as the bill is reviewed. We remain committed to providing useful and transparent reporting on our shelter census and look forward to working with the Council towards that shared objective.

Thank you and I welcome your questions.