



*New York City Council
General Welfare Committee
Oversight on Homelessness
December 9, 2015*

Introduction

My name is Gilbert Taylor and I am the Commissioner of the Department of Homeless Services (DHS). Thank you for the opportunity to present testimony to the General Welfare Committee about the work of DHS.

When I started as Commissioner in January 2014 it was clear that many reforms were needed. For instance, we didn't have a comprehensive rental assistance program in place. After Advantage was cut in 2011, the City had seen a consistent increase in homelessness, without any programs in place to help families and individuals exit shelter. There were no systemic shelter repair and inspection processes in place and there were no formalized policies regarding case management in shelters.

Disinvestment in critical programs supporting the City's homeless population combined with increasing inequality -- low wages, lack of affordable housing, and the increased cost of living -- have caused so many New Yorkers to find themselves in very difficult situations that no one should have to experience. Approximately 46-percent of New Yorkers live near or at the poverty line and approximately one out of every five New Yorkers are below this line. This disheartening reality directly manifests in our shelter system, now housing approximately 58,000 individuals -- the majority of whom are families with children.

When the de Blasio administration came into office, we systematically began to create, fund, and implement new rental assistance programs. We expanded existing prevention programs and created new ones. We expanded street homeless outreach, took over the subway outreach contract, and expanded transitional housing options such as stabilization and Safe Havens beds for homeless individuals who are resistant to shelters. We created the shelter repair squad to systematically inspect and repair all of our shelters. We ramped up our supports and services for minor children, the largest and most vulnerable population in our shelter system.

I am proud to announce that through the new subsidy-based programs we created after coming into office, that 22,215 New Yorkers have exited shelter and moved into permanent housing. We've also enrolled over 104,487 New Yorkers into HomeBase, a proven homelessness prevention program, helping New Yorkers access legal services, emergency rental assistance, and other supports to ensure that they remain in the community.

Prevention Services

One of our key focus areas is preventing homelessness before it starts. Shelter must be a last resort. Homebase is nationally-recognized and proven to be 95-percent effective. Prevention programs are best for families and individuals and they come with financial savings for New York City taxpayers -- the City saved \$1.37 for every City tax levy dollar invested in

HomeBase. Homebase helps families and individuals remain in their homes and out of shelter. We know Homebase works by the many examples that come to our attention every day. Such as Kesha, a mom, raising her three children with limited resources and a pay check away from eviction. Kesha saw our Homebase subway ad and sought assistance at one of our 23 offices. A social worker immediately was able to help Kesha develop a plan, obtain a lawyer, pay down her rent arrears, and enroll in a home care attendant program. Most importantly, she and her three children were able to remain stably housed.

Since July 1, 2013, over 104,487 individuals have been served by this program. Our budgetary expansion was reflected in the number of families and individuals we served, as we nearly doubled our efforts from 34,000 individuals in FY14 to 59,000 individuals served in FY15. In FY16 to date, Homebase has already enrolled 11,487 clients. Homebase continues to support families to avoid the trauma of homelessness and ensures families stay connected with their communities.

This milestone was met through intensive outreach work. Earlier this summer DHS launched its first-ever Day of Action to spread the word about the program near selected Homebase offices in high-risk neighborhoods in each of the five boroughs. And we will continue our prevention outreach efforts year-round. Towards the end of meeting people where they are at, DHS' provider CAMBA launched a mobile Homebase effort, entitled the You Can Van.

In addition, in a joint effort to further promote homelessness prevention services to at-risk households, DHS, the Department of Education (DOE) and the Human Resources Administration (HRA) put in place a Summer Strategy to proactively reach out to families who self-reported to DOE that they are living in vulnerable and unstable housing situations. To actively address this issue, the City prioritized outreach to the top 25 schools with the most children at risk and did a day of action to connect them with Homebase services followed by a telephone campaign where more than 20,000 calls were made to parents that might need assistance.

Street Outreach

In addition to preventing homelessness for families and individuals already housed, DHS is committed to serving all street homeless individuals in the city. Street homeless individuals are defined as people living without shelter either on the streets, in the NYC transit system, or other outdoor public places. We are committed to helping individuals living on our streets and subways come into shelter and get the services they need and deserve. Throughout the city, we deploy teams around the clock to engage people living on the streets and in subways to encourage them to move into transitional and permanent housing

In order to maximize our ability to help individuals transition indoors and to accept housing placement, we have considerably enhanced the services being offered and the funding committed to this population. We have made an unprecedented increase in services for street homeless individuals, including outreach, drop-in centers, and special shelter beds. The latter two are both innovative program models designed to reach people living on the streets who are reluctant to enter the City's shelter system. Specifically, drop in Centers are store front programs where clients can literally "drop in" to seek shelter, get a meal and a shower, and also connect to case

management and other social services. These programs are open on a 24/7 basis and connect to a network of churches and synagogues that run small shelters in their buildings that clients using drop in centers can access. Special shelter beds include models such as Safe Havens and Stabilization beds that were designed with input from individuals on the streets. They generally appeal to individuals who reject the mainstream shelter system because they tend to be smaller, afford more privacy and have fewer rules and more flexibility.

Since January 2014, DHS outreach teams have made 2,571 placements from our streets into shelter. Our street outreach work is especially crucial during extreme temperatures such as those we had this summer and last winter.

These enhancements are in addition to the substantial increases in funding to outreach efforts in the NYC transit system in July 2014 from \$800,000 to \$6 million. In partnership with the MTA, DHS has tripled the number of outreach workers in the subways, from roughly 20 to 60 full time staff. This investment has paid great dividends as outreach workers made over 700 placements from the subway system during the first year. We now perform outreach services in all 469 subway stations across the City. Outreach teams ensure that all subway stations and train cars are assessed for homeless activity on a routine basis. Our goal is to help transition as many people as possible off the streets and subways into homes of their own.

We are also working for the first time on a comprehensive plan to monitor and close down all encampments across the City. We define encampments as locations where at least two individuals consistently bed down and there is a structure erected – such as a tent or an established living space. We launched this effort in September when we worked in partnership with the NYPD, Department of Transportation, Sanitation, Parks and others to close 21 encampment locations. Through this effort, we were able to not only close 21 encampments but placed 55-percent of the individuals we encountered, and removed 400 tons of debris and over 2,600 syringes at these locations. In coordination with the NYPD and the Mayor’s Office of Operations, we continue to visit these locations multiple times daily to monitor them for re-population and to address any issues that arise. Reports indicate the sites remain clean and no homeless individuals have repopulated the locations. Additionally, in November we have started a second initiative and have identified 25 new encampments locations and are coordinating efforts with our partners to close down these encampments to address the needs of homeless individuals at these locations.

In order to be truly successful in helping people come indoors from the cold, we need to not only build the capacity and infrastructure of our outreach teams, but we also need to continue to invest in the development of special beds for individuals who are unwilling to enter traditional shelter. To this end, DHS has added 214 Safe Haven and stabilization beds to our system since January 2014. The total Safe Haven budget for FY16 is \$24.8 million.

We are now working aggressively to develop an additional 500 beds this winter. To this end, DHS announced its “Opening Doors” Initiative in collaboration with the Mayor’s Clergy Advisory Council, the Archdiocese of New York, and other houses of worship. The goal of Opening Doors is to partner with faith leaders throughout the City, to use their unoccupied space

to provide shelter and social services to the city's street homeless population. We are on target to launch the first round of the "Opening Doors" program in January 2016.

Shelter and Social Services

Providing shelter and social services for those in need continues to be DHS' core function and mandate. We provide temporary, emergency, and safe transitional housing to eligible families and all individuals in need of shelter.

As part of our operational plan, DHS is working to improve social service delivery in shelter by creating an enhanced model of practice. Using already established methods, the model is a four layered approach to providing quality services to all clients in shelter. This model of practice requires that all DHS shelter providers use the following in their work with clients.

The first layer is consistent and comprehensive documentation of case activities in CARES. CARES is an electronic case management system used by DHS and all of its providers to collect client level information about reasons for entry into shelter through to a permanent placement out of shelter. The second layer is Critical Time Intervention (CTI). CTI is an evidence-based practice model that engages a family or individual in shelter, identifying client needs to assist them through placement back into the community. The third layer consists of Rapid Rehousing (RR), which focuses on housing first, incorporating a comprehensive housing plan and search. The fourth layer is Motivational Interviewing (MI), a client engagement method that enables the client to express his/her needs to a case worker/shelter staff. The combination of all four of these elements has strengthened our work system wide and improved outcomes for our clients.

To attend to the safety and well-being of the 23,000 children within our system, DHS has expanded the scope of work in our Family Services division. In the fall of 2014, we launched the Safety First Team initiative. The Safety First Team was a group of master's level social workers charged with assessing over 1,900 families deemed to be at high risk for child neglect or abuse based on meeting three or more of the following factors: being a single parent, being a parent under 21, having more than three children, having children under the age of four, having medically fragile children, and having had prior child welfare involvement. Following this pilot initiative and lessons learned, DHS received funding to establish a Clinical Services Unit (CSU). The CSU launched in the fall of 2015, comprises one director, three supervisors and 24 master's level social workers who engage providers and our most vulnerable families to determine plans of action and services as needed, such as referrals for mental health treatment or education advocacy. The team coordinates with DHS Family Services and shelter providers through case conferencing, coaching, and interventions to support the family in keeping children safe while in shelter.

DHS is also creating Permanency Specialist Teams within the agency to work with program and shelter staff to support their efforts in helping clients exit shelter and move into permanent housing. Beginning in January 2016, these highly trained teams will be comprised of 30 multi-disciplinary staff who will review cases, offer technical assistance to providers and DHS staff, and support efforts to create Independent Living Plans (ILPs) for all clients. The Permanency

Specialist Teams will support our agency's aftercare efforts connecting clients to community-based supports and services to help them maintain housing in the community.

This spring, in order to further improve our shelter system for all residents, the administration created the Shelter Repair Squad -- bringing together for the first time five monitoring agencies (DHS, HPD, DOB, FDNY and DOHMH) to systematically inspect and repair all homeless shelters in NYC, committing \$12.5 million through FY16. There was no previously existing inspection and repair methodology for our shelter system, and the Shelter Repair Squad will now conduct biannual inspections of all NYC shelters to ensure the environment is healthy and safe for our clients and staff. Since the Shelter Repair Squad was launched over 10,000 violations have been cleared and we have started work on all long-term repairs at DHS facilities. Eighty-three-percent of violations at the inspected shelters have been closed out and action plans have been created and are being implemented to resolve all outstanding issues.

DHS is also part of "NYC Safe", an evidence-driven program to support the narrow population of New Yorkers with untreated serious mental illness who pose a concern for violent behavior. NYC Safe has changed the way in which the City intervenes to stop and respond to violence committed by mentally ill individuals, whether housed or homeless. This new initiative includes a series of interventions that together create a continuum of services to meet the specific needs of this vulnerable population, from timely intervention to treatment and follow up with a law enforcement response, when necessary.

The city has invested \$3.5 million to hire additional clinical support staff in DHS mental health shelters for single adults, including case managers, social workers and psychiatrists at 11 shelters city-wide. In addition, DHS received \$5 million to increase the number of peace officers at mental health and large shelters throughout the City.

Housing Permanency

In fall 2014, the City, working collaboratively with the state, introduced the Living in Communities rental assistance programs, also known as LINC, to move our clients out of shelter and into permanent housing. LINC is a program that targets families and individuals based on their specific needs, and unlike the Advantage Program, LINC offers aftercare to families to keep them stably housed. LINC is helping families like Cynthia's, who was living in shelter while she worked full time.

Cynthia wanted desperately to have her own apartment, but working a minimum wage job she found that she was unable to save enough money to move into a place of her own. Then Cynthia qualified for the LINC program, and was able to successfully move out of shelter with her daughter into their own apartment. These are the kind of real life stories that DHS is working to promote, and that this Administration is making happen.

These and other programs such as CityFEPS and HPD Section 8 have succeeded in exiting 22,215 clients from shelter and into permanent housing through subsidy-based programs from the beginning of FY15 to the present.

Organizational Excellence

The final goal of our operational plan is to strive towards organizational excellence in all of the work that we do, ensuring that our systems support best practices to improve outcomes for our clients.

Toward the end of achieving organizational excellence in all of our agency's work DHS has also put in place quality assurance tools to support the implementation of the model of practice described earlier. These tools include launching Home.STAT within the agency and developing a Continuous Quality Improvement (CQI) unit within the division of Policy & Planning.

Home.STAT is a management accountability and quality improvement tool that was created to examine DHS' practice and work in shelters. During Home.STAT, a list of action steps and recommendations are generated, and then provided to the facility and/or program under review to improve practice and housing permanency work. It is also a way to help shelter staff improve and share best practices with clients.

As a part of our Operational Goal related to Organizational Excellence, the Division of Policy and Planning created its Continuous Quality Improvement Unit (CQI) in May 2015. CQI is a method to evaluate and improve client services on an ongoing basis. This is done by performing case record reviews, site inspections, and interviews with clients and staff. CQI provides performance findings that pinpoint the service delivery areas that are working well and those that need improvement.

Conclusion

New York City has a legal mandate to offer shelter to those who seek it. However, we understand that we must balance our responsibility to provide such shelter with engaging communities and being more proactive and transparent. To that end, we have begun to work closely with the communities hosting our shelters by partnering with surrounding community organizations, and institutions of faith to ensure that all individuals in shelter have the support they need to get back on their feet.

In addition, after a new shelter is opened, DHS works with communities through the Community Advisory Board (CAB) where faith leaders, non-profit providers, local business owners, neighborhood residents and elected officials convene to ensure operations are running smoothly and to better integrate shelters into communities through the formation of partnerships. For instance, at a Queens shelter's recent CAB, it was announced that the Queens Public Library came to the location and held a "library card drive" where 18 adults and 5 children were issued library cards. And other members of the CAB are working on collecting donations for the families staying in shelter. These joint collaboration and spirit of generosity, of helping those who are in need, represents that we are truly one New York.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify. I now look forward to answering any questions you might have.