



Testimony of Steven Banks, Commissioner

Department of Social Services

Before the New York City Council, Committee on General Welfare

NYC Department of Social Services Fiscal Year 2021 Executive Budget Hearing

May 18, 2020

Introduction

Good Morning. Thank you Chairs Dromm and Levin and members of the Finance and General Welfare Committees for the opportunity to testify today about the Department of Social Services' Fiscal Year 2021 Executive Budget. And I hope that each of you and your families are doing well and staying safe.

My name is Steven Banks and I am the Commissioner of the New York City Department of Social Services (DSS). In this capacity, I oversee the Human Resources Administration (HRA) and the Department of Homeless Services (DHS). Under the extraordinary circumstances of this moment in our city's history, only a limited number of agency leaders can be with me at our offices for this remote testimony today – First Deputy Commissioner Molly Murphy, DHS Administrator Joslyn Carter, Acting HRA Administrator Gary Jenkins, Chief of Staff Scott French and Deputy Commissioner for Intergovernmental and Legislative Affairs Erin Drinkwater.

Before we proceed with this testimony, I want to thank the staff of our agency and our partner not-for-profit providers who are on the front lines helping meet the needs of our clients during this crisis. They are essential workers providing essential services to New Yorkers who need us more now than ever.

I also want to ask for a moment of silence for the 31 agency staff, an as yet unknown number of provider staff, and 76 DHS clients who we've lost.

Thank you.

Each year at our annual budget hearings we have provided an update on our progress in reforming several decades of social services and homeless services policies and procedures. Given this current moment in time, we have summarized the status of these efforts in an attached appendix for the record so that we can spend the limited time at the hearing focusing on budget and COVID-19 matters.

At DSS we joined leaders across the City to mobilize in response to the COVID-19 pandemic that has threatened the health, safety, and way of life of New Yorkers, and taken the lives of so many.

The Human Resources Administration - Accessing Services and Benefit During COVID-19

DSS took extraordinary steps to quickly transform agency operations. Over the past 10 weeks, HRA rapidly responded to continue to provide benefits and services in a changed City.

In-Person Appointments

On March 15, following NYS Office of Temporary and Disability Assistance (OTDA) approval, we announced the elimination of all requirements for HRA in-person appointments so as to reduce in-center foot traffic and implement social distancing. Accordingly, we will not take any adverse case actions for those clients who do not keep previously scheduled appointments or assignments. No new appointments or assignments are being scheduled. This includes, but is not limited to, appointments or assignments with Career Services employment providers as well as the Office of Child Support Services.

Benefits Online and By Phone

In 2015, with federal and State OTDA approval, we implemented a benefits access reform to enable SNAP/food stamps clients to apply, recertify, and submit documents online using ACCESSHRA; and in 2016, we began on demand telephone access to allow clients to call us by telephone to obtain benefits without the need to come into an office for an interview or to submit documents. By December 2019, 96% of application interviews and 87% of recertification interviews were held via telephone. The percentage of SNAP applications submitted online increased to 89% by the end of 2019. These reforms stood us in good stead when this crisis hit because SNAP clients can conduct their business with us from the safety of their homes. Today during the crisis, 99% of all SNAP business is conducted online and outside of centers.

We have been seeking approval for the same benefits access approach for Cash Assistance clients so that they can avoid the need to come into an office to receive help. As this crisis hit, we received OTDA approval to do so, and on March 20, 2020 – within four days of OTDA approval – we stood up a system to apply for Cash Assistance online and provide telephone interviews as needed. As a result of this essential reform, as of April over 90% of Cash Assistance applications are now submitted online.

Through our work with OTDA we have secured waivers to ensure we are able to prioritize the health and safety of our clients and continue to provide access to benefits during this pandemic. A status report on the waivers that we have requested from OTDA and other State agencies is included for the record as an appendix to this testimony.

Recertifications

For example, following our waiver request to OTDA and OTDA's request to the federal government, clients who would otherwise be required to recertify their SNAP/Food Stamps or Cash Assistance cases do not need to do so at this time. When recertification resumes, the agency will notify clients and community partners.

Sanctions

Similarly, following OTDA approval, we have been able to lift employment sanctions for Cash Assistance recipients who contacted the agency and stated a willingness to comply and we have suspended all employment related requirements.

And we also suspended all federal Able-Bodied Adults Without Dependents (ABAWD) work requirements for SNAP recipients after the federal government temporarily suspended the implementation of its new rules in response to the pandemic.

Center Consolidation

With our core benefits services available online and all in-office appointments suspended, on March 24th, we consolidated the physical Job Center and Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) Center locations across the city in order to protect staff and clients from having to leave their homes. In each borough, we maintained one open consolidated service location to ensure accessibility for clients who prefer in-person service. Within the Centers that remain open, staff are adhering to social distancing measures developed in accordance with the Department of Health and Mental Hygiene's guidance. We are now able to provide frontline staff at HRA centers, including client service staff and security guards, with personal protective equipment (PPE) consistent with the DOHMH guidance. And for those clients who do not have masks or face coverings, masks are provided in order to enter the Center.

New Yorkers in Need Seeking DSS Services – Applications Volume Up

Since the third week of March, DSS has experienced a surge in applications for Cash Assistance and SNAP. Since the stay at home order began and the economic impact of the pandemic became evident, HRA has seen record increases in applications for benefits – three times as many SNAP/food stamps applications and twice as many Cash Assistance applications. To meet this demand and to protect staff, DSS has redeployed and retrained staff from across the agency to process cases – and we have built a new remote access platform and deployed technology to enable as many staff as possible to process applications and interview clients from their homes.

Department of Homeless Services – Addressing the Needs of New Yorkers Experiencing Homelessness During COVID-19

Since this crisis began, DHS has responded quickly in partnership with multiple agencies to protect the health and safety of New Yorkers experiencing homelessness. From developing and distributing guidance and protocols with the Department of Health and Mental Hygiene and Health + Hospitals to ensure anyone who needs it can access care, to opening hundreds of dedicated isolation units at commercial hotels, to proactively relocating vulnerable New Yorkers and strategically transferring single adults out of congregate single adult shelters – DHS has responded to an unprecedented crisis with unprecedented action.

On March 3, 2020, DHS provided information and the DOHMH COVID-19 guidance to the Executive Directors of shelter providers. As a follow up, on March 4, 2020, we issued our first agency-specific guidance for COVID-19.

Guidance to providers, including information to be provided to clients, is shared via the DHS provider portal and email communications from DHS Administrator Joslyn Carter. We've included information on Provider Social Distancing FAQ, Mask Guidance and Face Covering FAQ, DHS's COVID-19 Isolation Plan and Best Practices, including Isolation Site Guidance and workflows and the Isolation Advisory Letter to Clients, and the Hospital Protocol Discharge to Isolation, DHS Isolation Discharge Criteria, and the Isolation Discharge Process.

Since these initial communications, we have continued to provide regular updates on evolving health guidance, stand up isolation locations as required to meet the need, hold weekly meetings with shelter medical directors hosted by the DHS Office of the Medical Director, and distribute PPE and face coverings regularly as it is now available in the supply chain.

Beginning the night of March 9, DHS rolled out a street homeless screening process to hundreds of street outreach workers to engage individuals experiencing street homelessness who may have possible COVID-19 symptoms and connect them to testing and assessment at Health + Hospitals facilities. Utilizing a process similar to our extreme weather approach, DHS HOME-STAT outreach teams continue their 24/7/365 outreach and to date have conducted over 20,000 engagements with clients regarding COVID-19 and their needs.

On the night of March 13-14, we opened our first isolation site in order to ensure that those clients who test positive or are experiencing symptoms have a location where they can isolate. We now have more than 700 isolation beds available across five locations, and we are bringing on additional beds at additional hotels as necessary to meet the need and evolving guidance on isolation length of stay requirements. And as of May 15, there were nearly 800 total discharges from isolation, which includes clients with positive cases whose conditions have resolved as well as clients who exhibited mild illness and completed isolation following City health guidance.

As we testified last month, in the April 16 NY Times daily report¹, we were credited with our transparency in reporting to the public:

The city's Department of Homeless Services is tracking and releasing information about confirmed virus cases and deaths. Other city and state agencies that run group shelters. . . have not disclosed that information.

This April report also noted our efforts “to try to contain the virus’s spread, the city’s plans call for moving about 2,500 single adults — including people over 70, those with underlying health conditions and those staying in the 10 most densely populated city shelters — to hotel rooms by month’s end.”²

In fact, on April 3, DHS began to strategically transfer some of our most vulnerable clients in congregate shelters who are not sick and/or are non-symptomatic/asymptomatic. Out of an abundance of caution, DHS began this relocation initiative first for clients 70+ years old in congregate single adult shelters using three existing DHS commercial hotel locations.

On April 10, the Mayor announced additional steps we are taking to strategically relocate more single adults experiencing homelessness residing in shelters with congregate settings to commercial hotel locations. This enables clients to isolate more effectively during this crisis—and the shelters will see reduced density and greater distancing as a result.

Through these COVID commercial hotel initiatives and our pre-COVID commercial hotel initiatives, of the 17,000 single adults in DHS shelter, 9,000 now reside in commercial hotel rooms. We have committed to continue to relocate 1,000 single adults from congregate shelters each week until we have widescale testing available as part of the citywide containment strategy.

¹ <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/04/16/nyregion/coronavirus-new-york-update.html>

² Ibid

As of May 15, we have had 961 positive cases in our shelters, and 792 have resolved which includes positive cases whose conditions have abated/resolved at this time as well as clients who exhibited mild illness who completed isolation following City guidance. Here is a breakdown of those positive cases:

- 813 cases among individuals (including sheltered single adult individuals, unsheltered individuals in our streets solutions programs, and Agency referrals)
- 658 of these cases are for single adults residing in 98 SA shelters
- 152 of these single adult shelter cases were at assessment sites, meaning they were caught at our front door and individuals were connected to care before being relocated into any ongoing shelter placement

Through this crisis we have also brought on new capacity to serve those New Yorkers experiencing homelessness who are on the streets. We've brought on over 300 new Safe Haven and stabilization beds, including more than 100 beds in a commercial hotel; and we are continuing to seek proposals from not-for-profit providers to open more safe haven and stabilization beds, including additional commercial hotel beds. We have also opened an additional drop in center.

Following the MTA's shutdown of the subway system between 1 am and 5 am effective May 6, 2020, we have deployed outreach workers and DHS staff at end of the line stations. As a result of this outreach initiative, 103 people who accepted services are still in shelter and out of the subways and off of the streets after being connected to services to get them back on their feet.

DSS/HRA/DHS - Staff Working from Home

Following the guidance from the DOHMH in order to reduce the need for staff to leave their homes and increase social distancing, DSS implemented new technology systems to enable increasing numbers of staff to provide client services and support from home – including creating an assembly line to outfit thousands of laptops with the technology systems needed to provide frontline client services remotely. Presently, approximately 84% of DSS/HRA/DHS staff are working remotely from home while performing essential agency work.

State and Federal Landscape

TANF/EAF Cut

The FY21 Executive Budget has been significantly impacted by COVID-19 and the related budget shortfalls, including reductions in the State 2020-21 enacted budget which included a cut to New York City's reimbursement for Family Assistance, funded by the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) program, by an additional 5% on top of the 10% cut last year. To backfill for the State reduction in TANF reimbursement from 90% to 85%, totals of \$17.7M in City Tax Levy funds in FY20 and \$35.5M City Tax Levy funds in FY21 and the baseline have been added to the HRA budget, and \$16M and 32.1M in FY20 and FY21 respectively have been added to the DHS budget. The Flexible Fund for Family Services (FFFS) shift, that requires more of this funding to be used for child welfare services, results in another \$14M City tax levy cost in FY22 and the out years.

Now more than ever New Yorkers are relying on a productive partnership of City and State leaders to create proactive solutions that can stem the inevitable tide of housing insecurity resulting from the economic fallout of this pandemic. For example, we will continue to monitor legislative proposals like

Home Stability Support (HSS) which would have provided funding for State rental assistance to prevent and alleviate homelessness across the State.

Burial/Funeral Assistance Costs

Due to the tragic and high mortality rate associated with COVID-19, and its disproportionate impact on low-income New Yorkers, we recognize that our clients need even more help from us. Under State statute and regulation, local social services districts can provide a grant for funeral costs but can only provide this allowance if the total cost of the funeral/burial is less than an overall cost cap set by the local district. NYC's cap since 2008 had been \$1,700. At the same time, the maximum State-set reimbursement was \$900, which has not been increased since 1987.

We took immediate steps within our City's power to increase the value of this allowance from \$900 to \$1,700, with the increase funded by the City while we continue efforts to increase the \$900 State-set grant reimbursement level. This action will nearly double this assistance grant, making this vital resource go further for more New Yorkers in need during this unprecedented time. As we increase the amount of assistance we are providing to New Yorkers through the burial/funeral assistance grant from \$900 to \$1,700, we are also increasing the required cap from \$1,700 to \$3,400. By issuance of an emergency agency rule on May 2, these changes are effective immediately. This action will make this critical assistance available to more New Yorkers right now. Private funds have also been raised to enable families to seek help regardless of immigration status.

This funeral allowance can be used for funeral arrangements, services, burials, or cremations to meet individuals' unique needs. DSS has also included burial assistance as a priority in our federal pandemic-related advocacy work seeking funds to reimburse local districts for the costs of burials for those receiving Cash Assistance, SSI, and/or for indigent and other unclaimed individuals requiring burial assistance.

Department of Social Services/Human Resources Administration FY21 Executive Budget

Our ongoing reforms of social services and homeless policies that are updated in the appendix must be contextualized within the citywide FY21 Executive Budget, which has been significantly impacted by COVID-19 budget shortfalls, and reductions in the State 2020-21 enacted budget.

Between FY20 and FY21 the DSS/HRA total budget declines from \$10.3 billion (\$8 billion City funds) to \$9.6 billion (\$7.4 billion City funds), or by \$600M in total funds and \$585M in City funds. Anticipated expenses and funding, including FEMA reimbursement, for COVID-related activities is not yet reflected in the Agencies' budgets.

Funding for DSS/HRA was added only for required technical adjustments, collective bargaining and backfilling the State TANF/FFFS cost shift, which increases the City share of TANF/FFFS to 15% from 10%. The TANF/FFFS backfill requires the addition of \$49.5 million in City funds in the baseline for DSS/HRA. Following last year's State TANF cut, this continuing loss of State support is all the more significant as we focus on benefit delivery to clients in the midst of this pandemic.

The decrease in the DSS/HRA budget is primarily due to the savings initiatives and anticipated one-time enhanced federal reimbursement for Medicaid from the CARES Act expected in FY20 only. The savings initiatives in FY20 and FY21 include one-time reductions in the budget due to anticipated underspending, which do not impact program operations as well as program right-sizing and vacancy reductions.

The savings initiatives that reflect anticipated underspending include:

- Fair Fares: a decrease of \$65.5M in City funds FY20 only, due to underspending resulting from a decrease in ridership during the COVID-19 shelter in place period.
- Supportive Housing: a decrease of \$20M in City funds FY21 only as a result of an updated timeline for the phase-in of supportive housing units.
- Legal Services: a decrease of \$11.5M in City funds in FY20 and \$8.5M in City funds in FY21 only due to a hiring lag for legal services providers.
- Client Carfare: a decrease of \$3M in City funds in FY20 and FY21 only due to decreased utilization of employment carfare services during COVID-19 shelter in place period.
- Job Training Program (JTP): a decrease of \$3.2M in City funds in FY20 only in JTP funding due to COVID-19 related underspending; the Parks Dept budget was also decreased by \$3M in FY20 only due to COVID-19 related underspending in the Job Training Program.

Other savings initiatives include:

- Silver Stars: a decrease of 15 head count, \$400K in City funds in FY21 and the baseline for implementing the Silver Stars program, which brings retired City workers back to work on a part-time basis.
- Three-Quarter Housing: a decrease of \$1.5M in City funds in FY20 and 20 HC, \$3.3M in City funds in FY21 and the baseline due to the rightsizing of services provided to former three-quarter housing tenants as referrals to the program have declined.
- Adult Protective Services: a savings of \$500K in total funds and \$250K in City funds in FY21 and \$2M total funds, \$1M City funds in FY22 and the baseline due to a restructuring of Adult Protective Services that will expand services provided through not-for-profit contracts.
- Job Training Program: a savings of \$6M in City funds in FY21 and the outyears as well as the baseline for restructuring of job training programs.

DSS/HRA Capital

The DSS/HRA five-year capital plan for FY20-FY24 totals \$330 million (\$236 million city funded) including: \$180 million for technology to streamline operations; \$125 million for facilities, maintenance and equipment; \$2 million for vehicles and \$23 million for Council and Borough President funded items.

Department of Homeless Services FY21 Executive Budget

Between FY20 and FY21 the DSS/HRA total budget declines from \$2.15 billion (\$1.3 billion City funds) to \$2.07 billion (\$1.3 billion City funds), or \$75M in total funds and \$40M in City funds. Again, anticipated expenses and funding, including FEMA reimbursement, for COVID-related activities is not yet reflected in the Agencies' budgets.

As with DSS/HRA, funding for DHS was added only for required technical adjustments, collective bargaining and backfilling the State TANF/ FFFS cost shift, which increases the City share of TANF/FFFS to 15% from 10%. The TANF/FFFS backfill requires the addition of \$32.1 million in City funds in the baseline for DHS.

To support the FY21 budget and our continued efforts to achieve savings and in light of the adverse budgetary impact of COVID-19, DHS will negotiate a reduction in the nightly rate paid for commercial hotels for shelter resulting in a savings of \$35M in FY21 and the out-years. Additionally, there is an

adjustment of \$25M in FY21 and the out years to right-size shelter security services. DHS continues to adjust and recalibrate our service delivery model which includes security for homeless families and individuals.

DHS Capital

The ten-year DHS capital plan for FY20-FY24 totals \$482 million (\$480 million city funded) including \$272 million for homeless family facilities, \$147 million for single adult facilities, \$49 million for technology projects and equipment purchases and \$13 million for Council and BP funded items.

Conclusion

Thank you again for this opportunity to testify and to summarize the critical work that DSS/HRA and DHS staff do each day on behalf of low-income New Yorkers. We look forward to continuing our important partnership with the Council and to keep improving essential programs upon which so many New Yorkers rely, particularly at this time of unprecedented need. Thank you for the opportunity to testify today and I welcome any questions you may have.

Appendix A

The Human Resources Administration

2019 Reform Highlights

Improve Access to Benefits and Services:

- Successfully advocated for the State to end the eligibility finger-imaging requirement for Cash Assistance (CA) applicants/recipients
- Launched a citywide process to give clients temporary “Vault” Electronic Benefit Transfer (EBT) cards which can be used to redeem Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) and Cash Assistance benefits until they receive their permanent Consumer Benefit Identification Cards (CBIC) through the mail
- Revised the “You Must Submit Documents For Your SNAP Case!” (FIA-1146) notice to help clients better understand what documentation must be submitted to complete the SNAP application
- Revised the New York State (NYS) Client Notification System (CNS) Expedited-SNAP Servicing notice, so clients are reminded that additional documentation is needed to establish eligibility for ongoing SNAP benefits
- Piloted the Internet Quorum (IQ) inquiry/complaint tracking system at the Queens Job Center and Hunts Point SNAP Center, to better handle client complaints and issues and offer faster turnaround (citywide rollout will occur in 2020)
- Expanded the SNAP Interactive Voice Response System (IVRS) process to permit SNAP households with participants aged 55 and older or with disabilities without earned income to recertify through IVRS
- Implemented an easier security voucher redemption process for landlords of deceased Cash Assistance clients whose tenancy was in effect on the date of death

Reduce Homelessness:

- Transitioned the responsibility of Family Homelessness Eviction Prevention Supplement (FHEPS) eligibility determination and approval from Community Based Organizations (CBOs) to HRA/DSS
- Implemented a Streamlined Rent Arrears Process in which Job Centers handle all Emergency Assistance / One Shot Deal (EA/OSD) rent arrears requests for amounts less than \$7,200 and less than 6-months of arrears without referral to the Rental Assistance Unit (RAU)
- Developed a Homelessness Prevention Administration (HPA) approval process for Congregate Care residents who have excessive rent arrears

Modernizing Services and Processes:

- Launched the ACCESS HRA online application for Single Issue (SI) grant access
- Added the SNAP Case Change Reporting form to ACCESS HRA to allow online submission of case changes
- Rolled out SNAP Telephone Interview Processing Services (TIPS) On-Demand satellite units to five in-person SNAP Centers to ensure that telephone interview services would be available at various locations in case a site goes down
- Implemented On-Demand “Processing Pods” in SNAP TIPS On-Demand Centers, allowing On-Demand staff to vary their work and gain an understanding of the case processing work flow by

spending every fifth workday processing SNAP applications, increasing work satisfaction and decreasing processing errors

Additional Accomplishments:

- Standardized training curricula for Office of Support Services (OSS) New Hires, and trained current OSS staff on unit procedures and Cash Assistance and SNAP program eligibility
- Revised Cash Assistance Periodic Mailer Form M-327H to simplify Cash Assistance interim reporting requirements and remind participants to sign the form (pending OTDA sign-off)
- Migrated Brad H. Rikers prisoner pre-release Cash Assistance process into the Paperless Office System (POS) to facilitate application processing and tracking
- Completed specifications to migrate additional Office of Central Processing (OCP) tasks, including Landlord Security Voucher redemption, Utility Grant payments, and Child Support Payments into POS
- Implemented Income Clearance Program (ICP) module in the POS to assist staff in processing actions and to better monitor unit workload
- Designed new reports to improve quality of case processing and procedural excellence, including but not limited to: the weekly worklist for engaging second adults on CA cases and the weekly report for Special Services on the status of potential Human Trafficking Victims receiving HRA services
- Established a quarterly convening between HRA/DSS and the Columbia University Center for Justice to help streamline access to benefits and services for formerly incarcerated clients
- Published a new procedure outlining the actions to be taken by management, staff, HRA Police, and Contracted Security Guards in responding to Center incidents, while ensuring all clients are treated with courtesy, compassion, and respect
- Launched an anti-bias and trauma-informed training program
- Retrained and provided enhanced training for the HRA Office of Police Operations (HRA OPO)
- Rolled-out the Body Worn Camera (BWC) initiative for HRA PD staff

TURNING THE TIDE ON HOMELESSNESS IN NEW YORK CITY

In February of 2017, Mayor de Blasio announced the Turning the Tide on Homelessness in New York City, a borough-by-borough plan for addressing the challenge of homelessness, which affects every community across the five boroughs – that three years later is producing real results to address and transform a shelter system that expanded in a haphazard way over the past four decades. The plan commits to ending the use of all 360 cluster sites and hotel facilities citywide, while opening a smaller number of 90 new and more effective traditional shelters, of which to date we have announced 70 and opened 36. This will reduce the number of DHS facilities by 45 percent across New York City, and allow us to maintain a necessary vacancy rate to ensure the flexibility needed to implement a more equitable borough-based system that takes into account the individual needs of the children and adults we shelter.

The plan’s guiding principle is community and people first: giving homeless New Yorkers, who come from every community across the five boroughs, the opportunity to be sheltered closer to their home boroughs, support networks and anchors of life, including schools, family, houses of worship, and communities they called home, in order to more quickly stabilize their lives.

And, as the plan states, we know this plan can’t be implemented without the help of New Yorkers, which is why we committed to reforming the way we communicate with neighborhoods. In March, for example,

I sent an annual letter to every elected official and community board in the city requesting sites our not-for-profit partners might consider as they open new shelter in support of the Turning the Tide plan. As we committed publicly in 2017, in advance of each shelter opening we provide our elected and community partners with no less than 30 days prior notice and we have been averaging more than 150 days' prior notice. Further, to maintain this community partnership, we have committed to establishing Community Advisory Boards for each new shelter to facilitate and ensure an open dialogue around shelter issues directly.

As we implement our multi-year transformation plan, we are continuing to redouble our efforts and build on the progress we have achieved for New Yorkers in need so far:

- *Prevention*: Helped more than 100,000 New Yorkers keep their homes by expanding access to legal assistance through our first-in-the-nation right-to-counsel program for eviction cases, with evictions by marshals dropping by 41% since 2013, while evictions are up all across the country;
- *Rehousing*: Helped more than 145,000 New Yorkers move out of shelters or avoid homelessness altogether through our rental assistance and rehousing programs;
- *Transforming the approach to providing shelter that has built up over 40 years*: Phased out more than 200 shelter sites that did not meet our standards, including closing down nearly 70 percent of the Giuliani-era cluster program—and counting—while announcing 70 high-quality borough-based shelters across the five boroughs, 36 of which have already opened their doors, offering New Yorkers in need the opportunity to get back on their feet nearer to the anchors of their lives; and,
- *Addressing street homelessness*: Helped more than 2,610 homeless New Yorkers off the streets who've remained off the streets and subways since the launch of HOME-STAT, the nation's most comprehensive street outreach program, while quadrupling the number of specialized beds dedicated to supporting these individuals to come off the streets. And in December 2019, we announced "The Journey Home," our action plan to double down on these efforts through new permanent housing, new safe havens, new outreach staff, and new cross-agency collaborative intervention—to ensure these solutions also start to work for those New Yorkers who've been the toughest to reach so that we can finally end long-term street homelessness.

HOW WE GOT HERE: HOMELESSNESS OVER THE DECADES

It is always important for us to contextualize our progress and reforms in how we got here and how homelessness increased in New York City over many decades. We know the current reality is a result of decades of economic changes and past choices at every level of government. Homelessness increased by 115% between 1994 and 2014 – including growing nearly 40 percent to more than 51,000 between 2011 and 2014 after the City and State ended the Advantage rental assistance program. From 1994-2012, there was a net loss of about 150,000 rent-stabilized units (16%) of the total rent regulated stock. From 2005-2015, rents increased by 18.4% while incomes increased by only 4.8%. And an overall rental vacancy rate of 3.5% is a challenge for all incomes, but for those only able to afford \$800 or less, the vacancy rate is 1.15% (2017), down from 1.8% (2014).

BREAKING TRAJECTORY AND HEADED IN THE RIGHT DIRECTION: BEGINNING TO REVERSE THE TREND

While the devastating impacts of economic inequality and past inaction from prior administrations led to the homeless crisis we face today, the initiatives of the Department of Social Services (HRA and DHS) are beginning to reverse the trend. After nearly four decades of an ever-increasing homeless population in

NYC, we have broken the trajectory of growth in the homeless census and the new programs, reforms, and investments we are implementing are headed in the right direction. We've held the DHS census essentially flat year over year in 2017, 2018, and 2019 for the first time in more than a decade. Currently, the DHS census is 56,799 in comparison to 58,444 a year ago, with the number of children and adults in DHS shelters for families with children at its lowest point of 11,014 families with 34,459 individuals in these families since December 2012 (34,497). Over the past ten weeks we've been closely monitoring the census, and what we've seen is a steady decline in family homelessness and a steady increase in single adult homelessness – as COVID-19 has magnified the realities of housing instability for single adults in New York City.

The plan offers our homeless neighbors the opportunity to be sheltered closer to their support networks, such as schools, jobs, health care, families, friends, and houses of worship, by providing shelter in the borough they last called home. Together, we are ending the band-aid approaches of the past and implementing a truly comprehensive strategy for finally turning the tide on homelessness.

PILLAR 1: PREVENTING HOMELESSNESS WHENEVER WE CAN

We exponentially expanded free legal assistance for New Yorkers in danger of illegal eviction, increasing funding for legal services for tenants more than 21-fold since 2014, from roughly \$6 million to more than \$128 million currently, with \$166 million in the baseline budget when the right to counsel program is implemented fully. With this investment, we have seen residential evictions by marshals decline by 41% since 2013. In 2019 alone, evictions decreased 15 percent—the largest single-year decrease since launch of the City's Universal Access to Counsel program through our Office of Civil Justice (OCJ).

In FY19, over 32,000 households facing eviction in Housing Court and NYCHA administrative proceedings received legal services in their cases – 84,000 New York City tenants who were able to face the threat of eviction with the assistance of a legal defender. OCJ-funded legal organizations provided legal assistance to over 41,000 households across New York City facing housing challenges, comprising over 105,000 tenants and their household members. This reflected a 24% increase in households served compared to the prior year and a 74% increase compared to FY2017, before the formal launch of Universal Access. In fact, as of December 2019, nearly 400,000 New Yorkers had received free legal representation, advice, or assistance in eviction and other housing-related matters since the start of the de Blasio Administration in 2014 through tenant legal services programs administered by the Human Resources Administration.

We have also expanded Homebase locations, which provides homeless prevention services such as emergency rental assistance, help relocating and assistance obtaining public assistance from 14 to 25. At the same time, the number of households served by Homebase reached 29,600 in FY19, almost tripling the 11,900 households served in FY14. Thus far in FY20, we've served approximately 21,500 households, almost tripling the 7,500 households served over that same time period in FY14.

PILLAR 2: ADDRESSING STREET HOMELESSNESS

Since 2014, we have tripled the number of outreach workers engaging unsheltered New Yorkers experiencing street homelessness from 200 to 600 in 24/7/365 outreach effort; quadrupled the number of dedicated Safer Haven and stabilization beds since 2014 from 600 to 1,800 before COVID – and we are on our way to 2,800 with the addition of more than 300 Safe Haven and stabilization beds coming online now to address client needs during the pandemic and more planned through the Journey Home Plan.

Tackling the problem of street homelessness, we have invested five times more since 2014, from \$45M to \$240 million.

Our current strategies have helped more than 2,610 individuals come off the streets and remain off in transitional programs and permanent housing since the launch of HOME-STAT (Homeless Outreach & Mobile Engagement Street Action Teams) in April 2016. Under our recently announced Journey Home, we are building on that work to finally end long-term street homelessness by investing in more housing, mental health and medical services for unsheltered individuals, as well as enhancing outreach resources to deliver more urgent and rapid responses to unsheltered individuals in need..

By marshaling new and critical resources, the Journey Home plan will:

- Increase Safe Haven capacity by opening 1,000 new Safe Haven beds.
- Create 1,000 new low-barrier permanent apartments by working with partners across the housing and social services sectors.
- Deliver new health resources to people where they are, providing treatment through street medical care and behavioral health care, and building the trust needed for clients to come inside.
- Provide coordinated rapid outreach response through the Street Homelessness Joint Command Center.
- Leverage state-of-the-art outreach technology to better connect clients to the services they need to transition into housing.
- Expand Diversion and Outreach in our subway system.

PILLAR 3: REHOUSING FAMILIES AND INDIVIDUALS

Immediately upon taking office, the de Blasio Administration stepped in to fill the gap left by the City and State’s cancellation of the Advantage rental assistance program in 2011 (which led to a 38 percent increase in homelessness between 2011 and 2014) by creating and implementing new rental assistance programs as well as reinstating rehousing programs—which to date have helped more than 145,000 children and adults remain in or secure permanent housing, with the vast majority exiting shelter.

We also streamlined a number of our rental assistance programs into one, to make it easier for clients and landlords alike to access housing opportunities, and we launched an aggressive, dedicated unit at DSS focused on combatting Source of Income discrimination to ensure landlords are not unlawfully closing doors of opportunity to those experiencing homelessness.

PILLAR 4: TRANSFORMING HAPHAZARD APPROACH TO PROVIDING SHELTER/SERVICES THAT BUILT UP OVER THE LAST FOUR DECADES

We’ve already reduced our shelter footprint by nearly one-third from the 647 buildings we reported in the Turning the Tide plan to our current use of 435 buildings following ending use of more than 200 shelter buildings during the last three years.

We are shrinking the DHS footprint by 45% by ending use of 360 “cluster” and commercial hotel locations, while also opening 90 borough-based shelters citywide. We are making progress in meeting this goal. We have reduced the DHS footprint by 31%, ending use of over 200 buildings that did not meet our standards. At the peak of the Giuliani-era program, the City was utilizing over 3,600 cluster units. Since then, we have phased out over 2,400 units, a reduction of nearly 70%. This includes cluster units converted to permanent

affordable housing. We have also announced 70 borough-based shelters, 36 of which are already helping New Yorkers get back on their feet closer to their anchors of life. We have invested more than a quarter of a billion dollars annually in additional funding for our not-for-profit shelter providers to address decades of disinvestment and to modernize the outdated rates they had been paid for too long. This includes funding for social workers in contracted families with children shelters, housing specialists in all shelters and standardized rates for services such as maintenance and supplies.

We continue to address decades of disinvestment and are restoring our infrastructure through aggressive repairs, renovations, and funding. Through our Shelter Repair Squad, a multi-agency task force, we inspect shelter buildings and identify code violations requiring repair. The Shelter Repair Squad conducted more than 65,549 shelter inspections from 2015-2020, reducing violations that went unaddressed for many years by 92%.