

**Testimony of Molly Park, First Deputy Commissioner
Department of Homeless Services**

**Before the New York City Committee on General Welfare
Oversight - Outreach NYC and Barriers to Shelter for Individuals Experiencing Homelessness
February 28, 2020**

Good morning Chairperson Levin and members of the General Welfare Committee. My name is Molly Park, First Deputy Commissioner of the Department of Homeless Services, joining me today is Erin Drinkwater Deputy Commissioner for Intergovernmental and Legislative Affairs for the Department of Social Services. Thank you for this opportunity to testify today about Outreach NYC and our comprehensive HOME-STAT program. Outreach NYC is one element of the recently announced six-point action plan to end long-term street homelessness in New York City over the next five years. This Administration is proud to be leading the nation in efforts to end long-term street homelessness, and we welcome this opportunity to discuss components of The Journey Home.

Outreach NYC - Mobilizing Frontline City Agency Staff to Help Address Citywide Challenge

In November, Mayor de Blasio announced the launch of Outreach NYC, a new, city-wide, multi-agency effort to help homeless New Yorkers across all five boroughs. The initiative builds on historic investments in HOME-STAT to mobilize thousands of frontline City Agency staff to request outreach assistance via 311 when they observe individuals experiencing unsheltered homelessness. The goal of Outreach NYC is to help more unsheltered New Yorkers transition off the streets and subways into transitional and permanent settings.

By training staff to submit Service Requests (SRs) for outreach assistance, City Agency employees are engaged as essential partners in our ongoing, 24/7/365 outreach effort by helping us deploy targeted homeless outreach teams in real-time. So far, the City has trained: 500 staff from the Department of Health and Mental Hygiene (Environmental Health Inspectors), 500 staff from the Buildings Department (Building Inspectors), 1,100 Parks workers, 300 Community Service Associates, 500 Maintenance and Operations Supervisors and 1,000 Department of Sanitation Supervisors and 15,000 FDNY staff, including 11,000 firefighters and 3,000 EMTs and Paramedics to submit Service Requests through 311.

Outreach NYC builds on additional enhancements to street outreach announced over the summer. All service requests, including those from Outreach NYC, are routed to the City's Joint Command Center (JCC), managed by DHS and NYPD, where interagency staff triage requests, prioritize and deploy multi-Agency responses as appropriate and analyze trends, with a goal to provide collaborative assistance to the more challenging cases involving high-needs individuals.

Joint Command Center

Through Outreach NYC, DHS, DSS, and our sister agencies are leading by example to help our homeless neighbors to make the journey home. These engaged City employees contribute to the utilization of new resources such as the Joint Command Center, a new approach that increases operational and outreach efforts. The JCC deploys additional DHS outreach workers to address the most challenging cases of unsheltered homelessness. These cases involve high-needs clients, who often face the most significant, and overlapping challenges, including mental health diagnoses and substance misuse.

The Joint Command Center brings relevant Agency experts to the table to develop tailored approaches to engage each individual based on their unique needs. HOME-STAT outreach teams are coordinating with Agency partners to address the needs of a specific subset of individuals who are confirmed to be experiencing long-term unsheltered homelessness, are known to outreach teams and meet a set of designations such as service resistant or medically vulnerable as an indication of greater need requiring more interagency expertise. Through close collaboration with partners including the Department of Health and Mental Hygiene (DOHMH) and Health + Hospitals (H+H), we are developing targeted interventions on a case-by-case basis to make the breakthroughs that encourage these individuals to finally accept services and transition off the streets and subways.

The Journey Home Plan

As I testified to last month, under The Journey Home, a strategic plan that encompasses the operational structures of the Joint Command Center and HOME-STAT, we are investing in 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. Our current strategies have helped more than 2,450 individuals come off the streets and into transitional programs and permanent housing since the launch of HOME-STAT (Homeless Outreach & Mobile Engagement Street Action Teams) in April 2016.

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

1. Increase Safe Haven capacity by opening 1,000 new Safe Haven beds.
2. Create 1,000 new low-barrier permanent apartments by working with partners across the housing and social services sectors.
3. 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.
4. Provide coordinated rapid outreach response through the Street Homelessness Joint Command Center.
5. Leverage state-of-the-art outreach technology to better connect clients to the services they need to transition into housing.
6. Expand Diversion and Outreach in our subway system.

HOME-STAT

Further, the Journey Home plan builds on the nation's most comprehensive street outreach program, the Department of Homeless Services' HOME-STAT initiative—with outreach teams canvassing the five boroughs and engaging New Yorkers who are unsheltered 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, every day of the year.

Through HOME-STAT, hundreds of highly-trained, not-for-profit outreach staff, including licensed social workers, canvass the streets, proactively engaging New Yorkers experiencing street homelessness. Outreach workers offer services and assistance, while working to gain trust with the goal of addressing the underlying issues that may have caused or contributed to street homelessness in order to ultimately help these individuals transition off the streets. HOME-STAT also provides aftercare services, continuing to work with individuals as they make that transition to ensure that they get the supports they need to remain in housing and off the streets.

Since 2014, the City has redoubled outreach efforts, through HOME-STAT, we have:

- Tripled the City’s investment in street homelessness programs from approximately \$45M to more than \$140M before the additional investments for the Journey Home plan.
- Tripled the number of ‘safe haven’ beds dedicated to serving street homeless New Yorkers citywide since 2014. As of this year, there are approximately 1,800 beds dedicated to street homeless New Yorkers operating citywide.
- Tripled the number of outreach staff from fewer than 200 in 2014 to now nearly 600 through the Journey Home plan that builds on the doubling of outreach staff through HOME-STAT.
- Built the City’s first-ever “By-Name” list of individuals known to be homeless and residing on the streets to improve delivery of services to help them come off the streets. Outreach teams now know approximately 1,800 street homeless individuals by name and actively engage another 2,400 individuals encountered on the streets to determine whether they are homeless.
- Increased joint outreach operations with the NYPD and partner agencies such as NYC Health + Hospitals (H+H), the Department of Health and Mental Hygiene (DOHMH), the FDNY Emergency Medical Services (EMS), and the Department of Parks & Recreation (Parks) to engage more New Yorkers and offer more supports.

The Journey Home builds on these investments, adding another \$100M in annual budget authority, bringing the total to \$240M. Among other initiatives, this spending will increase by 1,000 the number of Safe Haven beds dedicated to serving street homeless individuals available to HOME-STAT outreach teams, bringing the total of these beds to 2,800 citywide, and will provide permanent housing for 1,000 New Yorkers experiencing street homelessness by creating a new low-barrier permanent housing model to meet clients where they’re at.

HOME-STAT works by Building Trust, Person by Person – Our outreach teams remain focused on persistent, proactive, positive engagement, offering services and supports to New Yorkers in need 24/7/365.

Accepting outreach efforts, including services that will help homeless New Yorkers transition indoors from the streets or subways, is voluntary—and, in accordance with NYS Mental Hygiene Law, street homeless New Yorkers cannot be involuntarily removed from the streets unless they are posing a danger to themselves or others. Unsheltered individuals residing underground often face complex, layered challenges, and may be resistant to accepting services, but our teams remain undeterred in their efforts to help them transition off the subways. To that end, HOME-STAT outreach teams have access to:

- Licensed clinicians who work with clients on the streets, provide on-going case management, and assess each individual for immediate risk/crisis during each encounter
- Psychiatrists who perform psychiatric evaluations on the streets, as needed, helping understand and better meet the individual needs of each street homeless New Yorker

- Substance use resources, including ability to immediately connect individuals to detox and other rehabilitation programs—and are trained in naloxone administration

Legislation

There are two bills that are pre-considered at today's hearing. The first would amend the administrative code of the city of New York, in relation to the provision of case management services for homeless individuals.

Experienced outreach teams from not-for-profit service providers canvass the five boroughs 24/7/365 as part of our citywide effort to identify and engage individuals who may be homeless, encourage them to accept services, and ultimately help them transition off the streets. With no one-size-fits-all approach to ending homelessness, the by-name list enables HOME-STAT outreach teams to more effectively engage each of these individuals on a case by case, person by person basis, directly and repeatedly. Outreach teams meet individuals where they are, and evaluate the immediate and root causes contributing to their homelessness. Nearly 600 not-for-profit outreach workers are engaged in developing the unique combination of services that will enable individuals to transition off the streets, and build the trust and relationships that will ultimately encourage these individuals to accept services.

In their ongoing efforts to offer services, supports, and a helping hand, HOME-STAT outreach teams have access to:

- licensed clinicians who work with clients on the streets, provide on-going case management, and assess each individual for immediate risk/crisis during each encounter;
- psychiatrists who perform psychiatric evaluations on the streets, as needed, helping understand and better meet the individual needs of each street homeless New Yorker;
- substance use resources, including ability to immediately connect individuals to detox and other rehabilitation programs. HOME-STAT staff are also trained in naloxone administration.

We support the intent of the bill, but we want to make sure that the requirements of the bill do not result in a return to a one-size fits all approach that does not work. We look forward to working with the sponsor.

The second pre-considered bill would amend the administrative code of the city of New York, in relation to rental assistance eligibility requirements for New Yorkers experiencing street homelessness.

In the Journey Home, we reiterated our policy that a shelter stay is not a requirement for unsheltered individuals working with outreach teams to qualify for rental assistance. From the moment our teams engage individuals experiencing street homelessness, they are working to identify the roots causes of homelessness and what customized approach will get them connected to care and services. This includes pathways to permanent housing which might include rental assistance, supportive housing or a new low threshold model as a first step to bring someone inside.

We look forward to working with the sponsor to ensure the needs of individuals experiencing unsheltered street homelessness are provided the resources necessary to get back on their feet. Again, we want to make sure that we are not recreating a one size fits all approach. We think that our current policy in terms of eligibility for rental assistance strikes the right balance, particularly as we bring on additional safe haven and other permanent housing resources. And of course, shelter is always offered and available to help bring people inside at any point. In addition, we urge that the focus at this time continue to be on developments in Albany where there is broad support in the Legislature for Home Stability Support that

would provide significant funding for State rental assistance to prevent and alleviate homelessness all across the State. And, as we testified last week at a Council hearing on other legislation, we need to be laser focused right now on addressing a \$1.1 billion proposed State cost shift to New York City for the Medicaid program and a \$102 million State cost shift over two years to New York City for the TANF and EAF programs – all of which would limit significantly our ability to sustain our existing programs, let alone develop new ones.

The two other bills being considered today relate to the accommodation of pets in shelter.

Introduction 1483 would require the agency to develop a plan to accommodate pets of homeless individuals and families in the shelter system while Introduction 1484 would require reporting on the placement of pets whose owners enter homeless shelters. We applaud the intent of both of these provisions.

It has been our longstanding policy to permit service animals, as needed. Regarding pets as distinguished from service animals, we appreciate their importance in people's lives, particularly the support and stability they provide. At the same time, we must be mindful of the physical limitations of the haphazard shelter system we inherited, where many locations may not be effectively designed for pets and recognize that the one-size-fits-all approach of the past doesn't work. That's why we issued our Turning the Tide plan and modernized our open-ended request for proposals: to transform our shelter footprint, develop new approaches, increase the options available to those we serve, and raise the bar on services we provide. We encourage our not-for-profit partners to propose innovative new shelters and safe havens based on real-time needs clients may be experiencing on the ground, including for pet-friendly locations. We have been actively encouraging our partners to propose pet-friendly sites. We will continue working with partners to find a way to accommodate the various specific needs of clients with respect to pets.

Conclusion

Outreach NYC is just one example of how we use every tool at our disposal to help New Yorkers in need to get back on the path to stability. Homelessness is a moral challenge for our City that demands everyone's attention and action. As public servants, we all wear one uniform, and are working collaboratively to identify unsheltered New Yorkers and mobilizing resources to help.

Through HOME-STAT, by strengthening engagement, building trust, and providing more pathways off the streets, DHS continues and builds on our efforts, which have already helped more than 2,450 New Yorkers come off the streets and subways and into transitional programs and permanent housing. With compassionate frontline public servants acting as additional eyes and ears, helping our HOME-STAT teams further target their outreach and meet people where they are, we remain squarely focused on taking this progress further. Thank you and I would be happy to take your questions.