



Testimony of

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Before the

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General Welfare Committee

*Oversight Hearing: An Examination of the Department of Homeless Services' 90-Day Review*

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Good afternoon. My name is Stephanie Gendell and I am the Associate Executive Director for Policy and Government Relations at Citizens' Committee for Children of New York (CCC). CCC is a 72-year-old independent, multi-issue child advocacy organization dedicated to ensuring every New York child is healthy, housed, educated and safe.

I would like to thank General Welfare Chair Stephen Levin and the members of the General Welfare Committee for holding today's oversight hearing on the Department of Homeless Services' 90-Day Review. CCC also appreciates the efforts the City Council has made to provide both meaningful oversight and assistance to address the homelessness crisis in New York City.

Given the historic levels of homelessness and the numerous challenges homeless children and their families have been facing, CCC also appreciates the de Blasio administration's attention to this issue. We hope that the 90-day review conducted and recommendations will ultimately help to prevent homelessness, improve the transition of homeless families to permanent housing, and ensure the safety and well-being of homeless children and their families.

We know that housing instability causes stress and trauma for families and children and that there historic numbers of children living in the shelter system. It is therefore critical that as a City we take measures to ensure the safety of these children and to ensure programs and services are available to address the needs of these vulnerable families.

The 90-day review came at a time of nearly unprecedented homelessness. As of April 18, 2016, there were over 12,000 families with nearly 23,000 children living in the DHS shelter system.<sup>1</sup> In total, there were 57,921 individuals in the DHS shelter system.<sup>2</sup> Several recent reports and investigations have documented what many advocates and homeless New Yorkers have known for some time—many of the shelter sites are not safe places for adults, let alone children.

According to the administration, the City's 90-day comprehensive operational review of NYC's homeless programs was to "ensure homeless services are delivered as efficiently and effectively as possible in order to prevent, reduce and manage homelessness." There are many parts of this newly released plan that we believe will benefit children and families and we look forward to seeing the recommendations funded and implemented.

Two key components of the plan include implementing an integrated management structure with DHS and HRA reporting to a single Commissioner of Social Services and creating an Interagency Homelessness Accountability Council reporting to the Deputy Mayor for Health and Human Services. We look forward to learning more about the new management structure and leadership, as this will be critical to success. In addition, we are very pleased with the creation of the Interagency Council and hope that this structure will help lead to strategic resolutions of the numerous interagency issues that impact homeless children, families and adults.

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<sup>1</sup> According to the Department of Homeless Services Daily Report, on April 18, 2016 there were 12,261 families with 22,805 children in the shelter system. <http://www1.nyc.gov/assets/dhs/downloads/pdf/dailyreport.pdf>

<sup>2</sup> Id.

There are two key issues that must form the backbone of efforts to address family homelessness: the availability of affordable housing and mitigating the impact of homelessness on children.

1) Affordable Housing:

As it relates to affordable housing, data has shown that median household income has not been able to keep up with median rent. This is particularly true in some of the City's struggling neighborhoods. For example, in University Heights in the Bronx, median monthly rent increased 14.3% from 2005 to 2014, while median income decreased 12%.<sup>3</sup>

Addressing the affordable housing crisis is critical to addressing homelessness. The City has begun to take steps, including the commitment to a new affordable housing plan and the creation of additional supportive housing. It is critical that the state and the city be partners in this effort and we urge the state to create a New York/NY IV plan to coordinate state and city efforts to increase supportive housing.

2) Impact of Family Homelessness on Children

The data and research on the experiences of homeless children paint a disturbing picture regarding the well-being of the record numbers of homeless children, even in the best of circumstances. Homelessness creates risks to the physical and emotional well-being and educational success of children.

For example, children experiencing homelessness have an increased risk of illness compared to children who are not homeless: they suffer from four times as many respiratory infections, five times as many gastrointestinal infections, and twice as many ear infections.<sup>4</sup> Additionally, they are four times as likely to suffer from asthma and have high rates of asthma-related hospitalizations.<sup>5</sup> Homeless children also suffer disproportionately from food insecurity, as they are twice as likely to go hungry as non-homeless children, and, due to these nutritional deficiencies they are at an increased risk of obesity.<sup>6</sup>

Being homeless has also been demonstrated to be harmful to children's emotional well-being. Homelessness causes traumatic disruptions in the lives of children, who, in addition to losing their homes, experience loss of their friends and community, sense of security, routines, possessions, and privacy.<sup>7</sup> Homelessness also makes families more vulnerable to other forms of trauma, such as witnessing violence, physical or sexual assault, and abrupt separation from family members.<sup>8</sup> As a result, homelessness increases a child's risk of experiencing mental illness. For example, half of school-age homeless children experience

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<sup>3</sup> Citizens' Committee for Children, Using KT Online to Understand Housing Instability in High-Risk Communities. March 7, 2016. <http://www.cccnewyork.org/blog/using-kt-online-to-understand-housing-instability-in-high-risk-communities/>

<sup>4</sup> The National Center on Family Homeless, The Characteristics and Needs of Families Experiencing Homelessness, Dec. 2011. Available at: <http://www.familyhomelessness.org/media/306.pdf>.

<sup>5</sup> *Id.*

<sup>6</sup> *Id.*

<sup>7</sup> The National Child Traumatic Stress Network, Facts on Trauma and Homeless Children, 2005, at page 2. Available at:

[http://www.nctsn.org/nctsn\\_assets/pdfs/promising\\_practices/Facts\\_on\\_Trauma\\_and\\_Homeless\\_Children.pdf](http://www.nctsn.org/nctsn_assets/pdfs/promising_practices/Facts_on_Trauma_and_Homeless_Children.pdf)

<sup>8</sup> *Id.*

anxiety, depression, or withdrawal, compared to 18 percent of children who are not homeless, and one in three homeless children ages eight and under suffers from a major mental disorder.<sup>9</sup>

The impact of homelessness can also be devastating to a child's education because it often causes disruptions that impact their attendance and academic performance. Nationally, only 77 percent of homeless children attend school regularly.<sup>10</sup> While the attendance rate for children in New York City shelters is higher, at 84.5 percent,<sup>11</sup> this is still insufficient to meet the Department of Education's 90 percent attendance requirement for promotion.<sup>12</sup> Additionally, homeless children are twice as likely to repeat a grade compared to non-homeless children.<sup>13</sup> Only 51.8% of families in the City's shelter system are placed in a shelter in the school district where the youngest child attends school.<sup>14</sup>

### Key Components of the City's Plan

The City's plan includes a number of key programmatic reforms that we were very pleased to see. These include:

#### Prevention:

- Expanding HomeBase staffing and services.
- Developing an intake model that builds on Homebase and enables families to obtain services within their borough rather than needing to go to PATH.
- Using data to proactively target prevention services for families at risk of becoming homeless.
- Targeting outreach to doubled-up families with school-aged children through a model where HRA and DOE will work together.
- Target services and rental assistance to youth in DYCD shelters. Expand eligibility criteria for the City's rental assistance programs to youth living in DYCD youth shelters who are at risk of entering DHS shelters.

#### Shelter safety:

- Deploying an NYPD management team to help DHS develop an action plan to upgrade shelter security.
- Expanding domestic violence services to Tier II family shelters.
- Implementing a more extensive reporting system for critical incidents in shelters.
- Phasing out the use of cluster sites and commercial hotels.
- Rationalizing shelter provider rates so that they have funds for maintenance.

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<sup>9</sup> *Id.*

<sup>10</sup> National Coalition for the Homeless, Education of Homeless Children and Youth, Sept. 2009, at page 1. Available at: <http://www.nationalhomeless.org/factsheets/education.pdf>

<sup>11</sup> New York City Mayor's Preliminary Management Report FY 2016, Department of Homeless Services, at 171. <http://www1.nyc.gov/assets/operations/downloads/pdf/pmmr2016/dhs.pdf>.

<sup>12</sup> New York City Department of Education, Regulation of the Chancellor. Available at: <http://schools.nyc.gov/NR/ronlyres/DB08E4BD-DE50-4D96-87FF-9260B3C1AB4D/0/A501.pdf>

<sup>13</sup> The National Child Traumatic Stress Network, Facts on Trauma and Homeless Children, *supra*, note 9.

<sup>14</sup> New York City Mayor's Preliminary Management Report FY 2016, Department of Homeless Services, at 171. <http://www1.nyc.gov/assets/operations/downloads/pdf/pmmr2016/dhs.pdf>.

- Expanding the shelter conditions complaint process through HRA's Infoline.

#### Rehousing:

- Developing a centralized reporting structure to promote move outs.
- Continuing to place 1,500 DHS families on the NYCHA waiting into vacancies. (Note: The City may want to consider increasing this number).
- Consolidating and streamlining the City's rental assistance programs. (We believe this will be very valuable given the sheer number of programs now available.)
- Implementing a more effective aftercare program.

We respectfully submit the following recommendations that we hope the administration will consider as it works to implement reforms to the City's homeless services system.

#### **1) Prevent Family Homelessness by Enhancing the Child Welfare Housing Subsidy**

The best way to reduce the number of families in the shelter system, and eliminate the trauma homelessness causes children, is to prevent families from becoming homeless in the first place. We appreciate the de Blasio administration's investment in prevention programs, including HomeBase, rental assistance programs and legal services to prevent eviction.

The City should also support legislation pending in the State Assembly, A7756A (Hevesi), which would increase the child welfare housing subsidy from \$300 to \$600 (which the City supports), extend the age from 21 to 24 for youth aging out, and ensure youth can have roommates and still receive subsidy. This would prevent homelessness at a fraction of the cost of shelter—these child welfare services are supported with 62% state funding and 38% local funding. CCC appreciates the City Council including their support for this legislation in their state legislative priorities.

#### **2) Expedite the elimination of cluster sites for children and their families:**

The expansion of cluster site shelters was an unfortunate result of New York City's record homelessness. Cluster sites provide less access to the services that help families move out of shelter faster. Unlike conventional Tier II shelters, which generally provide services such as case management and housing search assistance onsite, families in cluster site shelters often must obtain services offsite. This can pose additional obstacles for homeless families, especially for those who work long or irregular hours, or who must accompany their children on long commutes to their schools.

In addition, creating new cluster sites is an inefficient response to the City's increase in homelessness because it does not confront the underlying reasons behind the crisis, which is the high cost of housing in New York City relative to what low-income families can afford, and the lack of programs to assist homeless families in their moves out of the shelter system.

And most concerning, the information we have seen to date indicates that both the shelter conditions and the safety to children suffers when families are placed in cluster sites. In a March 2015 report, DOI reported that it inspected 25 Tier II shelters, hotels and cluster sites

and found 621 City issued violations.<sup>15</sup> They determined that cluster sites are in need of the most immediate action and were unsafe and unhealthy. Some of the violations include seeing a dead rat in an apartment where children live, roaches throughout buildings, garbage in the stairs and hallway, urine on the floor of an elevator, lax security, and lack of an onsite caseworker.”<sup>16</sup>

While the newly released plan includes phasing out cluster sites over the next three years, we urge the administration to expedite this timeline and ensure that these sites are safe in the meantime.

### **3) Increase the Investment in Services that Keep Children Safe and Address Trauma**

Entering and exiting shelter is traumatic and stressful to both parents and their children. We encourage the City to invest in services that are targeted to families in shelter, aimed at reducing stress, addressing trauma, and thereby preventing abuse, neglect and mental health issues.

This will likely require the City to invest in additional family support programs, including child care, after-school, summer camp, mental health services and medical services for families in the shelter system.

This is important not only while families are in shelter but also when they leave shelter. For some parents, being in shelter for over a year provided the most housing stability that they have ever had. Leaving this community to live in perhaps a new community, with the stress of needing to pay rent and maintain housing, can be difficult for families and thus warrant additional preventive services.

### **4) Ensure Homeless Children Have Access to Child Care**

The relatively new federal reauthorization of the Child Care Development Block Grant made being homeless a priority group for receiving subsidized child care. The federal government recognized the benefits to both the children and the parents that child care could provide for these families. We urge the City to invest resources into ensuring homeless children are enrolled in child care programs, particularly EarlyLearn, by using the same deliberate system it has put in place to ensure homeless 4-year olds are enrolled in prekindergarten.

### **5) Be Transparent**

A key to successful implementation of the new management structure, programmatic enhances and services will be transparency. New Yorkers will need to be able to know which programs are successful, which need additional funding, what and how many critical incidents are still occurring, how shelter repairs are being addressed, etc. We urge the administration to be as transparent as possible.

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<sup>15</sup> New York City Department of Investigation Probe of Department of Homeless Services’ Shelters for Families with Children Finds Serious Deficiencies, March 2015. Available at:

<http://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2015/03/12/nyregion/report-on-violations-in-homeless-shelters.html>

<sup>16</sup> *Id.*

**6) The State Must Play an Important Role**

Finally, it is critical that the State and the City are true partners in addressing the homelessness crisis. We are urging the state to create a New York/NY IV agreement, to be a partner in addressing shelter conditions, to approve the City's FEPS plan modifications, to pay a fair share for homeless prevention, shelter and rehousing services, and to increase the shelter allowance.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify.