Testimony of

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Oversight Hearing: Reforms of Homeless Services, One Year Later

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Good afternoon. My name is Stephanie Gendell and I am the Associate Executive Director for Policy and Advocacy at Citizens' Committee for Children of New York (CCC). CCC is a 73-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 reforms to homeless services since the release of the Department of Homeless Services' 90-Day Review in April 2016. CCC also thanks Council Members Levin, Crowley, Espinal, Jr. and Torres, as well all of the co-sponsors, for introducing the five pieces of legislation that will also be addressed at today's hearing.

CCC also appreciates the de Blasio administration's attention to this issue. Given the historic levels of homelessness and the numerous challenges homeless children and their families face, we had hoped that the 90-day review and its resulting 46 recommendations would have set the City on a new course as it relates to homeless families.

What became clear to CCC, the de Blasio administration and others was that the homelessness crisis was not resolving quickly and that there was insufficient capacity to serve homeless families with children in appropriate shelter facilities; nearly half of the family shelter system is currently living in cluster sites or hotels/motels. We therefore also appreciate the administration releasing another plan in February of this year, *Turning the Tide on Homelessness.* This plan focuses on a phasing out cluster sites by 2021 and motels/hotels by 2023 by building 90 additional purpose built shelters and renovating 30 other days. While this plan does not aggressively reduce the homeless population, CCC does strongly believe that it is critical that the shelter system positively impact the well-being of children and their families, and thus we believe the building of new shelters to replace cluster sites and hotels is critical.

The 90-day review, in April 2016, came at a time that felt like unprecedented homelessness. On April 18, 2016, there were 12,261 families with 22,805 children living in the DHS shelter system.[1] In total, there were 57,921 individuals in the DHS shelter system.[2] On April 17, 2017 (essentially one year later), the shelter census is even larger, with 12,521 families in shelter, including 22,425 children. The total shelter population is 58,903.[3] Nearly 70% of those in shelter are parents and their children.[4]

We know that housing instability causes stress and trauma for families and 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.

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[1] http://www1.nyc.gov/assets/dhs/downloads/pdf/dailyreport.pdf accessed April 2016.
[2] Id.
[3] http://www1.nyc.gov/assets/dhs/downloads/pdf/dailyreport.pdf, accessed April 18, 2017.
[4] DHS Local Law 37 report: http://www1.nyc./gov/assets/operations/downloads/pdf/temporary_housing_report.pdf

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.[5] Additionally, they are four times as likely to suffer from asthma and have high rates of asthma-related hospitalizations.[6] 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.[7]

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.[8] 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.[9] As a result, homelessness increases a child's risk of experiencing mental illness. For example, half of school-age homeless children experience 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.[10]

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. Only 55% of families in the City's shelter system are placed in a shelter in the school district where the youngest child attends school.[11] As outlined in tremendous detail in the IBO's October 2016 report, *Not Reaching the Door*, homeless children struggle to get to school and are often chronically absent.[12]

Despite the numbers, the obstacles, and the impact of family homelessness, we know that the administration, the providers, the advocates and others have been working hard to prevent homelessness and help families secure permanent housing. We recognize the challenges of doing this in New York City where median income has not been able to keep up with median rent.

We appreciate all of these efforts, but respectfully submit the following recommendations and analysis regarding the 90 day review, the current well-being and needs of families in shelter, and the legislation on the agenda for today's hearing.

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[5] 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.
[6] *Id*.
[7] *Id*.
[8] The National Child Traumatic Stress Network, Facts on Trauma and Homeless Children, 2005, at page 2. Available at: http://www.nctsnet.org/nctsn_assets/pdfs/promising_practices/Facts_on_Trauma_and_Homeless_Children.pdf
[9] *Id*.
[10] *Id*.
[11] New York City Mayor's Management Report FY 2016, Department of Homeless Services.
[12] Independent Budget Office. *Not Reaching the Door: Homeless Students Face Many Hurdles on the Way to School*. October 2016. http://www.ibo.nyc.ny.us/iboreports/not-reaching-the-door-homeless-students-face-many-hurdles-on-the-way-to-school.pdf

1) The 90 Day Review

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."

When the City Council held a hearing on the 90-Review and Recommendations last year, CCC identified the components of the plan below as key to addressing the needs of homeless families with children. CCC is bolding those that have been implemented and italicized ones that are partially implemented. Those not bolded or italicized have either not been implemented or their status is unknown to CCC.

- *Implement an integrated management structure with DHS and HRA reporting to a single Commissioner of Social Services.*
- *Create an Interagency Homelessness Accountability Council reporting to the Deputy Mayor for Health and Human Services.*
- *Expand HomeBase staffing and services.*
- *Develop an intake model that builds on Homebase and enables families to obtain services within their borough rather than needing to go to PATH.*
- Use data to proactively target prevention services for families at risk of becoming homeless.
- *Target 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.
- **Deploy an NYPD management team to help DHS develop an action plan to upgrade shelter security.**
- **Expand domestic violence services to Tier II family shelters.**
- **Implement a more extensive reporting system for critical incidents in shelters.**
- *Phase out the use of cluster sites and commercial hotels by 2018.*
- Rationalize shelter provider rates so that they have funds for maintenance.
- Expand the shelter conditions complaint process through HRA's Infoline.
- Develop a centralized reporting structure to promote move outs.
- **Continue to place 1,500 DHS families on the NYCHA waiting into vacancies.**
- Consolidate and streamline the City's rental assistance programs.
- *Implement a more effective aftercare program.*

Last year, we made the following recommendations to enhance the plan:

- Prevent family homelessness by enhancing the child welfare housing subsidy by increasing the amount from $300 to $600 per month and enabling youth who age out to receive the subsidy until age 24 (rather than 21.)
- Expedite the elimination of cluster sites for children and their families.
- Increase the investment in services that keep children safe and address trauma.
- Ensure homeless children have access to child care.
- Be transparent about implementation of the recommendations.
- Seek a greater role for the state as a partner in addressing homelessness.

CCC has been looking forward to today's hearing because even though our recommendations included the need for transparency, we only know the status of a portion of the 90-Day review's recommendations.

On the positive side, CCC is pleased that since the 90-day review, DHS has done the following:

- Issued a new RFP for HomeBase services that will expand the number of sites, increase the amount of services, pilot a shelter intake process at a HomeBase office in Staten Island and expand HomeBase services to include after care.
- Eliminated the requirement for children reunifying from foster care with a homeless parent, reunify at PATH intake. Now just the parent can come to PATH and the family reunify in the shelter placement.
- Removed 647 cluster apartment units. (We should mention that we are, however, concerned that these have been replaced by hotels/motels.)

We understand from DHS's previous testimony that they had been waiting for the FEPS settlement before streamlining the rental assistance programs. We are pleased that the settlement has now happened and look forward to hearing plans to streamline the programs. DHS has also explained that this has led to the delay in rental assistance program for Runaway and Homeless Youth. We similarly look forward to learning more about the plans for this critical rental assistance for vulnerable RHY youth.

CCC is disappointed that many of the other recommendations have either not been implemented yet or the system has not been transparent enough for us to know the status. We urge the administration to expeditiously address the following:

- The timeline to eliminate cluster sites and hotels: Last year, CCC was disappointed in the timeline to eliminate the use of cluster sites. Since then, the administration has actually extended the deadline to eliminate their use from 2018 to 2021. We are also concerned about using hotels until 2023.
- Create a LINC program (or other rental assistance program) for runaway and homeless youth.
- Increase the rates for shelter providers.
- In addition, we would like to once again reiterate the recommendations we made last year, particularly with regard to addressing trauma, providing child care and being transparent.

2) Addressing the Well-being of Homeless Children and Their Families

We appreciate that the Mayor's new homeless plan includes plans to make shelter placements more appropriate for families with children. We also appreciate that the plan includes a borough-based approach. We understand that to keep families close to their community of origin (when safe) and to place them in purpose-built shelters, will require the creation of additional shelter facilities. We urge New Yorkers to be open-minded about opening new family shelters in their neighborhoods.

While shelter is intended to be temporary, families with children had an average length of stay of 431 days in FY16[13], well over a year. This length of stay makes it even more imperative that the systems address issues related to family and child well-being. Insufficient capacity of purpose-built shelters in the DHS system (referred to as Tier II family shelters) has significantly contributed to the negative impacts on families' well-being, with 40% of families being places in commercial hotels and cluster sites. This dearth of purpose-built shelter capacity also results in families being placed far from their communities, schools, jobs, social service providers, friends, families and support systems, even when it is safe and in their best interests to remain in their communities. For school-aged children this removal from their communities of origin has translated into school transfers and/or long commutes, with high rates of absenteeism. For parents this situation means long and complicated morning and evening commutes to access their children's schools, child care, jobs, public assistance appointments and medical appointments. As a result, families experience disruptions in social service supports, as well as the supports from friends and families in their communities.

In the Department of Homeless Service shelter system, there are currently about 13,000 homeless families—but only approximately 6,800 Tier II family shelter units to serve them-meaning only about half of all homeless families with children are in shelters built for that purpose. The remaining half of homeless families with children are living in cluster sites and hotels.

Hotel rooms are often far from transportation, far from communities of origin, and lacking in services provided by Tier II shelters. Hotel rooms typically lack kitchens, and some hotels lack cooking facilities completely, meaning only microwavable meals are provided. Hotel sites often lack laundry facilities for family use, play areas for children, and communal space for visitors. Due to the hotels' attempt to prevent homeless families from claiming tenancy rights, families are forced to move rooms in the hotel every 29 days—removing any potential stability a family in crisis could try to create. Furthermore, hotels have not been designed or funded to have appropriate l shelter staff, such as housing specialists, educational specialists, recreational specialists, etc.

To begin to better address the well-being needs of homeless students and homeless families living in hotels and cluster sites, CCC makes the following suggestions:

- Restore and baseline the $10.3 million one time addition for guidance counselors and social workers at schools with high numbers of homeless students, and then add an additional $7.3 million to the Executive Budget to fund a total of 100 DOE social workers (add 67) at schools with high numbers of homeless students.
- Reorient the system to be more proactive about helping homeless families with school-aged children, rather than being responsive to parents only after there is a problem identified.
- Better staff PATH so that every parent with school-aged children can meet with an expert in education, educational stability, McKinney Vento, and transportation while at PATH.
- Create a better system to arrange busing/transportation than the current process whereby busing cannot begin to be arranged until after the family is found eligible for shelter.

[13] http://www1.nyc.gov/assets/operations/downloads/pdf/mmr2016/dhs.pdf

This 10-day eligibility process can take substantially longer for families who are not initially found eligible, and thus leads to a tremendous delay in arranging busing.

- Provide monthly MetroCards (rather than weekly) for families awaiting transportation arrangements.
- Increase the number of DOE staff troubleshooting education issues for school-aged children in temporary housing from the current 8 staff. Increase the number of family assistants who aid at shelters to better accommodate families placed in hotels.
- Improve the conditions for families in hotels by:
    - Eliminating the practice of requiring families in hotels to move rooms every 29 days.
    - Ensuring families in hotels have access to laundry.
    - Ensuring families in hotels have access to high quality, palatable food that meets the needs of clients with special dietary restrictions.
    - Creating space in the hotels for children to play and for families to have visitors during specified hours.
    - Providing shuttle service and/or car service reimbursement for homeless hotel residents located further than a 10- minute walk from a subway and those with disabilities who cannot walk to the subway.
    - Ensuring all hotels have regular access to social service staff who are trained in trauma-informed care and to assist with housing, benefits, education, early childhood education, early intervention, accessing health, behavioral health, and child welfare preventive services, and employment training and assistance.
- Provide trauma-informed care training for DHS and provider staff in all shelters and PATH intake.

3) City Council Legislation

- Int. 1443-2017, in relation to requiring that certain DHS employees be trained in administering opioid antagonists:

  This legislation would require that all DHS employees who may encounter a person experiencing an opioid-related overdose to be trained annually in providing an opioid antagonist such as naloxone. CCC supports this legislation.

  While we support the legislation, the majority of staff who will come into contact with a homeless client overdosing will be staff working for non-profit shelter providers rather than DHS. We suggest amending the legislation to require that there be one person on-site at each shelter facility at all times who has been trained and how has access to the opioid antagonist—and that the providers be reimbursed for the cost of this training and purchasing the medication.

- Int.0622-2015, in relation to requiring the department of homeless services to educate homeless person on domestic violence and child abuse.

  This legislation would require that those found eligible for shelter at adult and family intake offices receive information about child abuse and domestic violence. Specifically, it requires DHS to issue and circulate electronic and written materials, which at minimum

is to include a video and an illustrated brochure explaining the nature and proper reporting of domestic violence and child abuse.

CCC likely supports this legislation but seeks more information about what educational materials will be provided.

CCC appreciates the need to educate New Yorkers about domestic violence and child abuse. We feel that it would be necessary for us to view the written and electronic materials before being able to support their widespread distribution. It would be important for the materials to be available in multiple languages.

- Int.1460-2017, in relation to requiring the formation of an interagency coordinating council and homeless services advisory council to combat homelessness

  This legislation amends a 1993 local law to strengthen the interagency coordinating council and to create an advisory board. CCC supports this legislation. We think that adding the City Council General Welfare Chair (or a designee) and being specific about more agency participation is key. We also think that creating a non-governmental advisory board that the Commissioner is required to meet with and make recommendations, is an important and critical addition.

  The legislation calls for an 11 member advisory board, with 5 members appointed by the Speaker and 6 members appointed by the Mayor. Representatives would need to includes CBOs and service providers and at least one person who has been homeless in the last two years.

  To strengthen this legislation, CCC makes the following recommendations:
  - Require a subcommittee of the interagency council and advisory board to focus on homeless children and their families.
  - Amend the requirements for advisory board members to include at least one advocate, one legal services organization, someone who specializes in affordable housing, and someone who specializes in child well-being.

- Int. 1066-2016, in relation to requiring DHS to conduct quarterly point-in-time countes of the unsheltered homeless population.

  CCC supports this legislation.

- Int. 1459-2017, in relation to updating the report on utilization of and applications for multi-agency emergency housing assistance

  This legislation aims to make the Local Law 37 reports easier to locate and to understand by a) requiring that they be posted on on homepage of the Mayor's Office of Operations' website and the Open Data web portal and b) that it include a summary page.

CCC supports this legislation.

This report is very important because it provides a truer sense of the numbers of homeless individuals and families because it includes those served by agencies beyond DHS (such as HRA Domestic Violence shelters and DYCD).

Currently it is very difficult to locate the local law 37 report online. This amendment would make finding the report much easier. In addition, a cover page that summarizes the totals would also be very helpful. Right now, each agency submits their own numbers in their own format, making it often hard to get the full picture.

CCC is grateful to the City Council for its commitment to homeless families. We look forward to working together to finalize these important pieces of legislation and to improving the homeless service system for children and families.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify.