Testimony on the long-term issues in New York City homeless shelters and the recent increase in migrant families
New York City Council Committee on General Welfare’s Oversight Hearing

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Thank you, Chair Ayala, and members of the City Council Committee on General Welfare for holding today’s oversight hearing on the long-term issues in New York City homeless shelters and the recent increase in asylum seekers.

Since 1945, Citizens’ Committee for Children of New York has served as an independent, multi-issue child advocacy organization dedicated to ensuring that every New York child is healthy, housed, educated, and safe. CCC does not accept or receive public resources, provide direct services, or represent a sector or workforce. We document the facts, engage, and mobilize New Yorkers, and advocate for policy, budget, and legislative solutions that improve child and family well-being.

New York is still recovering from the socio-economic effects of COVID-19, which have disproportionately harmed families and children of color. For over two years, families across the city have continued to struggle with the compounding effects of illness and loss of life, job insecurity and reduced income, heightened housing instability and food insecurity, and skyrocketing behavioral health needs.

Today’s City Council oversight hearing brings to light what we have known for months: New York City is facing a dire family homelessness crisis, and there is an urgent need to improve policies and programs to alleviate the struggles of families at risk or suffering from homelessness.

Since the start of 2022, the number of families with children in shelter has increased dramatically, and the influx of migrant families in need of urgent housing assistance has exacerbated the homelessness crisis. The DHS-shelter system is already facing a severe lack of staffing and financial capacity. The lack of adequate affordable housing support causes deep and long-lasting harm to children and families, who make up the largest share of the city’s homeless shelter population.

**CCC, in partnership with the Family Homelessness Coalition, calls on the City Council and Mayor Adams to develop a plan to address the surge in family homelessness and housing insecurity in New York City by providing immediate assistance to migrant families in need, improving existing prevention programs, expanding access to affordable housing, and increasing funding for aftercare programs.**
New York City’s Recent Surge in the Homeless Population

Since January, the population of families with children entering DHS-shelters has increased over 10 percent. Per DHS shelter data, there were 9,810 families with children in shelter as of July 28th. Of those individuals staying in DHS shelters, 16,765 are children and 30,366 are individuals in families with children, accounting for over 60 percent of the overall population in DHS shelters. In June and July alone, close to 1,800 children entered DHS shelters.¹

There are multiple issues contributing to the rise in the family shelter population, including the end of the state’s eviction moratorium, income insecurity, rising rents and eviction filings, and the lack of affordable housing. Families already in shelter have been experiencing longer lengths of stay during the pandemic.² All these issues were occurring prior to the recent influx of migrant families.

The increase in migrant families from the Southern border seeking shelter and socio-economic support calls for immediate policy and program measures to alleviate their suffering. The migration experience of undocumented children can be traumatic and leave lasting negative effects. Research has exposed the experiences of recently arrived immigrant children, who often face difficulties adjusting to a new school system, language, and culture, and often lack access to social supports. All these layers of obstacles contribute to lower educational attainment results compared to the general U.S.-born population.³ New York City must provide all available resources to recently arrived migrant children and families to support their health and wellbeing.

The City has taken an important first step to address the current crisis by declaring an emergency to secure federal resources to address this crisis, and we strongly urge other city leaders to add their voices to the call for federal funds.

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Both federal and city funds must be directed to addressing the immediate needs of migrant families, as well as better support all families at risk of homelessness and those already in shelter by ensuring that all families regardless of immigration status have stabilizing support; all children in shelters have the resources they need for the start of the upcoming school year; homeless prevention and aftercare services are adequately funded; and New York is meaningfully addressing the affordable housing crisis. CCC and our partners support the following:

**Address the surge of families entering shelter and influx of migrant families**

- The City must first address the immediate needs of families in shelter, including immigrant families, by providing cash assistance, cleaning supplies, assistance obtaining personal identification papers, workforce supports, and domestic violence counseling and services. Qualified, trauma-informed interpreters must be supplied to families who need them. The City must also recognize the significant legal barriers migrant families are facing – including needing to travel to the state where their case will be heard – by providing multi-lingual legal assistance.
- As the new school year is around the corner, the City must also address the needs of students in shelter by ensuring migrant children are connected to health coverage, immunizations, and school benefits like meals and after school activities. Spanish language support should be provided to recently arrived migrant children, as well as internet access and school supplies.
- Because migrant families are unable to immediately qualify for any housing vouchers, City leaders must prioritize undocumented families, who face significant barriers in accessing federal supports, and ensure that they are receiving housing resources at the city level.

**Increase resources for children in shelters or facing homeless for the start of the upcoming school year**

- In the 2000-2021 school year, over 100,000 NYC children experienced some form of housing insecurity, including 28,000 children in shelter and 65,000 doubled up. In NYC, students living in shelters had the highest percentage of chronic school absenteeism, and only 52 percent graduated from high school in four years, 27 percent lower than the rest of the city students. The DOE must take steps to support all students experiencing homelessness and ensure their success and wellbeing.
- In many cases, children in shelters must travel long distances to attend their school. The city should ensure that all students in shelters or facing homelessness, regardless of their immigration status, have the appropriate transportation to attend school.

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4 NYC students suffering from homelessness. Data retrieved from [https://advocatesforchildren.org/node/1875](https://advocatesforchildren.org/node/1875)
• The DOE and other City agencies must ensure that all children in shelter or facing homelessness have access to mental health professionals and resources to succeed in the upcoming school year. Having the necessary tools and resources will improve performance and reduce school absenteeism.

• We applaud the allocation of $3.3 million in FY23 to hire DOE Community Coordinators to support students experiencing homelessness. The City should ensure that shelter-based peer support positions are filled and assigned before the start of the new academic year. Coordinators will be of great assistance as they will act as liaison between families, schools, and City agencies.

Increase funding and improve programs procedures for homeless prevention services

• The city must ensure sufficient funding allocation and staffing of city social services and housing agencies to ensure that the immediate needs of families facing eviction and those who are in shelter homelessness are met.

• The City should identify and hire point persons within HRA, NYCHA and HPD with whom preventive and shelter service providers can troubleshoot. Lack of timely communication between government agencies and social services providers often leads to families in rental arrears or safety net assistance disruption. The City should immediately address the rental arrears request process to make it more accessible and less complex for families at risk of eviction.

• HRA’s One Shot Deals (OSD) are not always expeditious and effective. OSD requires an overwhelming amount of paperwork and strict conditions, which subsequently lead to denials and evictions when the head of household is unable to supply this large amount of information in a timely manner.

Improve the achievement of housing permanency for families at risk of homelessness or in shelter

• The City must address challenges with the personnel and financial capacity of shelter providers. There is an urgent need for expedient allocation of existing resources; expedited approval of contracts; and increasing housing resources for undocumented and mixed-status households.

• The city must eliminate administrative barriers to housing support to prevent months of delays in securing vouchers. The EHV, City Fheps and FHEPS voucher application process for families in need to relocate from shelter and into stable housing is often lengthy and problematic. The City should explore assigning additional personnel to expedite the processing and approval of all housing vouchers. The City should consider streamlining access to all housing subsidies by funneling all application processes through one system like Coordinated Assessment and Placement System (CAPS). Within NYCHA, HRA, and HPD,
consideration should be given to identifying persons that function as trouble shooters to engage with preventive and shelter services providers.

- The City must also increase access to City FHEPS by removing requirements that necessitate an eviction filing, shelter history, or income to qualify. Many families fall through the cracks of the voucher system eligibility requirements. In a city like New York, moderate income families must make problematic decisions to either qualify for a voucher or face eviction. These families should not have to make sacrifices that compromise their children's well-being.

- The City must increase investment in legal counsel to address the source of income discrimination faced by applicants and ensure that families are not pushed out of their home boroughs. Families with vouchers are often turned away by unscrupulous landlords due to their low-income or cash-assistance cases. The vouchers are their source of income; therefore, the City must provide legal assistance to enforce rules requiring landlords to accept vouchers.

**Expand the City’s affordable housing supply to further prevent evictions.**

- Enforce the mandate to set aside at least 15% of HPD-funded housing projects for people experiencing homelessness. As the homeless population increases, the need for affordable housing makes this a priority. The City should work with federal and state agencies to expedite this process.

- Expand access to supportive housing for families with children who have been or will be evicted. Supportive housing provides the necessary support for families in need of domestic violence and very-low-income families. These families are prone to be at risk of homelessness due to lack of support from government programs.

- Ensure that city-subsidized units present income requirements that accurately reflect the needs of the city’s population. Very low-income families are discouraged from applying to new or modern buildings due to the need to present required income, which makes them ineligible.

- To improve access to affordable housing, the staff capacity of the city housing workforce numbers should be addressed. Many City agencies are short staffed. Often personnel are moved to other departments, leading to a lack of knowledge and efficiency.

- City agencies must be optimized to ensure proper administering of federal housing resources, such as the Emergency Housing Vouchers (EHV). The processes of applying for the voucher, searching for an apartment, and submitting the apartment application for approval takes several months. Families, brokers, and landlords eventually get discouraged and move ahead with other options.

- We urge City Council members to refrain from exercising veto powers and blocking affordable housing development.
Conclusion

The City must address the urgent needs of migrant families while also investing in solutions to address the City’s long-standing challenges around family homelessness and housing affordability. We look forward to working with the City Council and the Administration to improve the well-being of children and families in New York.

Thank you for the opportunity to submit this testimony.