



**Testimony on bills to address DHS-shelter emergency crisis
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 legislative proposals that aim to improve the well-being of families and individuals in shelters and to enhance housing opportunities for New Yorkers facing homelessness and housing instability.

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.

CCC is also a Steering Committee member of the Family Homelessness Coalition, a coalition of 18 organizations representing service and housing providers and children's advocacy organizations united by the goal of launching a coordinated, collaborative, multi-agency effort focused on preventing family homelessness, improving the well-being of children and families in shelters, and supporting the long-term housing stability of families with children who leave shelter.

New York City is facing a homelessness crisis with severe constraints on shelter capacity and growing concerns on family well-being.¹ Since August 2021, the number of families with children entering DHS-shelters has increased over 32 percent, and around 60 percent of the new shelter population are families with children. From June to August of this year alone, over 2,750 children entered DHS shelters.² The housing crisis disproportionately harms families and children of color who are still recovering from the socio-economic effects of COVID-19 and an ongoing economic downturn. In recent months, the influx of migrant families arriving from the Southern border in need of urgent housing assistance has further exacerbated the homelessness crisis.

Today's City Council oversight hearing draws attention to how low-income families with children across the city continue to struggle with housing instability, lack access to reliable resources to relocate in a timely manner, and these stressors impact the mental health needs for those residing in shelters. We applaud the City Council's call to address the urgent need to improve policies and programs to alleviate the suffering of families struggling with homelessness.

CCC would like to call attention to three proposed bills in particular and the opportunities they offer to address urgent needs facing children and families in the shelter system: Intro 0229 (Caban), Intro 0522 (Bottcher), and Intro 0124 (Salamanca Jr.).

¹Lack of DHS-shelter capacity supportive services. Retrieved from:
<https://www.coalitionforthehomeless.org/state-of-the-homeless-2022/>

² Families with children entering DHS-shelter. Retrieved from:
https://www.icphusa.org/maps_infographics/number-of-families-with-children-in-nyc-dhs-shelter-2021-2022/#daily-report-from-september-1-2022-

Intro 0229 (Caban) - Will help strengthen rental support for families by prohibiting the Department of Social Services (DSS) from deducting a utility allowance from the maximum monthly rent when calculating the monthly rental for the CityFHEPS voucher

This rule change will establish the monthly maximum rent of an apartment or a single room occupancy. It would also require DSS to conduct outreach on this requirement.

This bill is important because it will ensure that the value of the rental assistance CityFHEPS provides matches actual rental expenses and will prevent landlords and brokers from turning families away in favor of those who can pay the full rental amount.

The bill will also be critical for reducing the red tape that often prevents families from securing housing. As a former supervisor for a homeless prevention program funded by HRA, I witnessed firsthand how multiple administrative barriers with housing vouchers kept families from relocating in a timely manner and oftentimes led to shelter entry. The CityFHEPS application process is already lengthy and complex for everyone involved. The utility allowance only complicates the process for families, and on many occasions landlords and brokers simply walked away due to the complexity of this procedure. Landlords wanted to receive full rent and expressed hesitance about the utility deduction. Brokers expressed frustration over the calculations and how this would impact their commission. Heads of household grew increasingly confused as they were unsure of their monthly rent contribution and who was responsible for paying for their apartment utilities.

The overall confusion of these unnecessary administrative barriers created several weeks of delays and distrust between all parties involved, ultimately harming the ability of families to secure affordable housing. We therefore strongly support Int 0229 and its potential to improve the ability of families to move to stable housing.

Intro 0522 (Bottcher) – Will require on-site mental health professionals to be available in each shelter housing homeless families

Children in shelter are subject to substantial levels of stress and trauma, as are their caregivers and families urgently need more mental health services.³ We therefore strongly support efforts to establish more mental health professionals serving families in shelter. While we support Intro 0522, we also urge city leaders to address several considerations related to the bill. First, the city is facing a widespread shortage of children's behavioral health providers. Any bill enhancing services in shelters must be accompanied by a funding mechanism at the appropriate level to attract and retain providers.

The city should also explore ways to provide flexible funding and partner with existing community organizations to bring providers on site at shelters. This can help ensure providers are not being pulled away from communities with high needs in order to work within the shelters but are instead expanding their reach to include shelter populations. These providers could include existing Article 28 and Article 31 clinics, FQHCs, Health+Hospitals clinics, and other types of providers that offer unique models covered by Medicaid and Child Health Plus.

³ Shelter stays related trauma and mental health service's needs. Retrieved from: <https://www.samhsa.gov/homelessness-programs-resources/hpr-resources/trauma>

We applaud the City actions welcoming migrant families with a plan for education enrollment and a resource navigation center. However, the City must include a reasonable number Spanish-speaking mental health professionals to assist families with children who are facing challenging migration and assimilation experiences.

Finally, the 1 to 50 ratio may prove unmanageable for professionals who are already facing high caseloads and may be worth additional review.

Intro 0124 (Salamanca Jr.) - Will establish housing specialists within HRA and DHS.

This bill aims to ensure that families in DHS shelters have access to well-qualified housing specialists by requiring the Human Resources Administration (HRA) to designate housing specialists within all temporary shelters and to submit an annual report on housing specialists. This bill would also update requirements for housing specialists in the Department of Homeless Services (DHS) transitional housing facilities and would require DHS to submit an annual report on housing specialists.

Family Homelessness Coalition Fellows and families in shelter have expressed serious concerns over the lack of effective communication and timely assistance from shelter housing specialists. With a severe staffing capacity in DHS shelters, current housing specialists carry unmanageable caseloads, which prevents them from assisting families with apartment search guidance and quick inspection once a family is connected to an apartment.

In consultation with DHS-shelter providers, the City should assign financial resources to hire an adequate number of housing specialists and establish competitive salaries to attract individuals with a background in social services and a solid knowledge of the New York City housing market.

To facilitate the work efficiency of housing specialists, the city must also eliminate administrative barriers to approve CityFHEPS applications. Families often lose apartments where leases have already been signed, as landlords walk away due to the lengthy approval process. Additionally, the City should explore assigning additional personnel at HRA/DHS to expedite the processing and approval of CityFHEPS packets.

To expedite the relocation process of families exiting shelter, the City must eliminate the shelter 90-day rule to qualify for CityFHEPS

We support the goals of City Council leaders to improve access to affordable housing and reduce shelter entry, and therefore believe it is important to highlight an immediate action city leaders can take to expedite relocation and move families to permanent housing with CityFHEPS assistance : eliminate the 90-day rule to qualify for CityFHEPS.

New York City currently has an illogical policy that makes homeless individuals and families wait in shelter for 90 days before they are qualified to apply for CityFHEPS rental assistance vouchers. As a result, individuals and families shelter stays are far too long. Government red tape should not needlessly inhibit the ability of homeless New Yorkers to find apartments.

The rapid surge of families entering New York City shelters, the influx of migrant families in need of urgent housing assistance, and the city's severely limited shelter capacity require immediate action. The DHS-shelter system is already facing a severe lack of staffing and financial capacity. The shortage of shelter beds has forced the city to push for emergency contracts worth over \$300 million, while warehousing homeless individuals and families in hotels without the resources they need.

The long-lasting emotional, educational, and social harms that children experience due to living in shelter. Eliminating this misguided "90 Day Rule" and providing housing vouchers to individuals and families in a more expeditious way will help them move into apartments faster and free up much needed shelter capacity for families and individuals in need of emergency shelter assistance.

In June, Mayor Adams and other City officials promised to abolish this unnecessary and costly rule, yet the rule is still in place and harming New Yorkers every day. We urge you to work with the Mayor and City officials to keep their promise and immediately abolish the "90 Day Rule" so that individuals, children, and families can get the stable housing they desperately need and deserve.

Thank you for your time and for your commitment to children and families experiencing housing crises.