

Beyond Band-aids: Ending Homelessness in NYC

Homelessness is a dynamic problem that New York City can solve. By moving beyond band-aid, ad hoc, short term strategies and embracing comprehensive, collaborative approaches, our city has the opportunity to end homelessness.

Overview

RxHome has looked extensively at best practices and research to determine the key factors that allow a city to create a comprehensive system committed to ending and preventing homelessness. Based on those findings, we believe that New York City needs to commit to implementing the following suggestions to end homelessness, which we divide into four categories:



ACCOUNTABLE
LEADERSHIP



HOUSING
STABILITY POLICIES



COORDINATED
ENTRY +
DATA- DRIVEN
CONTRACTING



CROSS-SECTOR
COLLABORATION

RxHome believes that our next mayor can solve homeless by following the pragmatic steps and actions outlined in each category. Each recommendation can be implemented by the next mayor using their executive and administrative authority, as provided by the New York City Charter, and does not require legislative action by the City Council.

The Problem

77,934 New Yorkers experienced homelessness in the five boroughs on a single night in January 2020.ⁱ The number of people experiencing homelessness in New York City is nearly double the capacity of Citi Field. Homelessness is on the rise in every neighborhood in New York City, and the city's linear approach that puts emergency shelter ahead of permanent housing isn't working. New York City's broken "shelter-first" homeless service system mandates a minimum 90-day shelter stay to even qualify for rental assistance,ⁱⁱ forcing on nearly 700 families into shelters instead of long-term housing, each month.ⁱⁱⁱ

Children bear the brunt of New York City's homelessness crisis, accounting for more than a third of shelter residents, and this number is expected to grow.^{iv} Living in shelters during these critical early years can cause irreversible damage to their health and development that will follow them for the rest of their lives.^v One in four families who are experiencing homelessness nationally, are sheltered in NYC.^{vi} Nationally, family homelessness has been decreasing, but in New York City the number of families experiencing homelessness has increased by approximately 40% in the last decade (between 2008 and 2020).^{vii}

The COVID-19 pandemic has revealed just how many New Yorkers are on the brink of homelessness and the racial disparities among those facing housing instability.^{viii} The dual health and economic crises--both of which disproportionately impact Black and Hispanic families--exacerbated the homelessness crisis, overwhelming an already fragile shelter system.^{ix}

Every New Yorker, no matter what their age, race or their family composition, should be able to have a safe, stable and healthy home. Families and individuals should be able to easily access help that prevents them from experiencing the trauma of homelessness. If a New Yorker experiences homelessness, the City must act with urgency to quickly rehouse the individual or family and provide them with the help they need to remain stably housed.

Solutions



ACCOUNTABLE LEADERSHIP

Lead by launching a collaborative and coordinated effort to end homelessness

- Prioritize ending homelessness starting with City Hall
 - Restructure City Hall leadership portfolios by putting a single deputy mayor in charge of overseeing housing and homeless services for all New Yorkers.

- Change the mission and goal of all agencies that work with New Yorkers experiencing homelessness to reflect the overarching citywide goal of ending homelessness in New York City.
 - Currently, there are 19 agencies across 6 different City Hall portfolios that work with New Yorkers experiencing homelessness in some capacity, many of which have conflicting goals, making true collaboration impossible.
 - Eliminate operational silos between agencies that serve people experiencing homelessness and proactively coordinate to ensure each agency is contributing to the work of solving homelessness for all New Yorkers.

- Create a dedicated, empowered cross-agency team responsible for implementing a Citywide collaborative approach to providing services to all New Yorkers experiencing or at risk of homelessness and achieving population level reductions.

- Actively recognize and confront that homelessness is a result of racial discrimination and use a racial equity lens to change the homeless service system in New York City (NYC).
 - Address the factors that result in disparate impacts for BIPOC when creating new resources and reviewing existing tools to identify and assist households experiencing and at risk of homelessness.



HOUSING STABILITY POLICIES

Implement Housing First policies in NYC that prevent and end homelessness

1) Prevent homelessness before it happens

- Expand access to community-based rental assistance.
 - Increase rental voucher amounts and expand the eligibility criteria to provide assistance to more New Yorkers in need, regardless of age or family composition.
 - Ensure that rental assistance resources are provided to all New Yorkers in need, not just those in Department of Homeless Services shelter facilities.
- Make Homebase mandatory for households receiving rental assistance and increase access to Homebase by leveraging existing community-based and health care organizations.
 - Increase options for preventing homelessness offered at Homebase and prioritize finding solutions to remain stably housed within their neighborhood:
 - Financial resources to pay rent or utilities in arrears;
 - Access to short-term cash grants to families that are unable to cover their housing and utility costs until the household can resume paying rent/utilities independently;
 - Case management, mediation and legal assistance to help a household remain in its current housing; and
 - Help identifying, obtaining, and affording new housing, so those at risk of homelessness can obtain help that keeps them from needing to access emergency shelter.
- Integrate institutional discharge planning into the city-wide homeless prevention strategy to identify housing, provide rental assistance and offer other supportive service options for New Yorkers leaving institutional or custodial settings, including:
 - Criminal justice facilities: Queensboro Correctional Facility and Rikers Island Correctional Facility;
 - NYC hospitals and in-patient healthcare facilities;
 - Foster care;

- Military service; and
- Addiction treatment facilities.

2) Rapidly rehouse those experiencing homelessness

- Prioritize homeless families and individuals (youth, as well as adults) for **ALL** City-subsidized affordable units.
 - Commit units financed by the City to be used to rehouse individuals and families experiencing homelessness.
 - Limit the rental application criteria that developers and managing agents can use to evaluate formerly homeless individuals.
 - Ensure units developed using HPD, HDC, EDC or NYCHA funds have their units re-rented via direct referrals from the City's coordinated cross-agency homelessness taskforce.
- Streamline bureaucratic process for moving families from shelter to housing.
 - Stop requiring families and individuals receiving rental assistance to be enrolled in public assistance benefits.

3) Expand access to affordable housing stock without relying on new construction

- Redevelop city-owned shelter facilities into permanent, supportive housing and pursue infill development at City-owned sites to expand affordable housing stock for extremely low-income individuals and families.
- Invest in legalizing **existing** basement apartments and expanding the stock of legal, affordable basement apartments in Queens, Staten Island and Brooklyn.
- Legalize Accessory Dwelling Units (ADUs) in New York City and provide funding for the development of new ADUs that commit to prioritize renting the unit to individuals and families experiencing or at risk of becoming homeless.
- Convert empty hotels and other vacant as-of-right development properties/parcels into supportive and affordable housing for extremely low-income individuals and families.
- Identify vacant rental units in the New York City housing market and provide multi-year supply-side rental subsidies for these units, as a way to preserve and expand the number of rental apartments affordable to low and extremely low-income New Yorkers.



COORDINATED ENTRY + DATA-DRIVEN CONTRACTING

Use real time data to inform all operations and contracting.

- Revise and reissue city homeless service and prevention assistance contracts in order to implement results-driven contracting strategies
 - Draft homeless service contracts with the explicit goal of ending and preventing homelessness in both service goals and payment structures.
- Implement a true single coordinated entry and housing placement system for all New Yorkers at risk of or experiencing homelessness. A coordinated entry system is a standardized process for identifying and assisting individuals and families experiencing or at risk of homelessness with appropriate housing and service interventions.
 - Require that all agencies and programs that serve people experiencing and at risk of homelessness report into the same coordinated entry system, allowing the city to have a full picture of the housing needs of everyone.
- Stop the haphazard expansion of the shelter system that is building and acquiring new emergency shelter facilities.
- Invest in culture change and engagement activities to ensure that all DHS activities and programs contribute to preventing and ending homelessness by securing safe, affordable housing for people experiencing homelessness and housing vulnerability.



CROSS-SECTOR COLLABORATION

Recruit partners and collaborators to help end homelessness in our city

- Affirm that homelessness is a public health crisis.
- Partner with the health sector to create and connect New Yorkers to healthy places to live:

- Co-locate housing and homeless prevention services (Homebase) in hospitals and clinics serving people experiencing housing instability, (including those that receive PHS Act 330(h) funding).
- Collaborate with healthcare partners to ensure tools used to identify and assist households experiencing and at risk of homelessness adequately account for health care conditions and needs.
- Call on healthcare organizations to contribute financial and strategic resources to expand access to affordable housing.
- Partner with philanthropy and business to:
 - Create public/private funding pools that provide flexible resources and expand rental assistance to accommodate immigrant New Yorkers, cover rental and utility arrears, or pay for fees that act as barriers to securing or maintaining permanent housing for New Yorkers experiencing and at risk of homelessness.
 - Expand access to information and community-based help for neighbors experiencing or at risk of homelessness.
 - Ensure that New Yorkers who need help are known by name by improving the process for contacting homeless outreach services and requesting help for neighbors at risk of or experiencing homelessness.
- Invest in capacity building for nonprofit service providers to ensure they have the tools, skills and support they need to end homelessness, by:
 - Proactively provide nonprofit service providers with the tools, collaboration opportunities and technical support necessary to reorient the city's homeless service system to focus on ending and preventing homelessness.
 - Training nonprofit service providers in collective problem solving by creating multi-stakeholder teams to test new program ideas in short iteration cycles.

Share data, resources and strategies to end and prevent homelessness

- Invest in technology and tools that allow for service providers to share information in order to effectively triage resources so that New Yorkers who need the most help, get it.
 - Build on existing health data sharing projects that use health data (i.e. electronic medical records or EMRs) to identify and assist households experiencing and at risk of homelessness.

- Use human centered design principles to create a quality, dynamic by name list of all New Yorkers experiencing homelessness so that the City has access to the individual data it needs in order to create homeless population level reductions.
- Implement public reporting procedures that:
 - Report key data and information that not only describes who is homeless and why, but also demonstrates progress towards ending homelessness.
 - Share data publicly, transparently, and at regular intervals.
 - Inform decision making regarding resource allocation and new policy interventions to prevent and end homelessness in NYC.

Result

Now is the time to end homelessness in New York City. By enacting the policies outlined in this memo, New York City will:

- Achieve meaningful population level reductions in New York City’s shelters, resulting in:
 - More New Yorkers receiving prevention services that help them remain stably housed,
 - Fewer New Yorkers experiencing homelessness and staying in emergency shelter facilities,
 - When New Yorkers need to access emergency shelter, their length of stay will be no more than 60 days before being rehoused, and
 - Experiences of homelessness do not reoccur because New Yorkers have supports that allow them to remain stably housed.
- Have a coordinated, city-wide coordinated prevention and entry system that works with all New Yorkers to first, prevent homelessness from occurring. If experiencing homelessness cannot be prevented, then the city quickly matches New Yorkers in need with the appropriate resources and housing typology to assist them in accessing and affording in permanent housing.
- Provide expanded, flexible rental assistance programs that provide short term emergency grants as well as, long term rental assistance to assist more New Yorkers in need.
- Ensure that all New Yorkers – no matter their age, race, gender, family composition, nationality or ethnicity – can easily access rental assistance, prevention services and rapid rehousing supports.

As our city leadership works to rebuild the city in the wake of the pandemic, they must remember that a family’s housing stability, health and safety are all interconnected. Ending and preventing homelessness will make our city a healthier, more equitable, and just place for New Yorkers to call home.

Definitions

Coordinated entry system: a standardized access, assessment, and referral process for housing and other services across agencies/service providers used to assist individuals and families at risk of or currently experiencing homelessness get the help they need to remain or regain permanent, stable housing.

Emergency shelter: any facility with overnight sleeping accommodations, the primary purpose of which is to provide temporary shelter for the homeless in general or for specific populations of the homeless. There are four different agencies that provide emergency shelter to New Yorkers in need; each agency focuses on a different group of New Yorkers:

- DHS provides services for families and individuals experiencing homelessness
- DYCD provides services for youth and young adults experiencing homelessness
- HRA provides services to families and individuals who are experiencing homelessness due to domestic violence
- HPD provides services to families and individuals who are experiencing homelessness due to fires or city-issued vacate orders.

Homeless: a term used to describe the experience of an individual or family who lacks a fixed, regular, and adequate nighttime residence, meaning: (i) Has a primary nighttime residence that is a public or private place not meant for human habitation; (ii) Is living in a publicly or privately operated shelter designated to provide temporary living arrangements; or (iii) Is exiting an institution where (s)he has resided for 90 days or less and who resided in an emergency shelter or place not meant for human habitation immediately before entering that institution.

Housing First: a proven homeless assistance approach that prioritizes providing permanent housing to people experiencing homelessness, without preconditions or barriers to accessing housing that are dependent on sobriety, income, service interventions or case management.

Performance based contracting/results-driven contracting: a type of government procurement that focuses on aligning data, outcomes, performance tracking and management with the achievement a specific goal detailed in the service contract. This type of procurement strategy has been shown to be an effective tool for improving the outcomes of homeless services contracts.

Permanent Housing: housing that is accessed via the open market and allows a tenant or occupant to stay for the term of a lease agreement or an ownership agreement. Types of permanent housing that can be legalized, and developed to help increase affordable housing options for low-income New Yorkers, include:

- **Accessory dwelling units (ADUs)** - an additional residential building that occupies the same lot as a primary residence; examples: guest house, detached garage with a rented apartment above.
- **Basement apartment units** – Citizens Housing and Planning Council estimated that there are between 10,000 and 38,000 basement spaces that could become new safe and legal rental housing with minimal cost and effort without pursuing amendments to the zoning resolution.
- **Conversion and infill development on city owned properties** – the City owns properties, such as emergency shelters, that can be redeveloped into affordable housing and new development on those sites for low-income housing does not require any discretionary action by the City Planning Commission or Board of Standards and Appeals.

Rapid rehousing: an intervention that follows the principles of the Housing First approach. It is designed to help individuals and families that don't need intensive and ongoing support services to quickly exit homelessness and return to permanent housing through targeted financial assistance and community-based social services.

Rental assistance voucher/subsidy: government funded programs that provide low-income individuals with additional money to allow them to access and afford rent on an independent apartment. Eligible households lease apartments in a neighborhood of their choice and usually pay 30% of their adjusted income towards the rent. The government subsidy is paid directly to the landlord and covers the difference between the tenant contribution and the actual rent of the unit, up to a specified limit. The largest rental assistance voucher program in the United States is the federally funded Housing Choice Voucher program, which is also known as the Section 8 rental assistance program. In New York City, there are three city operated rental assistance programs used to help New Yorkers afford their rent: CityFHEPS, FHEPS, and SOTA.

Right to shelter: the legal obligation of all jurisdictions within New York State, including New York City, to find a bed for every person who is experiencing homelessness and needs one. In New York City, if the City's emergency shelters are full, people cannot be turned away, which is why New York City also uses hotels to provide emergency shelter.

Street homelessness services: specialized services targeted towards individuals who are sleeping rough on the streets or other places not intended for human habitation. These services look to help transition a person from the streets into an emergency shelter or housing and can include case management, healthcare, and assistance obtaining public benefits.

ⁱ U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development "2020 PIT Counts within CoCs"; NYC file available for download from https://files.hudexchange.info/reports/published/CoC_PopSub_CoC_NY-600-2020_NY_2020.pdf

ⁱⁱ Rules of the City of New York. Chapter 10, Title 68. "City Fighting Homelessness and Eviction Prevention Supplement (CityFHEPS)" <https://codelibrary.amlegal.com/codes/newyorkcity/latest/NYCrules/0-0-0-110020>

ⁱⁱⁱ Department of Homeless Services (DHS). Local Law 37 Reporting. Data from January - November 2020. <https://data.cityofnewyork.us/Social-Services/Local-Law-37-DHS-Report/2mqz-v5im>

^{iv} U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development "2007 – 2019 PIT Counts within CoCs"; XLSX file available for download from <https://www.hudexchange.info/resource/3031/pit-and-hic-data-since-2007/>

^v Hilovsky, K; Lim, K; Taylor Williams, T. American Public Health Association. Creating the Healthiest Nation: Health & Housing Equity. May 2020. <https://www.apha.org/-/media/files/pdf/topics/equity>

^{vi} U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development. "2019 AHAR: Part 1 - PIT Estimates of Homelessness in the U.S." <https://www.hudexchange.info/resource/5948/2019-ahar-part-1-pit-estimates-of-homelessness-in-the-us/>

^{vii} U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development "2007 – 2019 PIT Counts within CoCs"; XLSX file available for download from <https://www.hudexchange.info/resource/3031/pit-and-hic-data-since-2007/> and https://files.hudexchange.info/reports/published/CoC_PopSub_CoC_NY-600-2020_NY_2020.pdf

^{viii} US Census Household Pulse Survey: December 9 – December 21, published January 6, 2021. <https://www.census.gov/data/tables/2020/demo/hhp/hhp21.html>

^{ix} NYC Dept of Health and Mental Hygiene. 2019. "Social environment of New York City children aged 3-12 years, 2015." <https://www1.nyc.gov/assets/doh/downloads/pdf/epi/databrief112.pdf> Data sourced from Child Health, Emotional Wellness, and Development Survey (CHEWDS) 2015; Data are weighted to the population of children age 0-12 years per 2011-2013 American Community Survey.