

**BOROUGH PRESIDENT GALE A. BREWER
TESTIMONY TO THE NEW YORK CITY COUNCIL'S
COMMITTEE ON GENERAL WELFARE
FEBRUARY 27, 2014**

Thank you, Chair Levin and the Members of the General Welfare Committee, for the opportunity to testify today on family shelters in New York City.

I am going to list some of the issues that have been brought to my attention over the years regarding how to prevent families from going to the shelter, and what to do to move them into permanent affordable housing.

Funding

Many of the problems with the current temporary family shelter facilities, for both families with young and adult children, stem from the very problematic and short-sighted processes through which these contracts have been allocated. In particular, the 'emergency' timelines by which contracts are set results in bloated rents for buildings filled with housing code violations, safety hazards, rodents, bed bugs (and sometimes tenants, who neither informed or engaged in the process); resulting in some government agencies going into business with notorious landlords and owners, while other government entities are charged with enforcing the various codes and laws which the buildings and their owners are actively violating.

In 2012, the Department of Homeless Services established a temporary shelter to house 200 adults, who were currently

homeless, in 100 tiny rooms at 316 and 330 West 95 Street on a temporary basis. This process was marked by poor planning, poor policy, and little if any transparency. The process should have included a substantive planning discussion with Community Board 7, elected officials, current residents of the two buildings, and responsible neighborhood leaders to find a solution to the need for shelter for homeless individuals. Because the DHS plan was not transparent and not well thought out, I could not support it. To his credit, then-Comptroller Liu refused to register the extended contract – for \$47 million over 5 years of taxpayer funds - due to this lack of transparent process. Some of these funds could be used for permanent housing. (NOTE: per Checkbook NYC Aguila has a registered contract for West 95 Street/Freedom House through March 31, 2014 – so this is still a month to month contracts – here is the link: http://www.checkbooknyc.com/contracts_landing/status/A/year/B/year/115?expandBottomContURL=/panel_html/contract_transactions//contract_details/agid/34732/doctype/CT1)

For some casework services and very small units in the SRO with two people per room, the City is paying the non profit and the owner of the building upwards of \$3500 per month. The situation is hard on permanent tenants, and there are vacant units that the owner won't rent because he cannot get a lot of monthly rent for them. Why can't the City use some of this DHS allocation for permanent housing?

Instead of establishing shelters, the Administration should investigate the purchase of buildings that could be converted

into permanent housing as well as evaluate the current stock – including Tier II family shelter facilities - to determine if there might be the opportunity to retrofit units to make them appropriate for families to receive permanent placement.

Advocates are also discussing the potential for a NY/NY IV agreement between the City and State that would expand the commitment to create permanent supportive housing for homeless people and include an increase in the number of units especially for families with a member who has mental illness.

And there is a push to reinstitute NYCHA placement priority for homeless families and use the ‘forgiven’ NYPD fees for the renovation and rehabilitation for vacant NYCHA units and fill them with people on the waiting list.

When I and others have inquired as to why more of the federal-state-city mix of funding cannot be dedicated to the creation of permanent affordable housing, the federal bias towards temporary solutions is often cited. I encourage the Administration to take a serious in-depth look at these funding streams for their potential in realizing new or renovated permanent units. In addition, there are funding opportunities through the state’s Medicaid Redesign Team restructuring of New York’s Medicaid system.

Prevention

Keeping New Yorkers and their families in their homes is our goal. For six years, my office – funded through the New York City Council’s Housing Preservation Initiative – has

sponsored monthly housing legal clinics in partnership with the Urban Justice Center, Goddard Riverside's SRO Law Project, and attorneys from Strook and Strook. Hundreds of tenants received free housing legal advice and information and resources regarding housing related topics. Many times I have been approached by past participants who said that it made all of the difference in keeping them in their homes. More resources must be dedicated for this type of assistance and anti-eviction services, and I hope to work with my colleagues in the Manhattan Delegation to fund these programs throughout the borough.

Second, I would like to commend the Department of Homeless Services and New York City Housing Authority on their Family Re-Entry Pilot Program, operating in conjunction with the Vera Institute for Justice and Corporation of Supportive Housing. By granting permission for individuals to join their families in NYCHA developments, with the potential for the arrangement to be made more permanent, this initiative provides an important opportunity for stability, and an alternative to becoming homeless or relying on the shelter system. I wish all the families success and hope to hear more as the program continues and might be appropriately expanded.

<http://www.nyc.gov/html/nycha/html/residents/re-entry-program.shtml>

Third, many people know that I think that the Homebase programs do prevention but they need to be open more hours and have more visibility.

Fourth, I have great respect for HRA's one-shot system and staff. The staff members work all hours of the day to find a way to pay back rent, if warranted. Some families don't have a third party to pay the on-going rent, and thus they are not eligible for the one-shot. Yes, the rent going forward must be paid but we need to be creative about this challenge, such as coupling the process with an intensive job search effort at Workforce 1. Of course if you get money back from the IRS after filing your income taxes, you are not eligible for a one-shot. This policy has to be re-evaluated.

Fifth, families are evicted because the city's portion of Section 8 is not paid. Families don't know that this is happening, and they get evicted through no fault of their own.

Six, Under the FEPS program families have only 6 months to utilize a voucher, and it is tied to an eviction.

I know you know that there are sub-sets of families who are increasing in the shelter population, and they include young people aging out of the foster care system, families who have been in the system for several generations, and those without the skill set to afford or navigate the rent in an apartment. And, we know that some families who were in the Advantage program have returned. These are the families to work to support before they enter the DHS system. In general, of course, as in any population, there are those who just need a little push to move out, and then there are those who don't have the life skills and need lots more support.

To move to permanent housing, once in a shelter...

These are some of the stumbling blocks, as I understand it.

1. The number of supportive housing units are not adequate, so families apply after collecting mounds of paper work, and then they never get called.
2. Families are high functioning but they have bad credit, so landlords will not rent to them. They may rent a basement room, which has all of its limitations.
3. To get any job today, a person needs a GED and often child care. Some non-profits, such as Volunteers of America, have on-site GED programs, and they do a great job of preparation. However, the GED program is going to be on line, more difficult and can cost to take. Fees can also be waived. VOA also has 24 hour child care, so if a parent works a night shift, the children are cared for safely.
4. If a person is working and in a shelter, the person has to apply for public assistance so that the shelter can be paid. That long process takes the person away from the job, and she could lose the job because she has to be at an HRA Center for several day long appointments, which do not assist her.
5. Families with parents under 21 might still be on the mother's budget, and the mother and daughter do not get along. Untangling this situation so that the young family can get their own budget is a challenge.
6. The excellent Parks Dept program to move individuals off public assistance has unfortunately been cut back
7. Even if you get a NYCHA apt after 10 years, it takes 2-3 months to satisfy the paperwork
8. There is a housing subsidy for families with ACS cases, but no one knows how to access it. \$350 per month is available for non-preventive cases.
9. Sometimes families lose an apartment that they have finally found because a government agency is too slow in providing the funding that is owed to the family and the landlord.
10. Family

unification outside of NYC can be problematic to the family and the next jurisdiction.

A DV shelter is only 3 months...

From Yajaira de la Cruz (placed at 4 East 28 Street) – MBPO is helping her with her NYCHA application. Ms de la Cruz has made 311 calls due to poor facility conditions including bad, mice, roaches, and mold. She has high praise for the child care center, however.

Yes, this is a regular homeless shelter and I have my own room. My housing specialist does not help at all; I save as much as I can as a single parent and I expect a little more help from the shelter in general! I will definitely keep in touch with you because I'm seeking as much help as possible and thank you for reaching out to me! My daughter is 2 years old

I am no longer in a DV shelter with my daughter because I timed out. I've been in this shelter for about 7 months. In a DV shelter they helped you more; they inform you about low income buildings, they post up all the boroughs of the buildings and their income requirements. They encourage you to fill out a NYCHA application. In this shelter all they tell you is to save and move. They don't even discuss if there's a program you might qualify for such as Semiperm, Rap, etc. All of these program opportunities I found out on my own. I honestly can't complain about my case manager she sympathizes with me understands my situation and try's to help as much as she can;

Ms. Blake. As for my housing specialist, NOTHING. Is always "Well Ms. De la Cruz, DHS wants you out; can't you just go live with someone? You have to at least leave to a room." I didn't know who was the director was until the special inspector called to see why they were trying to scare me to leave the shelter ASAP. That place is filthy full of mice, their electricity is horrible. One of the maintenance workers said that if he ever called the city, that building would be in trouble. I honestly keep to myself. I am always working so I can't really talk for anyone. But they are Careless and not worried about helping us. Everything that I have accomplished has been with the help of the case managers & housing specialists from the DV shelters. The only good thing this current shelter is their own daycare center that is clean and a safe environment for children!

69 DHS shelters are located in Manhattan:

29 single adults

10 adult families

30 families with children