



HOMELESS SERVICES UNITED

446 W. 33RD STREET, 6TH FLOOR
NEW YORK, NY 10001-2601
T 212-367-1562
www.HSUnited.org

**Testimony of Catherine Trapani, Executive Director, Homeless Services United, Inc.
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OVERSIGHT – Navigating the Shelter System as a Family with Children

My name is Catherine Trapani, and I am the Executive Director of Homeless Services United (HSU). HSU is a coalition of over 50 non-profit agencies serving homeless and at-risk adults and families in New York City. HSU provides advocacy, information, and training to member agencies to expand their capacity to deliver high-quality services. HSU advocates for expansion of affordable housing and prevention services and for immediate access to safe, decent, emergency and transitional housing, outreach and drop-in services for homeless New Yorkers.

Homeless Service United's member agencies operate hundreds of programs including shelters, drop-in centers, food pantries, HomeBase, and outreach and prevention services. Each day, HSU member programs work with thousands of homeless families and individuals, preventing shelter entry whenever possible and working to end homelessness through counseling, social services, health care, legal services, and public benefits assistance, among many other supports.

HSU recently submitted testimony to this committee regarding progress one year following the 90 day review of homeless services. At that time, we talked about the need for sufficient funding, leadership and, collaboration and coordination with experienced providers to execute the necessary reforms outlined in the 90 day review report, many of which would enhance a family's experience using the shelter system. Today, I am happy to report that following the adoption of the FY2018 budget, we are finally on our way to having sufficient funding to operate shelters to the standards families need and deserve. The other two areas, leadership and collaboration, remain a challenge. If we can address these issues, families would benefit from a system with well-coordinated services where experts in the provider community have both the flexibility and support they need to administer programming that supports families to regain their independence and quickly transition to permanent housing.

FUNDING

DSS has committed to reforming rates for shelter services and has committed \$111 million to FY2018 to do so. Working with each provider of homeless services and reviewing their budgets line by line, DSS and the providers will identify areas where costs have not kept pace with rates paid by the agency and negotiate a new budget that provides sufficient resources to adequately maintain and secure shelters and provide appropriate programming for families and individuals served. In addition, the agency has committed to funding administrative overhead at a level up to 10%, a 2.5% increase over the standard DHS contract. Taken together, these investments will support shelters as they continue to invest in the infrastructure required to offer families in shelter safe, secure, well maintained and appropriately

staffed facilities. HSU would like to thank the administration and the Council for committing this funding to preserve the shelter system and for working with providers to best target these resources.

LEADERSHIP

In some instances, planned initiatives that would support families working to escape homelessness have yet to take shape including those with minimal budgetary implications. Examples of low to no cost initiatives HSU had hoped would be implemented quickly, include targeting rental assistance for youth in DYCD shelters and eliminating the requirement for school aged children to be present at PATH for multiple appointments at intake. With no administrator yet appointed to lead DHS, several vacancies in DHS staff and, the absence of a clear chain of responsibility for the implementation of the myriad of initiatives announced since the 90 day review, progress in these and several other areas has proven elusive. While there may be obstacles to implementing these changes that HSU is not aware of, from the outside, it appears as if the delay is due to a lack of capacity at the agency level to implement the change.

In addition to the above mentioned staff vacancies, there has also been considerable turn over in contracts and program staff at DHS. This turnover has resulted in a loss of institutional knowledge and gaps in operational support for homeless services providers. For the remaining DHS staff, morale is low. People are juggling multiple responsibilities receiving pressure from all sides to overhaul agency operations with limited person-power. A current organizational chart is not publicly available and, while the commissioner has been extremely accommodating to HSU and made himself and his senior staff available to work on many issues facing the sector, homeless service providers would benefit mightily from having partners to work with on day to day operational concerns. **DHS must appoint leaders and continue to develop the internal capacity to manage the many changes in DHS programming and operations and support staff charged with implementing reforms if they are to be successful.**

COLLABORATION AND COORDINATION

Program Operations

Despite the challenges discussed above, DHS has been successful in implementing many positive changes that families using the shelter system should be able to see. The most successful initiatives have been those in which the Department of Social Services (DSS) has worked collaboratively with providers to implement the change. For example, working collaboratively with HSU and our member programs, DSS and the Mayor's Office of Operations streamlined shelter inspections by first piloting and then expanding a coordinated inspection system that allowed shelter providers to work with multiple City agencies to inspect shelters on the same day, consistently record violations and provider corrective action plans and, track repairs using a building compliance system. This work happened alongside a related project to establish new protocols to track "new needs" requests for repair funding to ensure providers have the necessary resources to maintain their properties. While the "new needs" process still isn't perfect, the collaborative spirit of this work has paid off – non-cluster violations are down more than 80% system wide. Once rate reform is fully implemented and providers have maintenance budgets that are sufficient to cover the cost of keeping buildings in good repair, we expect to make even more progress on improving conditions in shelters.

Areas in which there has been less success in implementing reforms often occur when there is a disconnect between ideas and practical issues impacting implementation that could be addressed with

improved collaboration with homeless services providers. This may be due to the lack of staff available at DHS for program management as discussed earlier but, it also may be indicative of an organizational culture that does not consistently support collaboration and provider feedback.

Despite the success of the shelter repair initiative, homeless services providers are not consistently included in the implementation of new initiatives which can lead to a clumsy rollout. For instance, some homeless services programs lack the physical space to accommodate the new program initiatives such as enhanced security or social workers- not all shelters have sufficient space to provide locker rooms and office space for these workers. This doesn't mean these initiatives shouldn't move forward but rather that DSS should work with providers to address obstacles to implementation in advance of roll-out.

More advanced planning, communication, inclusive training, additional resources for additional office space or, repurposing existing space for enhanced social services for clients *even if it would result in having fewer shelter units available for occupancy* would go a long way towards improving the implementation of programmatic reforms.

Daycare and Drop-off Childcare Services

In some instances, well intentioned reforms are not just hard to implement for logistical reasons but, they may wind up having real world consequences for families that City leaders never imagined.

For example, when the Comptroller audited daycare facilities in shelters and found deficiencies and inconsistencies, the administration created a taskforce consisting only of government officials to evaluate and reform the way shelters provide daycare and drop-off childcare services to homeless children. Despite HSU and other providers requesting to participate in the taskforce, no providers or advocacy organizations were invited to participate. A few weeks ago, the administration approached the board of health to propose a number of new regulations designed to ensure drop-off childcare services are of the highest quality. We have no objection to many of the proposed rules, particularly those that would impose standards of care that mirror the high standards our providers set for ourselves regarding child safety. However, the new rules also propose limiting the number of hours families may avail themselves to drop-off child care services to 10 hours per week. If this proposed rule were to take effect, families who are new to shelter and who have not yet set up full time daycare for their children would not be able to use onsite services while they went to appointments to apply for benefits and attend to their family's needs. Parents who need access to childcare services at hours not covered by community providers would also lose access to care as would others who were unable to find open daycare slots in their communities. We do not imagine that the City intended to deprive homeless parents of a vital service but, they failed to consider the impact this limitation would have on families and failed to ask providers or families how such a change would impact them. While there is still time to comment on and influence the proposed changes (and we intend to do so), the City could have spared families and service providers the threat of losing access to services by working collaboratively to find a balance between encouraging families to enroll children in full time, structured programming in the community and, allowing them to use flexible, onsite services when they need it.

Re-housing

Perhaps the most crucial element of an effective homeless services delivery system is having access to robust permanent housing resources. Sadly, the current suite of rental assistance programs (LINC, SEPS, CITYFEPS), Supportive Housing, HPD Section and affordable units and, NYCHA Public Housing have not been able to move families and individuals out of shelter in sufficient numbers. Part of this problem is

simple supply – there are not permanently affordable resources to go around. **The City can and should increase the number of public housing units available to homeless New Yorkers as well as commit more deeply affordable HPD financed housing units to homeless families.** In addition, the City should also partner with homeless services providers to better target existing resources so that clients can be matched with the type of housing assistance most appropriate for their needs so they can exit shelter quickly and, avoid returning to shelter in the future.

The City also pledged to streamline rental assistance programs in the 90-day review and have been told that changes will be announced this summer. We are hopeful that some of the gaps in existing programs will be addressed and that eligibility criteria will be re-aligned to better match with the realities homeless people confront every day so that we can match people with the kinds of housing supports they need to exit shelter quickly and permanently.

Two of the bills being considered this afternoon would address some of the short-comings with the existing suite of rental assistance programs and we hope that they can be adopted and included in the promised reforms that we expect to be unveiled soon.

- Int. 1597 - A Local Law to amend the administrative code of the city of New York, in relation to requiring that the department of homeless services recognize time spent in foster care as homelessness for the purpose of meeting rental voucher eligibility requirements.
 - HSU believes that young people experiencing homelessness should have the same access to housing resources that homeless adults have. Because of the way systems of care are structured, some young people do not qualify for rental assistance programs either because they are not considered homeless even if that is exactly what they are experiencing. This can be because they are living in the “wrong” shelter system (the one operated by DYCD instead of DHS) or because they are in foster care even if they would otherwise be homeless but for their placement in the foster care system. People should not be denied access to assistance because of these kinds of technicalities. The City has already pledged to provide access to housing supports for persons residing in the DYCD shelter system and we are anxiously awaiting the implementation of that reform. Intro 1597 would address the unmet needs of other homeless youth and allow persons aging out of foster care to access the housing supports they need to escape homelessness. HSU supports this introduction.
- Int. 1642- A Local Law to amend the administrative code of the city of New York, in relation to rental assistance vouchers.
 - HSU supports the Council’s efforts to ensure that rental assistance programs are as effective as possible. This includes making sure that rental assistance amounts are set at levels consistent with other, potentially competing programs, such as those administered by the federal government and, that rent levels that mirror market conditions to make sure that families are able to use them to access to quality housing. We therefore support efforts to index assistance levels to “fair market rents”. HSU also supports the idea of creating programs with sufficient flexibility such that they do not have arbitrary time limits but, can be extended for as long as families need the assistance to remain stably housed. Barring any unintended consequences that impact a family’s wellbeing such as eligibility for other vital benefits such as SNAP, HSU supports extending rental assistance to families and individuals who remain at risk of homelessness beyond five years.

OTHER NYC COUNCIL BILLS TO BE CONSIDERED

- Int. 1577 - A Local Law to amend the New York city charter, in relation to establishing an office of case management.
 - HSU supports the use of technology to enhance client services however, we have concerns about privacy implications associated with integrating databases and sharing client information. Some information such as treatment for substance abuse disorders, domestic violence services, HIV-status and, other health information are governed by strict privacy laws designed to protect clients against discrimination and to preserve their rights to privacy and self-determination. While it may be easier to get a comprehensive history of every person we encounter before engaging them in services, doing so takes away a person's ability to decide who has access to their private information and for what purpose. Any integrated case management systems must be carefully designed and include mechanisms to obtain informed consent from clients prior to using such systems. Clients must also be able to retain their right to access shelter even if they are uncomfortable sharing their personal data across systems.
- Int. 855 - A Local Law to amend administrative code of the city of New York, in relation to notification of public assistance eligibility.
 - HSU supports any and all efforts to ensure that eligible New Yorkers know about and are able receive the benefits for which they qualify to help alleviate poverty and escape homelessness.
- Int. 1461- A Local Law to amend the administrative code of the city of New York, in relation to requiring the department of social services to provide customer service training twice per year to all employees that interact with members of the public.
 - HSU agrees that everyone applying for and receiving services at the Department of Social Services (DSS) is entitled to be treated with professionalism and respect. DSS employees work in stressful environments where tensions can run high creating an environment that feels hostile to clients and staff alike. Any training or additional tools that can be afforded to staff that would translate into a better experience for persons receiving services would be welcome. In addition to training, it is also important that other factors that contribute to the customer experience and worker morale such as office design (lighting, condition of waiting areas and offices), average caseload (which impacts wait times and staff ability to return phone calls and process client requests) and office hours also be attended to to maximize the efficacy of any new training programs.
- Int. 1635- A Local Law to amend the administrative code of the city of New York, in relation to HRA job centers.
 - HSU supports this legislation. It is a common sense accountability mechanism that will provide clients with the proof they need to demonstrate that they've complied with DSS program requirements while also providing the administration and Council with the tools they need to properly oversee the work of the Centers and account for the quality of service provided to clients.

CONCLUSION

Homeless Services United recognizes the difficulty in remaking an entire service delivery system – the structural reforms alone require a tremendous amount of effort to achieve – but we hope that the City is willing to meaningfully engage with providers as full partners to realize our shared goal delivering high quality services as efficiently and effectively as possible in order to prevent and reduce homelessness. Thank you for the opportunity to testify.