



HOMELESS SERVICES UNITED

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

New York City Council Committees on General Welfare and Housing and Buildings
Oversight Supportive Housing
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Testimony of Homeless Services United respectively submitted by
Catherine Trapani
Executive Director
212-367-1539
ctrapani@hsunited.org

Good morning, 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 Services 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.

On behalf of HSU, I would like to thank the City Council for holding this hearing. Supportive Housing is a vital resource that has helped thousands of New Yorkers escape homelessness and live independently. Single adults who are chronically homeless with complex behavioral health

needs have been particularly well served. Because they have had access to supportive housing, many have enjoyed better health, improved relationships with family and friends and have remain stably housed for years.

There are other groups who also benefit from supportive housing such as families with heads of household or children with special needs, individuals and families fleeing domestic violence, homeless youth, youth aging out of foster care, persons who are medically frail (too ill for shelter and too well for nursing homes) and, the formerly incarcerated. While supportive housing models supporting these groups are only just emerging, available evidence suggests that supportive services can end episodic homelessness and prevent or end chronic homelessness, promote family stability, improve health outcomes and, reduce recidivism.

From the perspective of groups working with homeless individuals and families, the biggest challenge associate with supportive housing is that there simply isn't enough of it. For every six approved supportive housing applications there is only one available vacancy. Those numbers don't include the hundreds of households who don't even bother putting in an application because they and their housing specialists know there simply won't be an available housing unit on the other side. This is particularly true for families who have been traditionally underserved by supportive housing programs. In fact, fewer than 10 families exiting domestic violence shelters were placed in NY/NY III supportive housing in the first 9 years of the housing agreement's operation.

The scarcity of available housing units can lead to problems with application and tenant selection procedures. In the interest of fairness given overwhelming demand, officials controlling access to this scarce and precious resource must be absolutely certain that available units are going to the neediest people. To prove that one is "neediest" a lot of documentation is required including identifying documents, proof of homelessness including documentation of time spent on the streets, documentation of medical conditions including recent psychiatric evaluations and psycho social assessments, proof of income including public benefits and more. For those who are the most ill and struggling to manage their mental illness or addiction simply getting through the various appointments and assessments can be overwhelming if not

impossible. In addition, clients are required to sign multiple consents to release confidential information like psychiatric records to City officials in order to be considered for a placement. For persons who may be paranoid or fear surveillance, obtaining informed consent can be a challenge. Dedicated housing specialists and counselors at shelters and homeless services programs throughout the City work hard to guide persons through this process but sadly sometimes the most vulnerable are “noncompliant” with this onerous process and unable to make it through the application. The intention of the rigorous process is to reserve units for those who need it most yet, the process itself can weed out those very people. The result is that shelter, safe haven and street outreach programs are the only supports available to persons who would benefit most from a more stable environment. We need to identify housing solutions for such persons by streamlining access to supportive housing for them. Others, with the support of outreach workers and community based and shelter programs many do eventually make it through to the approval stage but their struggle to gain access to housing doesn’t end there.

In order to move in to a supportive housing unit the application must not only be approved by the referring agency (HRA) but also the supportive housing provider. Many providers have flexible criteria meeting applications “where they are at”. This is especially true of organizations who provide homeless outreach and other support services to homeless people in addition to supportive housing. Still, there are times when a person is rejected for supportive housing because they “do not have insight into their mental illness” or because they arrived to the interview late, appeared disheveled or disorganized and weren’t able to effectively communicate with the interviewer. Given that most persons who qualify for supportive housing have been homeless for at least a year and suffer from severe health conditions including mental illnesses and substance abuse disorders and, are not yet living in a stable enough situation to help them function as well as others, such things ought not be grounds for rejection from housing. Persons who struggle with the interview process are likely the ones who would most benefit from supportive housing. HSU urges the City to track how often such persons are rejected for housing placement to determine if there is some sub-set of people who are systematically passed over for placement. If this is the case, immediate action must be taken to ensure that such persons are able to access appropriate housing.

HSU understands the need to balance the needs of an applicant with the ability to effectively run a supportive housing residence but, the reality is that if the same group of homeless people with complex needs gets passed over for placement over and over again there is a group of people who will be permanently relegated to the street or the shelter system where a right to a bed is given to all regardless of their perceived level of compliance or functioning. Shelters are not designed to house people permanently so, if it is the case that some clients aren't being served by current supportive housing programs then, a new permanent housing program must be created that can accommodate persons requiring a level of care that is at once too acute for supportive housing and not acute enough for a hospital stay leaving them to languish in shelters indefinitely.

The City has already taken some steps to address some of these issues and we would like to thank them for their work. The new Coordinated Assessment Placement System (CAPS) and accompanying vulnerability index that will be created to score applications could streamline the application process, reduce reliance on paper records produced by applicants (particularly in cases where the person is already known to City systems and has records on file) and reduce agency and provider discretion thus ensuring that those with the highest needs are first in line for an available unit. HSU is participating in the pilot program and we have been impressed by early feedback. Once fully implemented, some barriers associated with the application process will be reduced thus simplifying access to housing. Other protections can and should be built in on the placement side to help persons who don't present as well as others a chance at a placement following an interview.

The vulnerability index, if properly designed, could also promote fairness by allocating resources to those who score as neediest rather than those who are the easiest to serve within a larger category of needy persons who qualify for a particular housing type. HSU looks forward to partnering with the CAPS committee to inform the design of vulnerability index such that the scoring appropriately triages assistance and, makes it possible for those in need of supportive housing but who are currently underserved by it, to qualify. Scoring on issues like domestic violence, caring for children with disabilities, physical health issues, criminal justice system

involvement and similar vulnerabilities must be considered and weighted alongside traditional supportive housing criteria such as mental illness, in order to determine which households would be best served by housing with supportive services.

Supportive housing only works to the extent that those who need it are able to access it. We need to continue the work of the CAPS committee to ensure that 1) applicant burdens are reduced, 2) admission criteria is transparent and low barrier while factoring in risk factors like age, medical frailty, domestic violence risk, family stability and systems involvement, 3) that housing providers are not turning away persons who may be challenging to work with and 4) that housing models are flexible and appropriately funded to adequately care for persons seeking housing enriched with supportive services, even those with complex needs who struggle with the current framework.

Supportive housing has been an incredibly important resource in the fight to end homelessness. HSU is glad to see the City is committed to building on its success and hopes that some of the concerns raised to today will be addressed by the ongoing work to create new supportive housing resources. I also hope that as the City moves forward with plans to create more supportive housing that they can commit to tracking progress in these areas so we can be accountable to the most vulnerable citizens who so desperately need supportive housing to move beyond homelessness. I would like to thank the City Council for the opportunity to testify and welcome any questions you may have.