



**HOMELESS SERVICES UNITED**

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**Testimony of Joan Montbach, Interim Executive Director,  
Homeless Services United  
Oversight: An Examination of the Department of Homeless Services 90-Day  
Review**

**April 21, 2016**

My name is Joan Montbach, and I am the Interim 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.

The de Blasio administration has focused significant efforts and resources on improving conditions for homeless and at risk New Yorker including the impressive plans outlined in the recent Comprehensive Plan. HSU supports the systemic changes to the homeless delivery system that are part of this plan, and will work with the City to ensure that the initiatives are implemented and address the root causes of homelessness.

A meeting of HSU members was recently convened to discuss the changes in homeless services that might occur/or should occur as a result of a management restructuring as well as to discuss the impact of these changes on service delivery. Since the Comprehensive Plan was fairly wide ranging—with details still under discussion, or as yet unreleased-- we wanted to share our thoughts with you today. HRA leadership has been receptive to our comments in the past and appear to appreciate our unique position in terms of representing the homeless sector. We are very interested in seeing this plan succeed, and hope that this spirit of openness

to meeting and discussing issues with our membership will continue. We are optimistic that we can work together to make real and significant improvement in this complex system.

Today's testimony offers a summary of our concerns. It is important to note that a number of these concerns were addressed directly in the Comprehensive Plan. Clearly the Plan has moved the providers into closer alignment with the City on a number of key issues. We will continue to consider these open items, however, until the details of the plan are fully available. Others have not as yet been addressed—we expect to continue meeting with the city about these issues with the hope of arriving at a mutually satisfactory resolution in the near future. Our providers are always available to discuss these issues with you in further detail at your convenience.

**Budget:** many of our issues deal with the inadequacy and inflexibility of the DHS shelter budgets. The focus of our members concerns include:

- Budget Parity: HSU members have repeatedly asked the city to address the issue of budget parity. *The Plan addresses this in issue in item #22 Rationalizing shelter provider rates.*
- Overhead: the administrative overhead for DHS contracts is currently set at 8.5% (one of the lowest among all city agency rates.) This rate is, moreover, applied only to the non-rent portion of the budget—thereby significantly overstating its true value. *This item was not directly addressed in the Plan.*
- Capital and on-going maintenance: this issue is directly linked to the city's Shelter Repair Initiative. Providers need a better understanding of the city's plans and progress in this area and specifically information about covering the capital costs associated with clearing violations. It is critical that if cited for violations, our members have funding available (outside their shelter budgets) to correct them. *The Plan addresses this in issue in item #21: Implementing a capital repair program, and in item #22: Rationalizing shelter provider rates.*
- COLA: a status update is needed with respect to the approved COLA. It is our understanding that COLAs have been effected in some but not all budgets. We are also concerned about the way in which its calculation impacts the overall budget. We believe that the overhead rate should reflect the COLA increase (we been told that it currently does not.) *This item was not directly addressed in the Plan.*
- Advances: What plans have been made for the recoupment of advances? We favor either making advances permanent or maintaining them until the end of the contract period to avoid end of fiscal year issues. *This item was not directly addressed in the Plan.*

**Contracting:** Delays in contracting have impacted the delivery of services and have too often forced our members to operate with burdensome carrying costs of bridge loans. The contracting functions needs to be revised/revamped. One specific suggestion we have for improving the process would be to enable providers with multiple DHS contracts to operate under a master contract and/or to employ other means of providing our members with the ability and flexibility to move money between contracts. *This item was not directly addressed in the Plan.*

**Facilities and Maintenance:** HSU member agencies are committed to providing safe and secure conditions within our shelters and fully support the city's plans to improve these conditions. We have, however expressed concern about the process, requesting specifically that the various agencies responsible for oversight...

- Standardize their inspection/reporting tools and share this information with the providers;

- Align regulations to ensure that conflicts are resolved;
- Coordinate inspections by city/state agencies to reduce redundancy.  
*The Plan addresses this in issue in item #15: Expand Shelter Repair Squad 2.0 Operations and in #16: Increase Coordination among Inspectors.*
- Again, as noted in the testimony related to budgets issues, our membership remains concerned about the funding for facility maintenance.
- On a more general level, we would appreciate updates on the status of plans to develop purpose-built facilities *The Plan addresses this in issue in item #18: Assessing the potential conversion of existing shelters to permanent housing.*

**Communication:** While Social Services/HRA Commissioner Banks and staff conducted an extensive listening tour to develop The Comprehensive Plan, the City should continue to include providers and other stakeholders in its development and implementation. For now, we seek....

- Provider Involvement in the Interagency Council. Our members are asking: What is the format of the Council? Will the meetings or minutes be made public? What is the mission of this group, and what mechanisms will be put in place to institute its findings and recommendations? As HSU's members, we are tasked with making this vision a reality, and we firmly believe that we can offer invaluable insight into implementations and recommendations into this process. *This item was not directly addressed in the Plan.*
- Given the increased focus on both facility conditions and plans for implementing enhanced safety measures in the shelters, providers are requesting advanced notice of plans that will have an impact on the program operations. *The Plan addresses this in issue in item #15: Expand Shelter Repair Squad 2.0 Operations:*

**Interagency Coordination:** Shelter staff need seamless access to specialists from other agencies (e.g., the city has recognized this by offering to co-locate HRA staff with prevention staff in HomeBase offices.) Within the shelters, staff will benefit by improved coordination with city agencies offering services to youth/survivors of domestic violence, child welfare, etc. *This item was not directly addressed in the Plan.*

**Administrative support:** CARES: improvements are needed in the management of the city's IT system, including ensuring that providers 1) have access to expert technical assistance and 2) have data sharing capability with CARES and other City sources. *This item was not directly addressed in the Plan.*

**Workforce:** HSU members are grateful to the support shown by both the state and the city for increases in minimum wage, and will continue to work for a living wage on behalf of our workforce. Our ability to appropriately compensate our long-term and committed employees, as well as our ability to retain new talent, is dependent upon our finding success in this area. The non-profit human service workforce needs to be compensated fairly. *This item was not directly addressed in the Plan.*

**Services enhancement:** Our members have identified specific service enhancements which hold the promise of improving long term outcomes; we appreciate the fact that the City listened, and adopted some of our ideas in this area—at the same time, it is clear that this conversation needs to extend beyond a discussion of service needs and shelter capacity for targeted populations, to a discussion of actual programming enhancement. Specifically we have called for:

- Increased programming aimed at youth: *Population related references in items #30 and #31.*
- Aftercare planning: aftercare is a proven intervention to reduce homelessness and is an issue that HSU has submitted specific ideas. The plan address this need in broad strokes by is non-specific with respect to actual programming. What are the specific programming plans? *The Plan addresses this in issue in item #42.*
- Enhanced Domestic violence services: it is evident that there needs to be better coordination between the shelter and DV system, including training of shelter staff to identify signs domestic

violence, safety planning and system response. HSU offered a model training on DV on April 21<sup>st</sup>. *The Plan addresses this in issue in item #13: Enhanced domestic violence services in DHS shelters.*

- Specialized services at family shelters (modelled on a children and families initiative currently piloted by five NYC providers and supported by funding from the City Council. *Population related references in item #27.*

### **Prevention Services:**

The Plan was fairly specific with respect to HomeBase and its more prominent role in the homeless system. We are strong supporters of HomeBase and together with the city believe that prevention should be a first line approach to reducing homelessness. We do, however, wish to offer some cautions to the City as these plans move towards implementation. The idea that HomeBase offices could serve as an alternative to Path as the first point of contact for families in acute crisis seems impractical given the way in which the programs now operate. The current HomeBase offices are not open 24/7, of course, nor are many HomeBase offices physically appropriate setting for managing large families. More specifically, we believe that the city needs to clarify exactly who should use HomeBase as “the first point of entry” (those at risk of homelessness?) or everyone in the borough who needs shelter? Again we would argue for the former: i.e., those “at risk”. Since its inception, HomeBase has been called on to provide an ever changing range of range of concrete services to at risk populations. Our concern is that the proposed these new roles and responsibilities are integrated in a way – and with the funding needed – to protect these programs underlying strengths as homeless prevention providers.

On a final note, we are eager to learn more about the implementation plan—the roll out, staffing and timing of these changes. We are also interested in, and prepared to keep this conversation going. Ongoing discussions would focus not only the changes that have been outlined by the City, but those that we have laid out in today’s testimony.

We want to again emphasize that we believe that the recently released Comprehensive Plans has made significant progress in addressing some of the most pressing concerns of our members. We are also well aware of the fiscal and structural issues that make it difficult to move quickly on many of these issue. By working in close collaboration, however, we also believe that the City and HSU’s members can make real improvements in the system that shelters individuals and families in crisis. Thank you for taking time to listen to comments from our members about the needs and concerns of homeless and at-risk New Yorkers and those who serve them.