



HOMELESS SERVICES UNITED

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**Testimony of Catherine Trapani, Executive Director, Homeless Services United
The New York City Council Committee on General Welfare
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Oversight: Conditions in the DHS Shelter System, Intrs. 915, 1232, 1233, 884, 1110, 883

Good afternoon, my name is Catherine Trapani and I am the Executive Director of Homeless Services United, an organization that represents approximately 50 mission-driven, nonprofit organizations providing a range of services to homeless New Yorkers including street outreach, prevention, shelter and aftercare services in all five boroughs. Thank you Chair Levin, members of the General Welfare Committee and other members of the Council for the opportunity to testify.

This purpose of this afternoon's hearing is to get a sense of where we are as a City with respect to our collective efforts to improve the condition of the shelter system as well as to discuss several pieces of legislation each seeking to improve transparency and the quality of services provided to persons living in shelter. I will speak to each of the bills being heard today later in this testimony but I want to begin by stating that the single most impactful thing the City could do to improve the conditions and quality of services in shelter would be to fully implement promised investments in shelter maintenance, appropriate staff to client ratios, indirect expenses and cost of living increases owed to employees so that service providers have the resources they need to care for the buildings in which clients reside and appropriately staff and manage programs.

While some things have gotten better- DHS has implemented a new 10% contingency on DHS shelter contracts will allow for fast access to funding upon approval for repairs which should allow providers to address issues more quickly in the future and, more contracts were registered before the end of the fiscal year in 2018 than in prior years- more needs to be done to ensure providers have the financial resources to deliver the high quality services homeless New Yorkers need and deserve. Investments in DHS model budget, COLAs and, indirect increases were slated to be implemented for fiscal year 2018 (which ended on June 30th earlier this year) but, most of these funds have yet to reach providers. The last progress update HSU received was in early October when DHS reported that over 400 contract amendments were still pending. This lag in registering contract amendments has meant that service providers continue to rely upon lines of credit to meet expenses, nonemergency repairs remain incomplete and hiring and retaining staff has remained a challenge. Until the full backlog of contract amendments is addressed, conditions are not likely to markedly change.

DHS has committed to providers that all of this funding will be in place soon as the procurement schedule normalizes and they are able to better plan for future fiscal years. We are hopeful that once these basic baseline budget needs are in place the fiscal health of the sector will improve enough so that

we can invest in more comprehensive programming that will help our clients recover from homelessness more quickly in service rich environments that support their transition to permanency.

- There is a need for onsite medical services, particularly at assessment and mental health shelters, to ensure clients have access to buprenorphine to treat opioid addiction.
- Family shelters need social work supervisors to support the social workers recently added to the program so that we can attract top quality staff as they work towards their LCMSW certification.
- All programs need additional funding to afford overtime in accordance with new State regulations that qualify previously exempt supervisors, social workers and case managers for overtime if they work more than 40 hours per week, something often required to ensure continuity of services, particularly in times of crisis for our clients.
- All programs need additional resources to support clients transitioning to permanent housing with the new CityFHEPS program, particularly if the City persists in their plans to pass the responsibility of inspecting clients' apartments to shelter staff.
- Robust aftercare services are necessary for clients transitioning to permanent housing so that should they need support in their new communities, staff will be there to assist to avoid with a crisis that could otherwise result in another episode of homelessness.

All of these service enhancements would greatly improve the wellbeing of families and individuals using the shelter system.

The second most impactful thing to improve the conditions of the shelter system is to ensure that there is more purpose-built shelter available in all five boroughs of the City for those who need it. Currently, shelter capacity is at such a premium that despite tremendous strides in closing cluster apartments, the City still relies heavily upon hotels to meet the need for shelter. Because there are few vacancies in shelter on any given night, the only space available for a new family entering into the system may be far from their youngest child's school or a parent's job. The low vacancy rate means that persons with disabilities and others with unique service needs are difficult to place. Sometimes other households need to be transferred to accommodate the needs of others which can be disruptive to all. The Council has an important role to play in easing the capacity crisis, each of you can work within your districts to identify appropriate sites for shelter and continue your advocacy to ensure more permanent affordable housing resources are dedicated to homeless households. It is not enough to do only one or the other, sadly, there is so much need that even if we were to dramatically increase the number of moves to permanent housing we would still need to open many new shelters in order to close all hotels and clusters for good.

Finally, HSU offers the following comments on the legislation being heard today:

Int. No. 915 in relation to requiring the department of homeless services and human resources administration to post shelter, supportive housing and cluster site data

HSU strongly objects to this legislation. Attempts to force the reporting on the location of shelter and housing services only serves to further stigmatize the persons relying on these housing types. Singling out homeless or formerly homeless supportive housing residents is discriminatory and flagging their homes and forcing public reporting thereof invites harassment and encourages displacement or discourages development of needed housing and shelter facilities.

In order to enhance the wellbeing of homeless persons and provide appropriate services, we must do everything we can to ensure there is sufficient appropriate shelter capacity to meet the demand. That means that every neighborhood in NYC should be open to housing all New Yorkers whether temporarily or permanently.

Intros 1232, 1233 and 884 in relation to notices, policies and procedures related to transfers within the DHS shelter system

Homelessness can result in a feeling of being unmoored and the trauma of dislocation should be minimized to the extent possible including minimizing transfers for clients living in shelters. As stated above, the best way to minimize the need for a transfer is to ensure that capacity is sufficient to ensure available placements are appropriate at intake and, that all shelters have the requisite funding and staffing to accommodate the varying needs of residents. Still, sometimes, transfers may be necessary to accommodate the special needs of a client or, to ensure the safe administration of shelter services in general. When transfers are necessary, we agree that clients should be given appropriate notice and explanation to ease their transition or at least ensure it doesn't feel arbitrary or capricious. Written notice is already required by OTDA and provided to residents who are transferred within the system. Procedures and forms governing transfers in DHS shelters are currently being revised to strengthen the way these regulations are carried out – because the new forms and procedures are still in draft, HSU cannot yet comment on what if any impact Intro 1233 would have. We do however urge the Council to work with DHS to ensure any new local law would complement State regulation to avoid unintended administrative burdens that may not greatly enhance client service.

In keeping with our shared values of transparency the signage Int. 1232 would require is a good idea in principle although, given the complexity and breadth of transfer policies, a single poster may not be able to fully convey all of the information sought in this introduction. HSU would recommend the posting of more general, “know your rights” materials in plain view notifying clients that the full procedures are available upon request. HSU would also recommend that shelter staff at all levels receive periodic training regarding such procedures so that they can be appropriately explained to residents as needed.

HSU has no opinion on Int. 884 regarding a requirement to report the extent to which transfers are used however, we hope that the information received is understood within the context that transfers will continue to be necessary to accommodate the needs of clients in a shelter system with a low vacancy rate and a high demand for specialized services. Easing the capacity crisis by making it easier to develop shelters and housing for homeless New Yorkers would create a vacancy rate that is high enough to allow for thoughtful and appropriate placements at intake and minimize the need for moves.

Int. No. 1110 in relation to housing specialists within the human resources administration and department of homeless services

HSU supports the idea that all persons living in shelter need access to supports to find safe, permanent housing and often, housing specialists are an important tool to help them achieve that. Such staff members do need access to training to cultivate expertise and remain up to date with changes to housing subsidy programs and other benefits and we support the Council's efforts to help ensure there is sufficient funding to hire such staff and that they receive appropriate training. However, Int. 1110 would also require reporting on the number of shelters disaggregated by shelter type and district – this reporting requirement has little to do with ensuring clients get access to appropriate resources but it

could expose address information for HASA and Domestic Violence shelters which cannot be reported on due to confidentiality rules designed to protect clients living in such shelters from stigma. Further, reporting on the number of shelters per district subjects shelters to NIMBYism and would make siting new programs exceedingly difficult. This potential chilling effect on program development and the exposure of shelter residents to harassment would make it harder to accommodate the needs of these particularly vulnerable homeless New Yorkers despite the good intent of this legislation. For this reason, HSU opposes Intro 1110 as written even as we agree and acknowledge the need for additional specialized staff and housing supports throughout the system.

Int. No. 883 in relation to requiring the department of homeless services to provide customer service training

HSU agrees that training is an important tool to help prepare staff of all levels for the challenges associated with worker in high stress environments like shelters. HSU conducts training under a subcontract of an OTDA grant held by the Silberman School of Social Work at Hunter College on boundaries and professionalism when working with homeless New Yorkers. Our curriculum is quite similar to the subjects enumerated in this bill although available slots are not sufficient to accommodate every staff member citywide. HSU would be happy to share materials with Council staff and welcome the chance to discuss the Council's ideas on how to scale up offerings and ensure that all shelter staff have the opportunity to attend such training. DHS shelters do not have a dedicated budget line for staff training but we understand that DHS is currently exploring ways to enhance training available to its vendors – we look forward to continued conversations on how to further this goal.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify. We are happy to answer any questions you may have and look forward to continued partnership with the Council to improve the administration of homeless services in New York City.