



## HOMELESS SERVICES UNITED

307 W. 38TH STREET, 3RD FLOOR  
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### Homeless Services United Testimony before the NYC Council Committee on General Welfare

#### NYC FY21 Budget Oversight Hearing

Originally Scheduled for March 23rd, 2020

My name is Eric Lee and I'm the director of policy and planning at Homeless Services United. Homeless Services United (HSU) is a coalition representing mission-driven, homeless service providers in New York City. 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. Thank you Chair Levin and Members of the General Welfare Committee for allowing us to submit written testimony.

#### COVID 19 and Homelessness

Thank you to the General Welfare Committee and the entire City Council for your leadership and responsiveness to the COVID-19 health crisis which has brought New York City to a standstill. In this time of tremendous uncertainty, we must work together to ensure that those in need of emergency shelter, food, and services are able to receive vital assistance, uninterrupted. Homeless service providers are on the frontlines of stopping the spread of the COVID 19 virus. We appreciate that the Council acknowledges that the stop of the virus must include a solution for the homeless community.

#### Bolstering the Fiscal Health of the Non-Profit Safety Net

To ensure continuous provision of care, **Homeless Services United and our members and other human service providers have asked the City to provide accelerated funding to contracted providers so that they are agile enough to respond to emerging needs during this crisis.**

To the City's credit, MOCS assured providers that advances on contracts will be available to help providers draw down funds, as well as granting flexibility around meeting contract goals and milestones, additional funding for COVID-19 related-expenses, and postponing upcoming audits. They are also partnering with the Comptroller to expeditiously register pending contracts and amendments. But more must be done to ensure the health of non-profit providers during this unprecedented health crisis. Despite the work being done to address the cash crunch, DHS and HRA are continuing to act as if business is usual, insisting on continuing counterproductive policies that undermine these efforts. The agencies are holding up invoices, continuing to recoup advancements from providers, and using a case-by-case review to designate "priority invoices" which is completely inadequate to keep pace with the ever growing need for essential services during this crisis.

DHS providers shared that their programs are still being asked to provide documentation for 100% their invoices and expenses, rather than a reasonable sampling required to ensure vendor integrity.

**Providers need robust and immediate access to funding to procure essential emergency supplies such as cleaning supplies, hand sanitizer, N-95 and surgical masks, gloves, and thermometers to ensure programs are adequately equipped to keep their clients and staff safe.**

This lack of access to cash leaves non-profits in a fiscally vulnerable position as they try to meet the growing need of existing programs. As DHS brings online emergency hotel capacity to isolate households



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who test positive for COVID-19, we are concerned that the core of experienced non-profit homeless service providers that New York City's safety net relies on will not be fiscally solvent enough to take on additional risk of those units. **Providers are literally concerned that if this continues, they may not be able to make payroll in a few weeks.**

Beyond payroll demands, homeless and human service providers are concerned their programs may not have enough staff to continue operation of services in the coming weeks. **The City must commit additional funding for hazard pay incentives for the heroic women and men of the human services workforce who put the welfare of the individuals and families that they serve first and foremost.** HSU member agencies are already seeing staff drop-offs as news becomes direr by the day. The City must give non-profits the ability to pay their staff commensurate with the sacrifices they are making to help their fellow New Yorkers.

### Streaming Access to Public Benefits and Housing Assistance

In addition to the challenges in our own agencies, we are also deeply concerned about the communities we serve and the benefits upon which they rely. HRA Centers have seen a swell of new households applying for public benefits and unemployment assistance as the hospitality and retail sectors ground to a halt, and a number of HRA Centers across the City have recently closed. To ensure timely access to benefits, and minimize the chances of further spreading COVID-19 among applicants at HRA Centers, **the City must modernize how New Yorkers access public benefits and housing assistance.** We applaud HRA for recent advances in the functionality of the ACCESS HRA online app to handle Cash Assistance and SNAP applications and recertifications, as well applying for emergency assistance and special grants.

While we recognize that HRA staff are racing to open record numbers of new public assistance cases for households in need, **HRA must ensure that all settled housing court cases are resolved well in advance of the eviction moratorium's end in June. Legal and eviction prevention providers anticipate a surge in the number of new eviction cases once the moratorium ends, and any unresolved cases will only further overload the courts and needlessly destabilize households due to bureaucratic delays.**

During this eviction moratorium, **HRA must make every effort to process one-shots for arrears as expeditiously as possible.** The moratorium on evictions should not give a false sense that the clock has stopped on arrears. We are concerned that landlords, if unable to receive timely reimbursement for back rent and lacking legal recourse, may harass tenants and employ "self-help" evictions to illegally remove them, if not already preparing to file eviction cases the day the moratorium ends.

As we all collectively reflect on how work can be accomplished in the post-COVID-19 reality, it is an opportunity to reimagine outdated bureaucratic processes.

With the economic downturn and numbers of households becoming un-or-underemployed, the City must ease bureaucratic restrictions and financial limitations of housing vouchers to ensure that as many households as possible are able to move into permanent housing, avoid having to enter shelter, and not be at risk of losing housing due to loss of income. Households should not have to show up in person to apply to sign applications for CityFHEPS or state FHEPS rental assistance.



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The City needs to expand the number of FHEPS “B” vouchers for survivors of domestic violence living in the community, to lessen their need to have to enter an HRA or DHS shelter in order to qualify for a voucher.

HSU is also concerned that a number of households in shelter will be unable to qualify for a CityFHEPS voucher because of recent unemployment caused by the health crisis. HRA currently allows case-by-case exemptions for households that have documentation they recently became temporarily unemployed due to illness or injury. But this is not the time for a case-by-case approach. Bold action is needed to prevent the shelter census from swelling in this economic downturn, **and we urge the Council to change the CityFHEPS rule to waive work requirements for households that receive unemployment benefits.** We further urge the City to automatically renew all CityFHEPS cases for continued assistance up for recertification and suspend any and all subsidy terminations.

### Enhancing Resources for HomeBase

HomeBase programs citywide are doing amazing work helping households in crisis to stabilize their housing and prevent evictions, but they are being increasingly asked by HRA to do more without additional resources. **HomeBase programs need an additional \$450,000 per site to hire additional case managers and housing specialists, provide COLAs to retain qualified staff, cover increases in fixed and operating expenses.**

HomeBase programs have less flexibility to manage their caseloads as HRA mandates that all placements made into the community from DHS shelters should have active HomeBase aftercare cases for a set amount of time, regardless of whether the household actually wants or needs the services. HRA is also mandating use of “Critical Time Interventions” (CTI) for certain cases which need a higher level of support, but where HRA’s original intent was for HomeBase to utilize a “CTI informed approach” or CTI “light”, the shift to a more robust version of CTI did not include additional resources to implement it.

HomeBase providers also need expanded capacity to assist in housing searches and inspections, as the process is extremely time intensive, with inspections easily taking half a day to inspect, address, and pass one apartment, under ideal circumstances.

With HRA’s absorption of the state FHEPS applications, which as of Oct. 2019 are being processed by HRA Centers citywide, HomeBase has been tasked with addressing any complications which would preclude HRA submitting an application. Households applying for FHEPS at HRA Centers would receive a “But For” referral to HomeBase, which in actuality, has seen households referred outright with little time spent by HRA staff discerning the housing situation for the family. These applications were handled by a workforce of 70 FTES citywide, and HomeBase is expected to absorb the case management for all these applications without any additional funding. Moreover, FHEPS referrals also impacts HomeBase’s front door, as all referrals must go through a full HomeBase needs assessment.

For the aforementioned reasons, HSU is concerned that households are unable to apply for FHEPS in a timely manner. Given the economic crisis deepening in our communities in the wake of the spread of COVID-19 we anticipate demand for FHEPS to spike and this problem will likely get worse. **HSU urges the Council to consider tracking number the FHEPS applications processed on a monthly basis by each**



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**HRA Center, as well as the number of referrals made to HomeBase for “but for” cases for applications, as well as the overall number of FHEPS households active, number of households that fall off the program, and reasons why.**

Eviction prevention providers including HomeBase, STEHP programs, and legal providers recently recounted instances where households were either told by HRA Center staff that they do not handle FHEPS applications or restorations, or made unnecessary referrals to HomeBase or inappropriate referrals to the non-profits who were previously funded to submit the applications. For example, one household’s rent was literally one dollar above the maximum rent level, and instead of processing a rent modification to instantly address the issue, the HRA staff referred the household to HomeBase to ask the rent to be lowered, a huge waste of time for the client who is trying to maintain their housing, and the HomeBase staff who are inundated with cases. If households are unable to access FHEPS in a timely manner, they are at risk of losing their housing, and every unnecessary or inappropriate referral is another chance for a household to fall through the cracks.

With the impact of COVID-19 crisis to New York City still not yet fully realized, the Council must take this opportunity to lay the groundwork that positions the safety net and equips the City’s non-profit providers with the tools and additional resources they need to help those they currently serve, and bolsters their capacity in anticipation of the surge of new households effected by this crisis.

Thank you for the opportunity to submit testimony. Should you have any questions, feel free to reach out via email at [elee@hsunited.org](mailto:elee@hsunited.org) or phone at (646) 515-8053.