



**HOMELESS SERVICES UNITED**

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**Testimony before the NYC Council Committees on General Welfare and Public Safety  
Oversight: NYPD Subway Diversion Program  
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My name is Catherine Trapani, and I am the Executive Director of Homeless Services United (HSU). HSU is a coalition of approximately 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, providing quality shelter when prevention isn't an option and, working to end homelessness through counseling, social services, health care, legal services, and public benefits assistance, among many other supports.

Since the launch of this "subway diversion" program I have received calls, been pulled aside at events and meetings and been pinged on social media from everyone from front line workers, program leaders, nonprofit executives and even City employees all urging HSU to "do something" to get the City to change course. Nearly universally, those who have approached me have expressed grave concerns that the City's police-centric approach to outreach is eroding trust and making it more difficult to bring people in off of the streets and into safe havens and affordable or supportive housing. Many of these people feel they cannot publicly criticize the administration, especially since the Mayor did recently heed our calls for additional safe havens and permanent housing resources but, the cruel irony is that these pledged resources won't make a significant difference in the lives of people living on the streets if we push them further underground and away from those who can best help them access them.

The feeling amongst experts is the more people experiencing long term homelessness associate our outreach workers with the NYPD, the less likely it is that they will feel safe with our staff. If they won't engage with the staff, we cannot begin to guide them through the onerous process of applying for and securing housing. The application process for supportive housing requires clients to divulge deeply personal information including about sensitive topics like drug use and mental illness. The likelihood of anyone being straightforward about these kinds of struggles with a police officer empowered to arrest them for such admissions leading the way in the first interactions with our teams is slim. The close

association of our teams with the police is actively harming our efforts to engage and get our clients into housing.

The diversion program is premised on the misplaced idea that people experiencing homelessness don't know what's good for them and are so "entrenched" in this belief that they will refuse housing and services when offered. The logic of the program then goes on to presume that the way to overcome this so-called "entrenched" resistance is to get the police to corner them into a situation where they can either accept these services or criminal or civil consequences for merely existing as a homeless person in a public space. Once cornered, it is assumed that the outreach workers will seem a more appealing alternative and magically be able to overcome barriers to engagement and secure housing for the person. Never mind that we still don't have enough safe havens to meet the need. Never mind that there are five approved applications for every one supportive housing unit and, eligibility for that type of housing is far from guaranteed. Never mind that absent a safe haven or supportive housing unit being immediately available, the traditional shelter system is ill equipped to address the needs of those who have experienced harm or trauma at intake or assessment shelters and who, reasonably, would prefer not to go back.

Outreach workers know better. They know that if they are to earn the trust of clients, starting with coercion and willful ignorance of the facts of the shelter and housing landscape isn't going to work. They know that being real, respectful and understanding of the real challenges our clients face is the only way to earn trust. They also know that once that trust is built they can keep up a relationship with a client continuously checking in, offering support with no strings attached and then, when the stars align and a safe haven or housing unit becomes available, they can connect with that client immediately and help them access the resource that works best for them.

Outreach workers and the clients they serve have been clear; the best way to end homelessness and get people off the streets is with low-barrier safe havens and housing options. Therefore, the best way to set these workers and their clients up for success is not to chase and make life more difficult for people without homes but, to make sure that availability of housing and safe havens isn't a rare occurrence. We must accelerate the production of safe havens and housing units. We must continue to repair the shelter system and reform the intake and assessment shelters so that they too are safe and inviting places for people seeking refuge from the streets to go. We must make sure that there is an acquisition fund so that nonprofits can secure sites and buildings to create purpose built shelters designed to meet the needs of those experiencing homelessness. We must make sure that the programming in these shelters is trauma informed and fully staffed with qualified service providers earning a living wage which will reduce turnover and ensure continuity of quality services. We must make sure that there is a robust pipeline of both deeply affordable and supportive housing available to everyone who needs it. We must make sure that housing vouchers are valued at fair market rent so clients can actually find apartments with them. We must make sure that prevention and aftercare programs are robust so that even if our best efforts falter and someone is again on the verge of a housing crisis, help is available before they are forced back on the streets or a shelter. We must do all of these things to end the crisis of homelessness.

I understand the frustration of those who continue to be disheartened by the persistence of this crisis but the solution can only be found with a commitment to the policies outlined above over the long term. I also understand that these long term solutions are not always readily apparent to the public which presents a political challenge for our elected leaders. The optics of seeing police out in force

moving people along and talking with outreach teams may make it look like we are “doing something” but the only thing we are doing is scaring people into moving farther away from the resources that can actually help them. Homelessness is not a crime and we ought not treat it that way just because doing so makes it look like we are being proactive. NYPD resources should be reserved for addressing actual crime – let the outreach teams handle engagement and social services for homeless people.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify.