Results Over Red Tape

New York is spending more than ever on shelters, yet conditions for over 80,000 people remain unchanged. The budget growth funds more beds, not more services for those who rely on the system every night. The city measures success by counting beds, not by tracking how many people actually move from shelter to stable housing. Real progress means measuring outcomes: how many New Yorkers regain stability and independence, not just how many beds are filled.

FOUR BARRIERS THAT KEEP THE SYSTEM STUCK

Shelter providers are up against four barriers: crumbling buildings, a staffing crisis fueled by poverty wages, shrinking program budgets, and a maze of thousands of overlapping rules. Three of these problems require investment and will pay off over time. The fourth, cutting red tape, costs nothing except political will. That is where the city should begin. Starting with red tape does not replace the need for investment. Providers need both: clear, straightforward rules so they can focus on serving people, not paperwork, and contracts that cover the real cost of the work.

Crumbling Buildings. The city is falling behind on basic maintenance, and it is shelter residents who pay the price. Most of New York's roughly 350 shelters were never built to be shelters. They're converted apartment buildings, hotels, city properties, and armories. When budgets stay flat, maintenance gets deferred and problems pile up, leaving residents in unsafe conditions. The city just closed the Bellevue shelter, one of its largest, because the building deteriorated beyond repair. Fixing buildings before they fail costs less than replacing them after the damage is done.

A Staffing Crisis. Nonprofit shelter workers are paid poverty wages under city contracts. The city pays nonprofit shelter workers about 30 percent less than its own staff for the same jobs. Shelter workers can leave for city jobs and earn more or even take retail jobs and still come out ahead. Either way, shelters lose experienced, trained staff and face constant turnover. Providers are asking the city to keep funding the 3 percent cost-of-living increase for contracted workers and to bring nonprofit pay in line with city pay for the same job titles.

Shrinking Program Budgets. A good shelter is more than a bed. It is programs and support that help people rebuild their lives. When budgets get squeezed, the first cuts hit the very services that help people get back on their feet. One provider budgeted play therapy for children who lived through trauma, not because the city required it, but because it works. Rising costs for rent, electricity, insurance, and food swallowed the budget, and the therapy disappeared. Shelter residents have high rates of chronic illness, yet one nonprofit went from sharing a single nurse practitioner across shelters to affording none at all. A budget set in 2021 cannot cover the costs of 2026. Contracts need model budgets based on what services actually cost, with built-in inflation increases and a budget reset at every contract renewal.

A Maze of Overlapping Rules. The city has piled up thousands of overlapping rules. Many are redundant, some even contradict each other, but all are mandatory. A new NDA rule now requires a 45-page procedure and 11 attachments every time a volunteer enters a shelter. The right-to-shelter rule requires the city to add beds when demand rises, rather than pursue strategic, data-driven quality improvements. The solution is simple: replace about 2,000 rules with 50 clear, straightforward ones. This fix does not require new funding. The city already has the staff to make it happen. Simplification means greater accountability, not less: fewer, clearer rules make it easier to measure compliance and hold everyone, providers and the city alike, to their commitments.

The city should prioritize people, not processes

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