



The Doe Fund

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**RECOMMENDATIONS AND REFORMS
FOR HOMELESS SERVICES IN NEW YORK CITY**

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A Four Point Plan to Enhance Services and Outcomes for Homeless New Yorkers

The current homeless services system in New York City as administered by the Department of Homeless Services (DHS) focuses exclusively on the acute outcome of “being without shelter” rather than the contributing and systemic causes of homelessness. Thus, the system’s primary concern (and sole legal responsibility engendered by the “right to shelter”)¹ is providing instant access to shelter to homeless individuals and families.

Services which support independent living and address problems which have led to homelessness (i.e. sobriety support, life skills, vocational training, mental health services, paid transitional work) are scarce, underfunded, and available only through a disconnected group of independent, non-profit providers which work outside the Department of Homeless Services. In order to access those services, individuals must seek them out from multiple sources without a coordinating, administrative body to provide continuity of care.

The result is a system out of balance: an uneven mix of quality nonprofit shelter providers, poor conditions at city-run “assessment” shelters (the front door of the system), and unsafe, substandard for-profit shelters which have won contracts in “emergency” conditions and profited greatly from the suffering of clients referred to them.² Without the soft-skills and tools to convey themselves out of the shelter system, families and individuals are staying longer than ever,³ causing a system already overburdened to seize.

The current system, as implemented, is no longer functional or sustainable. We therefore propose this series of reforms to improve outcomes, reduce waste and strain, and provide the best possible services to New Yorkers in need.

¹ Robin Herman (August 27, 1981) “Pact Requires City to Shelter Homeless Men” *New York Times*. <http://www.nytimes.com/1981/08/27/nyregion/pact-requires-city-to-shelter-homeless-men.html>

² Andrew Rice (December 1, 2013) “Why Run a Slum If You Can Make More Money Housing the Homeless?” *New York Magazine*. <http://nymag.com/news/features/podolsky-homeless-shelters-2013-12/index1.html>

³ Mayor’s Management Report (2015) pages 195-96. <http://www1.nyc.gov/assets/operations/downloads/pdf/mmr2015/dhs.pdf>



Recommendations

- 1. Allow only non-profit organizations to operate transitional residences and services for homeless individuals and families.** Remove and prohibit all for-profit companies from the transitional and cluster-site network. Cede assessment and “front-door” shelters from government control to nonprofit operators.
- 2. Restructure and streamline DHS as an administrative body, connecting and coordinating a nonprofit ecosystem of service providers.** Leverage outside providers, invest in their programs, and utilize technology to monitor client paths and outcomes to facilitate permanent exits from the shelter system and long-term stability for themselves and their families.
- 3. Merge the “right to shelter” with a “mandate of services.”** Automatically engage the service provider network for each client and require participation in transitional services to steadily and continuously convey people out of the homeless services system.
- 4. Create a new services pathway for undomiciled individuals under community supervision (parole).** Recognize the special economic, vocational and social conditions of those returning from prison and provide a transitional path outside the traditional shelter system to reduce recidivism and arrest generational cycles of incarceration and homelessness.

Recommendation 1: Full “non-profitization” of the shelter system

In 1990, a commission chaired by Andrew Cuomo was convened by Mayor David Dinkins to create a citywide strategy to combat homelessness. In the report published by the panel, “The Way Home,” the Department of Homeless Services was envisioned as an administrative body, responsible for the funding, oversight, and disposition of nonprofit shelter operators.⁴ Today, the shelter system’s front door is operated by the city government through notoriously overcrowded and unsafe assessment shelters.

Corrupt for-profit companies have also joined the system, lured by the opportunity to secure deals with the city worth hundreds of millions of dollars on little more than a handshake; conduct business through shell nonprofit organizations subject to virtually no oversight; and profit from a population unlikely to report malfeasance.⁵

Recently, some for-profit shelter providers and landlords have come under scrutiny for dangerous and unsanitary conditions. Yet over half of all families in the homeless system still reside in for-profit residences. Single adults living on the street say they prefer to risk their lives in sub-zero temperatures than repeat traumatic experiences at city shelters and for-profit “three-quarter houses.”⁶

Instead of increasing supply and therefore the number of people served by the system, the government and for-profit sector may be unintentionally inhibiting people from accessing bona fide, effective services; increasing street homelessness and prolonging stays in transitional facilities at the same time.

We therefore recommend a pure nonprofit ecosystem of transitional facilities, including the shelter system’s “front door.” The Department of Homeless Services’ role will focus on the administration and funding of services, tracking of data and population dynamics, and policy implementation; while the

⁴ *The Way Home: A New Direction in Social Policy* Report of the New York City Commission on the Homeless (February 1992). https://www.dropbox.com/s/s5qfpva3t2u0ni5/The%20Way%20Home_Complete.pdf?dl=0

⁵ Andrew Rice (December 1, 2013) “Why Run a Slum If You Can Make More Money Housing the Homeless?” *New York Magazine*. <http://nymag.com/news/features/podolsky-homeless-shelters-2013-12/index1.html>

⁶ Chauncey Alcorn, et al. (January 4, 2016) “Horror stories show why NYC’s homeless resist shelters despite frigid temperatures” *New York Daily News*. <http://www.nydailynews.com/new-york/horror-stories-show-homeless-avoid-nyc-shelters-article-1.2485417>

private sector's role will be limited to legitimate businesses pursuing development of new affordable housing projects.

Recommendation 2: A streamlined City role and a coordinated, intelligent referral network

While shelter can temporarily alleviate the condition of homelessness, it does nothing to address the root causes of it, which range from the obvious and straightforward (financial hardship, for example, or serious mental illness) to nuanced and interrelated (a period of incarceration due to drug abuse which interrupted education and precipitated long-term unemployment, familial alienation, and finally homelessness).

Yet there are hundreds of high quality nonprofit providers who specialize in addressing many comorbid and contributing factors to homelessness, but who remain outside the city's housing-focused infrastructure. Ironically, to receive help from these providers— help that will convey them out of the homeless system— an individual or family must seek them out independently. That is why we propose connecting these independent providers, funding their programs in new service contracts, and coordinating their work through a centralized city-run administrative hub.

DHS' role must therefore change from overseer-operator to administrative nerve center for an ecosystem of nonprofit service providers. This reenvisioned city role and the network it will create will be the first true continuum of care for homeless New Yorkers and afford each a customized service package assembled from this flexible network of service providers.

Using new case management and database technologies, the city could monitor both individual outcomes and system-wide trends; identify, fund, and promote best practices more efficiently; cut waste; and release emergency funding for programs when demand suddenly rises. As data amass over time, surges in homelessness could be predicted by city monitors and, through targeted interventions, even prevented.

Recommendation 3: The Right to Shelter and a Mandate for Services

Supply drives demand in the New York City shelter system, meaning no number of beds alone will correct and reverse a growing homeless population. Many have expressed legitimate concern that the “right to shelter,” litigated into existence in the early 1980s, has done more harm than good,⁷ putting New York City taxpayers on the hook to meet inexhaustible demand and attracting individuals from outside the city who decide that New York is an “easier” place to be homeless.⁸

Automatically engaging services through the nonprofit network for each client will convey individuals out of homelessness more effectively⁹ and dissuade outside populations from seeking obligation-free housing in New York City— all without negatively impacting those who would have sought services on their own while receiving transitional housing services.

By prescribing a minimum set of services based on client category (e.g. employment services and vocational training for the long-term unemployed; mental health services for those who need them; emotional support and education resources for children; etc), the “right to shelter” is no longer a never-ending, infinitely expensive commitment for the city, but a starting point for individuals to enter a system designed reduce reliance on city services over time.

Recommendation 4: Clearing a path home from prison

Currently, there are over 2,000 men under state supervision who are homeless in New York City, with thousands more parolees on the verge of homelessness due to a lack of domestic stability or poor employment prospects.¹⁰ Yet the city has failed to invest in a scalable re-entry solution to meet their needs.

⁷ Cecilia W. Dugger (January 13, 1994) “Mayor Urged to Redefine Shelter Pact” *New York Times*.

<http://www.nytimes.com/1994/01/13/nyregion/mayor-urged-to-redefine-shelter-pact.html>

⁸ Reuven Blau (July 31, 2012) “Out-of-town homeless families are flooding NYC shelters” *New York Daily News*.

<http://www.nydailynews.com/new-york/out-of-town-homeless-families-flooding-new-york-city-shelters-article-1.125381>

⁹ “Strategic Action Plan on Homelessness” (March 2007) United States Department of Health and Human Services.

<http://www.hhs.gov/programs/social-services/homelessness/research/strategic-action-plan-on-homelessness/index.html>

¹⁰ New York State Department of Corrections and Community Supervision



As old drug sentences expire and tens of thousands of men return from upstate, New York City will be challenged by a new kind of homelessness: one that results from years or decades of isolation and deprivation in the criminal justice system, requiring a holistic, integrated service model with both short term interventions (transitional housing) and long-term investments in an individual's success (vocational training, paid work, education, etc.).

The links among homelessness, drug use, crime, and recidivism are well established, as are their costs to society. Intervening as soon as an individual is released into homelessness with a specially designed, structured path provides the best chance to break the cycles of homelessness and recidivism, reduce crime and pressure on the homeless system, and mitigate taxpayer costs.

We therefore propose a re-entry service track that bridges the gap between the State Department of Correction and Community Supervision and the city's Department of Homeless Services. This track will divert individuals out of the traditional single adult system and address the specific vocational, educational, and social needs of the formerly incarcerated, inhibiting recidivism, restoring self-sufficiency, and breaking the generational cycle of homeless and incarceration for their families.