

Protecting the Right to Shelter: Challenging the Capacity Crunch

By *Giselle Routhier*

Amidst frigid winter weather and the lingering effects of the economic downturn, the City of New York has run out of shelter beds for homeless men and women. After months of dialogue, warnings and letters, the Coalition for the Homeless was forced to file litigation to ensure that all homeless New Yorkers obtain safe, decent shelter.

The number of homeless single adults in the New York City shelter system has risen dramatically over the past year, largely as a result of rising unemployment and the continuing shortage of affordable rental housing. Even before the onset of winter, the number of homeless men seeking shelter had increased by eight percent from the previous year.

As early as last summer, Coalition for the Homeless saw the impact of rising need for shelter on the municipal shelter system's capacity and communicated these concerns to City officials. Without enough beds, the City would be at risk of failing to meet its legal obligation under the 1981 consent decree in *Callahan v. Carey* to provide shelter to all homeless men and women. Unfortunately, City officials failed to heed the Coalition's warnings and did not develop a plan to expand shelter capacity. At the onset of winter, Coalition monitors witnessed first-hand the shelter system reach the breaking point, with new entrants still streaming in and the peak winter census still months away—leaving many vulnerable men and women without a safe, decent shelter bed.

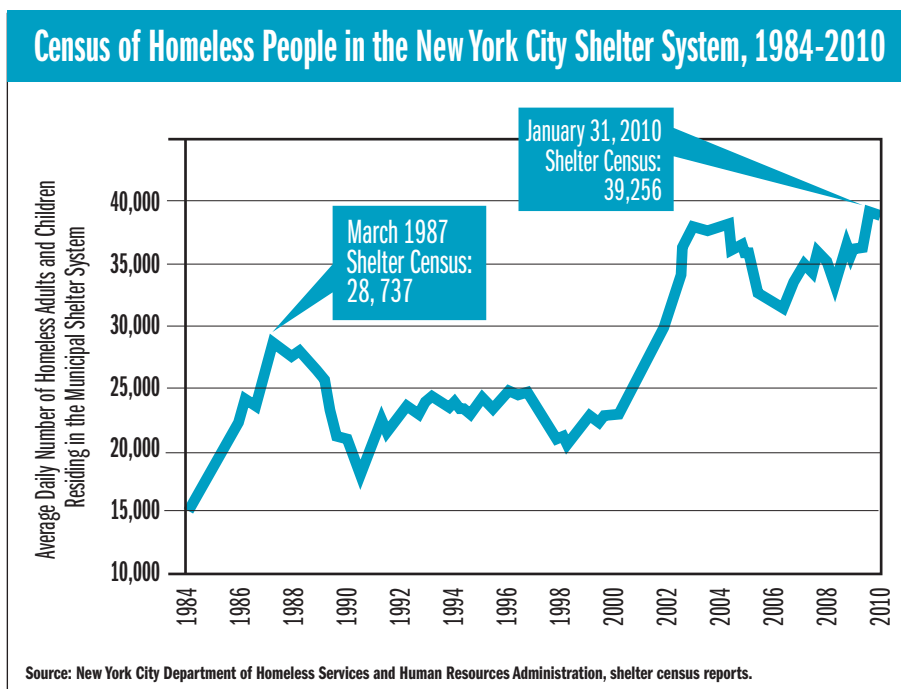
In response to this dire shortage, in December the Coalition for the Homeless and Legal Aid Society filed a motion in *Callahan v. Carey* against the City of New York requesting relief on behalf of all homeless men and women. We called for the City to fulfill its obligation to provide shelter by increasing capacity and abiding by the

minimum standards for health and safety of the residents.

The Coalition witnessed terrible conditions, including dozens of men sleeping on the floors of dirty and crowded waiting rooms night after night. At the same time, women were continually transported by bus as late as 2am from an intake center in the Bronx

who lost her job and suffers from kidney disease was bused from the Bronx to Brooklyn several nights in a row, only to arrive in Brooklyn close to 2am and then awoken at 6am and told to return back to the Bronx.

In response to our litigation, as of late January the City had added some urgently needed shelter capacity. But



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to overnight-only beds in Brooklyn, only to be awoken a few short hours later and told to go back to the Bronx to wait again for a shelter bed.

Steven Marin, a 40-year-old man who suffers with severe depression and diabetes, was left to sleep on a bench in a shelter waiting room for two nights in a row. A 43-year-old homeless woman

many homeless men and women were still left with either no beds or continual one-night placements. The Coalition will continue to press forward with the litigation until the rights of all homeless New Yorkers are protected.

In the long term, the Coalition continues to urge the Bloomberg administration to accelerate the development of permanent supportive housing for homeless individuals living with mental illness and other special needs, and also to restore the successful policy of prioritizing homeless New Yorkers for Federal housing assistance.

Do you want to learn more about how you can get involved with the Coalition? Sign up for our e-advocacy alerts at:
www.coalitionforthehomeless.org/