



BRIEFING PAPER

The Bloomberg Administration's New System for Addressing Street Homelessness: Fewer Resources and Reduced Access

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Nearly a year ago, Mayor Bloomberg and his administration proposed the most dramatic changes in the City of New York's approach to street homelessness since modern homelessness began in the late 1970s. Initially, two proposals were made: (1) relocating the sole intake center for homeless men from Manhattan (where the majority of street homelessness is concentrated) to the Crown Heights neighborhood of Brooklyn, and (2) reducing shelter and services at drop-in centers and faith-based shelters which serve street homeless people. Taken together, this two-part plan would have drastically diminished access to emergency shelter for homeless men and effectively led to rising street homelessness. Advocates, service providers, community organizations, and elected officials mounted strong opposition to the proposed changes and succeeded in modifying some aspects of the plan.

Unfortunately, even with the changes, the new policies will still result in fewer resources and reduced access to services for street homeless New Yorkers. As of July 1, 2009, the Bloomberg administration's modified plan went into effect—closing several drop-in centers and reducing services in those remaining. All in all, the street homeless population of New York City will have a harder time accessing shelter and vital services under the Bloomberg administration's new policies at a time when homelessness is on the rise.

Cuts for Drop-in Centers and Reduced Access

Since the early 1980s, homeless men in New York City have had two major ways to obtain emergency shelter: (1) at the central men's intake center, located next to Bellevue Hospital, or (2) at one of eleven citywide drop-in centers, which can place homeless men in church or synagogue overnight shelters or, if those faith-based beds are full, where homeless men can sleep overnight in chairs.

This two-pronged approach to street homelessness was developed in response to the fact that, while thousands of homeless men utilize the municipal shelter system each year, many street homeless men largely shun the warehouse-style facilities that dominate the municipal shelter system – but they will seek shelter in smaller drop-in centers and faith-based shelters. And because the large majority of street homeless men suffer from mental illness and other disabilities, it is vital to ensure accessibility to shelter and services.

In FY 2008, according to City data, each night an average of 929 homeless adults were provided with overnight shelter placements in drop-in centers and faith-based beds. Each night New York City's drop-in centers sheltered an average of 644 homeless adults while faith-based beds sheltered an average of 292 homeless adults. In the winter months, the use of these overnight placements rose significantly – in February 2008, for instance, there were an average of 1,027 homeless adults sheltered each night (692 people each night in drop-in centers and 335 people each night in faith-based shelters).

Fewer Drop-in Centers and Cutbacks in Overnight Services

Last summer, the City closed three drop-in centers, leaving eight still operating on a 24-hour basis, including five drop-in centers in Manhattan where the majority of street homelessness is concentrated. However, as of July 1, 2009, the Bloomberg administration has closed two more, leaving only six drop-in centers citywide and only three centers in Manhattan.

To make matters worse, only three of the six remaining drop-in centers citywide will remain open 24 hours (two in Manhattan and one in the Bronx), greatly diminishing access to overnight placements for the hundreds of homeless men and women that need them each night. One remaining 24-hour drop-in center has already reported an increase in new clients, evidence of what may become a larger burden on fewer service providers.

It is still unclear what the impact on faith-based beds will be, but within the recent transition, several congregations have reported seeing a smaller number of homeless people referred to them from the drop-in centers than is typical for the season, suggesting that many homeless individuals may be falling through the cracks.

More Bureaucratic Barriers

In addition to cutting back the number of drop-in centers, the City has also made it harder for homeless men and women to gain access to them. Previously, homeless individuals could simply walk into drop-in centers to seek help with virtually no bureaucratic hurdles. This longstanding practice had ensured that street homeless individuals could access shelter and services easily. The Bloomberg administration's new policy abandons this successful approach and imposes a new requirement that homeless individuals must have a referral from an outreach worker (or other service provider) in order to access services at the three drop-in centers that are no longer open 24 hours. This would effectively leave only three genuine "drop-in" centers for the entire city, where there were once eleven.

No Replacement Services

The Bloomberg administration claims it will counter the loss of drop-in center services with an increase in what are known as "safe haven" beds—increasing the number from 298 to 500 beds. Unfortunately, "safe haven" beds are not available to everyone. They are restricted to those who are homeless on the streets for more than nine months and referrals must come from City-funded outreach teams. And while additional shelter beds for fragile homeless individuals are welcome, the small increase in the number of these restricted-access beds does not come close to replacing the large number of overnight placements cut in the Bloomberg administration's plan.

The City has also mentioned a plan to open more faith-based shelters to make up for the decrease in overnight placements available at drop-in centers. They pledged to create a capacity of 495 faith-based beds by the end of the current fiscal year, up from around 330 currently. However, the likelihood of this happening is very small, given that these shelters rely heavily on the availability of congregant volunteers and donated space in churches and synagogues. Still, even if the City does achieve the pledged increase, it will still fail to accommodate all those in need. In the first two-thirds of fiscal year 2009, the city reported an average of 543 homeless individuals sleeping in drop-in centers each night after the faith-based beds were filled.

Another loss in services pertains to special populations. Several drop-in centers that were closed provided services to specialized populations of homeless individuals, including seniors, women, and people living with chronic mental illness. These individuals will no longer be able to quickly access services specifically tailored to their needs, leaving many vulnerable populations without comparable replacement services.

All in all, many homeless people will lose out on services as the entire system contracts in size and more barriers to entry are put up. In particular, homeless individuals living with mental illness or physical disabilities will find it difficult to navigate these barriers and will be less likely to obtain vital services. A very probable result of these new policies will be more people sleeping on the streets.

The Future of the Intake Center for Homeless Men

Advocates and community groups won a victory by pressuring the City to keep the intake center for homeless men in Manhattan. Earlier this year, Bloomberg administration officials abandoned plans to close

the Bellevue intake center and shelter and move operations to the Bedford-Atlantic armory in the Crown Heights section of Brooklyn. (The City had planned to convert the Bellevue facility to a luxury hotel and conference center, and had already sought bids from developers). Officials also pledged to create a new homeless men's intake center in Manhattan before ever closing the Bellevue facility in the future.

However, several concerns still remain. The Bloomberg administration still wants to convert the Bedford-Atlantic armory, a City-operated shelter with a notorious reputation, into an intake center, which has generated continued opposition among Crown Heights community groups. Furthermore, the City has still not provided any details about the promised Manhattan intake center that will eventually replace the Bellevue center. This creates uncertainty surrounding the long-term future of the Bellevue intake center, and raises concerns about homeless men's access to the shelter system in the future.

Summary and Recommendations

The dramatic changes proposed by the Bloomberg administration will make fewer services available to some of the most vulnerable people in New York City at a time when there is evidence of a rise in the numbers of New Yorkers experiencing homelessness. In the past, economic recessions have been coupled with an increase in the number of homeless New Yorkers as low-wage jobs are lost and resources wear thin. This is a uniquely inappropriate moment for the City to be cutting back on overnight placements for street homeless New Yorkers while simultaneously making it more difficult for street homeless adults to access vital services. Despite the fact that an average of 929 homeless individuals slept in New York City drop-in centers and faith-based shelters each night in FY 2008, the City has gone forward with plans to reduce these services, with no replacement plan to shelter the hundreds of individuals who no longer have a place to sleep each night.

In addition, the Bloomberg administration's proposal has erected new and unnecessary bureaucratic barriers for homeless individuals seeking help. These specific administrative procedures will deter many homeless people from accessing services and will prove especially difficult to navigate for individuals living with mental illnesses or other disabilities. With a diminished number of beds available, it is inevitable that those most in need and who have difficulty negotiating complicated administrative rules will be the same individuals turned away to the streets.

It is a fundamental and proven principle of assisting street homeless people that shelter and services must be easily accessible and have few barriers to entry. Most important, on cold winter nights, when securing shelter is literally a matter of life and death, emergency shelter must be nearby and easily accessible to all street homeless individuals.

In order to truly reduce the numbers of homeless individuals on our streets, Mayor Bloomberg and his administration should immediately restore services available in drop-in centers and faith-based shelters to street homeless New Yorkers.

*For more information, please visit
www.coalitionforthehomeless.org.*