



STATEMENT

Ending the Bloomberg Administration's Discriminatory Policy of Denying Shelter to Homeless Domestic Partners

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Coalition for the Homeless welcomes New York City Council legislation that will end the Bloomberg Administration's discriminatory policy of denying shelter to homeless couples who are registered domestic partners. The Bloomberg Administration policy – which reversed Giuliani-era rules that established parity between married and domestic-partner couples seeking emergency shelter – has resulted in the denial of shelter placements and food to hundreds of homeless couples, including both same-sex and opposite-sex couples, pregnant women, and individuals living with severe mental and physical disabilities. Many couples have been forced to sleep for days or weeks on the floors and benches of a Manhattan intake office simply because the Bloomberg Administration refuses to recognize them as a “family unit.”

Despite the record of harm to homeless couples and more than a year of appeals from homeless advocates, service providers, religious leaders, and lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) organizations, Bloomberg Administration officials have refused to end its policy and ensure parity for couples with marriage licenses and domestic partnership certificates. City Council legislation introduced today will end this discriminatory policy and finally guarantee that homeless domestic partners can seek shelter as families.

The Bloomberg Administration's Discriminatory Policy: In 2003 the Bloomberg Administration introduced new rules requiring that homeless couples with domestic partnership certificates who were seeking shelter had to produce additional proof in order to be considered a “family unit.” These rules reversed the policy of the Giuliani Administration, under which both homeless couples with marriage licenses and couples with domestic partnership certificates were provided emergency shelter as families. For more than a year, as a result of the Bloomberg policy, hundreds of homeless domestic partners have been denied shelter placements and food, and many have been forced to sleep for days or even weeks on the floors and benches of a Manhattan intake office opened in December 2003. Many homeless couples – in particular those who have slept on the streets for significant periods – are unable to provide documents required by Department of Homeless Services (DHS) investigators, including utility bills and leases. And in practice DHS rejects most other forms of proof offered by desperate couples, including letters from homeless service providers, family, and local clergy. DHS workers often urge couples to seek shelter separately in the adult shelter system despite the fact that many couples depend on one another for physical and emotional support. The Bloomberg Administration policy has discriminated against both same-sex and opposite-sex couples, and among those denied shelter are pregnant women and individuals living with severe mental and physical disabilities.

Bloomberg Administration Claims and the Reality: Bloomberg Administration officials claim that the discriminatory policy was implemented to address so-called “fraud” allegedly committed by couples applying for shelter. This claim is absolutely false. DHS application procedures require eligibility investigations of all families applying for shelter in order to determine whether they have other available, suitable housing options, and those investigations continue to be conducted for married

couples as well as domestic partners. City officials claim that homeless domestic partners are “fraudulently” seeking some advantage by applying for shelter as a family, but this too is a specious and false claim. Homeless couples are routinely sheltered in welfare hotels, many with decrepit or unsafe conditions; couples receive no higher priority for housing assistance than homeless single individuals; and in fact the cost to taxpayers of shelter for two separate individuals is higher than that for a couple. Finally, City officials have claimed that many homeless couples seeking shelter obtained their domestic partnership certificates shortly before applying for shelter. This claim ignores DHS rules requiring that couples have at least a domestic partnership certificate in order to even apply for shelter at the Manhattan intake office – indeed, DHS workers themselves routinely tell couples how to obtain the certificates. Ultimately, the only effect of the Bloomberg Administration policy is to permit City bureaucrats to determine who is a “family” and who is not, and finally to deter many homeless couples from seeking emergency shelter.

For more than a year, homeless advocates (including Coalition for the Homeless), homeless service providers, religious leaders, and LGBT organizations have appealed directly to Mayor Bloomberg and to administration officials (including DHS Commissioner Linda Gibbs) to end the discriminatory policy and to ensure parity in the provision of shelter for homeless married couples and homeless domestic partners. The Mayor, Commissioner Gibbs, and other City officials have repeatedly refused to do so. City Council legislation introduced today will finally end this discriminatory policy and help guarantee that homeless domestic partners are provided shelter and services as families.

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