



**TESTIMONY OF COALITION FOR THE HOMELESS
BEFORE THE NEW YORK CITY COUNCIL**

General Welfare Committee Hearing, March 1, 2007

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I present this testimony on behalf of Coalition for the Homeless, a not-for-profit organization that provides advocacy and services for over 3,500 homeless New Yorkers each day. Since its founding in 1981, the Coalition has advocated for proven, cost-effective solutions to the crisis of modern mass homelessness, which now continues into its third decade. The Coalition has also struggled for more than two decades to protect the rights of homeless people through litigation around the right to shelter, the right to vote, and appropriate housing and services for homeless people living with mental illness and HIV/AIDS.

The Coalition operates several direct-services programs that both offer vital services to homeless and formerly-homeless New Yorkers, and demonstrate effective long-term solutions. These programs include supportive housing for families and individuals living with AIDS, a job-training program for homeless and formerly-homeless women, a Rental Assistance Program which provides rent subsidies and support services to help homeless families and individuals rent private-market apartments, and two buildings in Manhattan which provide permanent housing for formerly-homeless families and individuals. In addition, the Coalition's food program provides more than 800 nutritious meals to street homeless New Yorkers each night, and our Crisis Intervention Program assists more than 1,000 homeless and at-risk households each month with eviction prevention assistance, client advocacy, referrals for shelter and emergency food programs, and assistance with benefits.

The Domestic Partners for Full Equality Bill

Coalition for the Homeless strongly supports Intro. 501, the "Domestic Partners for Full Equality" bill. This legislation will codify the important principle, which was clearly the intent of the City Council when the domestic partnership law was first enacted, that vital services provided by the City of New York should be provided on an equal basis both to couples who are married and to those who have registered as domestic partners. Indeed, in the decade since the domestic partnership law was enacted, it has if anything only become more evident that many New York City families identify themselves in different ways, and domestic partnership has become an important vehicle for those who wish to affirm their family relationship but who do not or cannot marry.

As this committee is well aware, a compelling recent example of unequal, discriminatory treatment of domestic partner families was the Department of Homeless Services' four-year-old policy that required homeless couples with domestic partnership certificates to provide additional "proofs" in order to be obtain emergency shelter as families. This discriminatory policy reversed a decade of City policy, through the Dinkins and Giuliani administrations, that had treated both married and domestic partner

couples equally with regards to obtaining emergency shelter. As a result of this harmful, discriminatory policy, for nearly four years hundreds of homeless couples in New York City – including people living with mental illness and other serious medical problems – were denied emergency shelter and food, and many were forced to turn to the streets.

Fortunately, in a landmark agreement with the City Council, the Bloomberg administration has agreed to change these discriminatory rules. Effective February 1st, homeless couples in New York City have equal access to emergency shelter, whether married or registered as domestic partners. A homeless domestic partner couple who seeks shelter need only present their domestic partnership certificate in order to be considered a family by the Department of Homeless Services for the purpose of securing shelter – thus finally putting them on equal footing with married couples who similarly only have to present a marriage license. In addition, the new policy grants “family status” to homeless adults who have other family relationships (e.g., grandparent and grandson/daughter, or siblings) who have resided together for six of the previous 12 months, and to street homeless couples who are assisted by an outreach worker. The Bloomberg administration has agreed to this change for six months, and we are hopeful that the new policy will become permanent at the end of that period.

We are grateful to Mayor Bloomberg and Department of Homeless Services Commissioner Robert Hess for agreeing to the new policy. And, once again, we want to express our enormous gratitude to City Council Speaker Christine Quinn for her work in forging this agreement, and to Councilmember Bill deBlasio, Councilmember Maria Baez, and the members of the General Welfare Committee for taking up this issue last year in an important hearing and for pushing for the changed policy and this new legislation.

It is our hope that enactment of the “Domestic Partners for Full Equality” bill will prevent future instances of discriminatory treatment like those suffered by so many homeless families over the past four years. Indeed, like other low-income New Yorkers, homeless people are forced to rely on vital City services for emergency shelter and other life-sustaining support. It should in no way be the business of City agencies to deny such vital services based on arbitrary, even illegal determinations of who is a family and who is not.

Thank you for the opportunity to present this testimony, and we look forward to working with the City Council towards passage of this important legislation.