



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

**General Welfare Committee Hearing  
April 11, 2007**

**Submitted by Patrick Markee, Senior Policy Analyst,  
Coalition for the Homeless**

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 25 years 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 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 1,000 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 public benefits.

**Prohibiting Discrimination Based on Lawful Source of Income**

Coalition for the Homeless strongly supports Introduction 61, the legislation before the committee today, which will prohibit discrimination against tenants and prospective tenants based on their lawful source of income, including housing subsidies and public benefits. Homeless and formerly-homeless families and individuals, along with other low-income New Yorkers, rely disproportionately on housing subsidies and public benefits to pay for their housing, as well as other necessities like food and clothing. Indeed, given the widening gap in New Yorker City between the cost of rental housing and the income of renter households, for a rising number of New Yorker City renters such subsidies and benefits represent the difference between having a home and languishing in municipal shelters or on the streets.

As this committee knows well, New York City is currently in the midst of an historic crisis of family homelessness. In February of this year, according to data from the New York City Department of Homeless Services, there were an average of nearly 9,300 homeless families sleeping each night in the municipal shelter system, a modern-day record. Equally alarming, family homelessness is on the rise. Last year the number of homeless families sleeping in shelters each night rose by 17.6 percent, while the number of homeless children in shelters rose by 18.1 percent. One of the major causes of the rising population of

homeless families is the dramatic increase in the number of new homeless families – according to City data, compared to the previous year 2006 saw a 22.9 increase in the number of homeless families new to the shelter system, an increase in large part driven by the growing scarcity of rental housing affordable to low-income New Yorkers.

For the past two decades, the City's major tool in re-locating homeless families from shelters to private-market housing has been the federal Section 8 Housing Voucher Program. Since the 1980s tens of thousands of families have been successfully moved from shelters to private-market apartments through the use of such vouchers. Moreover, according to an acclaimed 2005 research study by the Vera Institute for Justice (summarized in the briefing paper attached), which was commissioned by the Department of Homeless Services, formerly-homeless families with federal housing vouchers have remarkably low rates of return to shelter.

Notwithstanding the Bloomberg administration's two-and-a-half-year-old policy of reducing homeless New Yorker's access to such federal housing subsidies, as well as harmful reductions in Section 8 funding levels by the Bush administration and the previous Congress, the Section 8 voucher program will continue to be a major part of New York City's efforts to address and reduce homelessness. Indeed, the Bloomberg administration is currently discussing new rent subsidy programs for homeless families that would rely in part on the use of Section 8 vouchers for some families. Moreover, in the current calendar year the administration has allocated around 3,000 Section 8 vouchers to at-risk homeless households assisted by the City's Home Base prevention offices, and the City has also allocated several hundred vouchers to help move street homeless New Yorkers into apartments with support services.

Nevertheless, many homeless, formerly-homeless, and at-risk households struggle to obtain and keep their private-market housing despite the presence of Section 8 vouchers, as well as other public benefits, because some property owners refuse to accept payment of rent from these subsidies and benefits. Over the years, we have received an alarming number of reports of homeless families and individuals who have been unable to use their Section 8 vouchers within the roughly 180 days that they are permitted by City rules. These homeless New Yorkers have told us of being repeatedly rejected for apartments by landlords and brokers, even when the apartment rents were within the Section 8 guidelines. Tragically, many of these homeless households ended up remaining in the shelter system, often for several years.

In explaining the rejections to our clients, many landlords and brokers have been remarkably blunt: They do not want to rent to tenants or prospective tenants with Section 8 housing vouchers. Many landlords have gone further, and have explained that they do not want to rent to tenants or prospective tenants who receive any kind of public benefit. And, indeed, many more homeless and formerly-homeless New Yorkers receive other public benefits – including Social Security disability benefits, Supplemental Security Income (SSI), veterans benefits, and public assistance – than receive Section 8 housing assistance.

Remarkably, unlike other cities and large and small across this country, New York does not have a statute which explicitly prohibits this form of discrimination against low-income tenants and prospective tenants. Intro. 61 will address that shortfall, and will provide a vital protection for low-income New Yorkers – including the growing number of homeless families and individuals – who are struggling to find and keep decent housing. For this reason, once again we urge you to pass Intro. 61.

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.