

Testimony of
Coalition for the Homeless

on

**Coordination between CEO, DHS, HRA, and ACS
on poverty-reduction measures**

Presented before
The New York City Council
Committee on General Welfare, and
Committee on Community Development

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Coalition for the Homeless welcomes this opportunity to testify before the New York City Council regarding poverty initiatives and coordination between the Center for Economic Opportunity (CEO) and other agencies working with low-income New Yorkers.

About the Coalition for the Homeless: Coalition for the Homeless, founded in 1981, is a not-for-profit advocacy and direct services organization that assists more than 3,000 homeless New Yorkers each day. The Coalition advocates for proven, cost-effective solutions to the crisis of modern homelessness, which now continues past its third decade. The Coalition also struggles to protect the rights of homeless people through litigation around the right to emergency shelter, the right to vote, and appropriate housing and services for homeless people living with mental illness and HIV/AIDS.

The Coalition operates twelve direct-services programs that both offer vital services to homeless, at-risk, and low-income 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 working homeless individuals rent private-market apartments, and apartment buildings in Manhattan which provide permanent housing for formerly-homeless families and individuals. Our summer sleep-away camp and after-school program help hundreds of homeless children each year. The Coalition's mobile soup kitchen distributes 900 nutritious meals each night to street homeless and hungry New Yorkers. Finally, our Crisis Intervention Department 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.

The Coalition also represents homeless men and women as plaintiffs in Callahan v. Carey and Eldredge v. Koch. In 1981 the City and State entered into a consent decree in Callahan in which it was agreed that, "The City defendants shall provide shelter and board to each homeless man who applies for it provided that (a) the man meets the need standard to qualify for the home relief program established in New York State; or (b) the man by reason to physical, mental or social dysfunction is in need of temporary shelter." The Callahan consent decree and Eldredge case also guarantee basic standards for shelters for homeless men and women. Pursuant to the decree, the Coalition serves as court-appointed monitor of municipal shelters for homeless adults.

Poverty Trends

Just this fall, the Census bureau released new data showing the rise and scope of poverty in New York City. Between 2009 and 2010, the number of New Yorkers living in poverty rose to 1.6 million—the largest one-year increase in nearly two decades.

In addition to an overall increase in poverty, certain populations experienced more severe increases. Poverty among children rose 2.9 percentage points to an astonishing 30 percent. Among families headed by single mothers, the rate reached 41 percent and a

remarkable 58 percent for Hispanic single mothers. Additionally, household income diminished among all but the City's wealthiest—back to levels not seen since 1980.

But the numeric increase in poverty was not the only change that occurred in the City. While 75,000 city residents were pushed into the official definition of poverty, the City's wealthiest got wealthier, adding to the ever-widening gap between the haves and have-nots. In 2010, the top fifth of all earners made 38 times as much as the bottom fifth.

With growing inequality and one in five New Yorkers now living in poverty, the City must re-examine how it is addressing these problems and what policies need to change.

Increasing Homelessness

Even before these most recent poverty numbers were reported, it was clear that more New Yorkers were experiencing economic hardships. Over the past several years and even before the economic downturn, the number of homeless people sleeping in shelters has increased dramatically. This November, the shelter population reached an all-time record high. There are now over 41,000 men, women, and children sleeping in shelters each night, including 17,000 children. Over three-quarters of the shelter population consists of families.

Additionally, the characteristics of families entering shelter has changed. In March of 2011, for the first time, the number of families entering shelter that had previously been homeless surpassed the number of newly homeless families entering shelter. Since then, the number of "repeat families" has continued to outnumber newly homeless families entering shelter, suggesting that current City policies to address homelessness on a long-term scale are failing.

Indeed, since Mayor Bloomberg cut off homeless families in 2005 from receiving federal housing assistance that provided *permanent, affordable* housing, the number of "repeat families" has nearly tripled. Since 2005, temporary subsidies provided to homeless families, the most recent being the failed Advantage program, have contributed enormously to this revolving door back into shelter.

Missing Piece: Affordable Housing Policy

All of these data combine to show a city not doing enough to combat poverty, particularly a city as wealthy as New York. What the Mayor's current policies fail to address, as evidenced by the mainly small-scale initiatives implemented by the Center for Economic Opportunity, are the overarching causes of poverty. These include a severe lack of affordable housing, joblessness, failing schools in our poorest neighborhoods, and stagnating wages among the working poor.

With regards to homelessness, the solution is relatively straightforward: affordable housing must be both created and preserved, while being made available to those who

need it most. Unfortunately this solution is lacking from the Center for Economic Opportunity's initiatives and the Mayor's larger plan as a whole.

We urge the City to take immediate steps to allow homeless families to access permanent, affordable housing through federal programs such as public housing and Section 8. Additionally, we urge the City to set aside more apartments created or preserved by the Department of Housing Preservation and Development for homeless families and individuals. This is the only way to begin to address record homelessness and begin to make a dent in the increasing ranks of families and children living in poverty.

Thank you for the opportunity to share this testimony. And, as always, we look forward to working with the committee and the City Council on efforts to reduce New York City's homeless population.

Submitted by,

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