



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

**General Welfare Committee Hearing
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I present this testimony on behalf of Coalition for the Homeless, a not-for-profit organization that assists more than 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 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 emergency 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, 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 two 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 more than 1,000 nutritious meals to street homeless and hungry New Yorkers each night. 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.

Record Family Homelessness and the Bloomberg Administration's Harmful New Rules for Families Re-Applying for Emergency Shelter

Amidst all-time record family homelessness and a worsening housing affordability crisis, it is deeply troubling that the Bloomberg administration has chosen not to address these critical problems but instead to deny emergency shelter to some of the most vulnerable children and families in New York City.

Over the past two weeks, as the City has implemented its new rules denying emergency shelter to families re-applying for shelter – despite widespread evidence of widespread errors in the City's eligibility review process – the number of homeless families sleeping in New York City shelters exceeded 9,500 families per night for the first time in history. Even more troubling, the number of homeless families in New York City continues to rise at an alarming rate, and has increased by 20 percent in the past two years.

The current all-time record number of New York City families bedding down nightly in municipal shelters includes more than 15,000 children and nearly 14,000 adult family members. Indeed, of the more than 36,000 homeless New Yorkers currently sleeping each night in the municipal shelter system, four out of five are in families.

The reasons for the steady rise in family homelessness are familiar to this committee, and can be summarized as follows:

1. The increasingly acute shortage of affordable housing in New York City, exacerbated by rising rents and the significant and ongoing loss of subsidized and rent-stabilized housing citywide.
2. The Bloomberg administration's misguided decision, three years ago, to reverse longstanding City policy and to deny homeless families a priority for Federal housing vouchers and public housing apartments.
3. The failure of the administration's deeply flawed "Housing Stability Plus" program – launched in late 2004 and abandoned earlier this year – and the serious flaws in the program that largely replaced it, the "Work Advantage" program.
4. Finally, the failure of the City to invest sufficient resources in genuine homelessness prevention services, including eviction-prevention legal services and rental assistance for households with ongoing housing needs.

Facing these significant challenges, the Bloomberg administration has refused to alter its failed homeless housing policies and has sadly chosen essentially to close the shelter door on some of the most vulnerable children and families in our city. In a sense, the administration has borrowed from the worst and most harmful, and even illegal, policy tools of the Giuliani administration and of former welfare commissioner Jason Turner, and is attempting artificially to reduce the shelter rolls by denying help to homeless families who are genuinely in need.

The results have been predictable and tragic. Already since the new rules were implemented on October 12th many children and families who have no place to go have been turned away at the City's Bronx intake center, and many have been forced to sleep in unsafe places. We have worked with families who have slept in hospital emergency rooms, on the floor of a church in the South Bronx, on subway trains, and even, for much of a night, in a McDonalds restaurant. Many children and adults have gotten sick as a result of the denial of shelter, and we are fearful that even greater harm will occur to additional homeless families who are turned away by the City.

These results are predictable because of the large number of errors that the City continues to make in its eligibility determination process. Indeed, the City's own data verifies the large volume of mistakes made in determining families' eligibility for shelter. The Department of Homeless Services' website reports that of the 11,792 homeless families that the City deemed "eligible" for shelter in FY 2007, 33 percent – or some 3,891 families – were forced to apply two or more times before they were deemed eligible. In fact, these cases where the City reversed its initial determination of "ineligibility" represent 20 percent of all families who applied for shelter in FY 2007, an alarming error rate. Many of these are exactly the families that, under the new City rules, have been and will be denied emergency shelter.

City officials have repeatedly claimed that families deemed "eligible" after an initial "ineligibility" determination had a "change in circumstance" that merited the new determination, but this is simply not a credible claim given that the large majority of these families re-apply immediately. Moreover, our own experience working firsthand with dozens and dozens of families initially deemed "ineligible" for shelter has shown that the City makes numerous errors in the determination process, and that the procedures for determining eligibility are themselves significantly flawed. Indeed, Coalition staff report that the frequency and severity of these errors has worsened in the past year.

As this committee is aware, before the new rules were implemented on October 12th, the City implemented its shelter denial rules in a more limited way last year. During many long months, Coalition for the Homeless worked with more than 25 homeless families who were wrongly denied shelter by the City and who were turned out into the streets. Some of these families slept on subway trains or in other dangerous places. The Coalition in many cases paid to shelter the families temporarily in hotel rooms while we worked, with help from the Legal Aid Society's Homeless Rights Project, to convince the City of their eligibility. In nearly every one of these cases last

year, the City ultimately reversed its erroneous initial determination and finally deemed the families “eligible” for shelter. Attached to this testimony I have included a summary of some of these cases of homeless families, children, and pregnant women who were wrongly denied shelter by the City.

Three years ago, when Mayor Bloomberg announced the goal of reducing New York City’s homeless population by two-thirds in five years, we joined with this committee in applauding the Mayor’s ambitious goal. We believed then, as we believe today, that with the right policies and resources – and specifically, with the right commitment to addressing the affordable housing needs of homeless and at-risk families – the number of homeless New Yorkers in shelters can indeed be successfully reduced.

However, there is a right way and a wrong way to reduce the homeless shelter population, and attempting to artificially reduce the shelter rolls by closing the door to homeless families in need is not only the wrong way, but it inevitably results in tremendous harm to some of the most vulnerable children and adults in New York City.

We urge Mayor Bloomberg to immediately halt the new policy of denying emergency shelter to re-applicant families, and we are eager to work with this committee and the City Council to accomplish that goal.

Thank you for the opportunity to present this testimony.