

April 2, 2020

Hon. Bill de Blasio
Mayor of the City of New York
City Hall
New York, NY 10007

Hon. Steven Banks
Commissioner
NYC Department of Social Services
4 World Trade Center
150 Greenwich Street, 38th floor
New York, NY 10007

RE: Meeting the immediate needs of unsheltered homeless New Yorkers

Dear Mayor de Blasio & Commissioner Banks:

Homeless New Yorkers, particularly those living unsheltered, have been cut off from many of the places they often frequented, due to the COVID-19 crisis. To promote social distancing and reduce risk of transmission, many programs that offered food and showers now only offer food to-go, and no longer offer their shower programs. Meanwhile, the City has closed recreation centers, which many homeless people utilized to shower and wash their hands. Since this crisis began, homeless New Yorkers have told advocates that they have either not showered or have been forced to manage with a sink in a public restroom. Further exacerbating the situation, restaurants and cafes with public restrooms are no longer allowing homeless folks to use them, removing yet another place people could wash their hands.

The result of these closures and changes is that homeless New Yorkers have been starved of the most basic resources which, particularly during a public health crisis, could lead to devastating results. New York City must act quickly to fill the gap in essential resources, offer people a way off the streets, and ensure they are able to safely social distance. This is especially crucial given how many homeless New Yorkers are elderly (according to DHS' [The Journey Home](#), 39 percent of unsheltered homeless New Yorkers are age 55 or older, although City data on street homelessness is likely an undercount) and/or suffer from chronic health conditions that, combined with COVID-19, could be fatal.

We are calling on you to address the immediate needs of homeless New Yorkers by:

Offering single rooms so each unsheltered homeless New Yorker can move off the streets and out of DHS drop-in centers, and into rooms with showers, restrooms, and space to safely social distance. This includes:

- Repurposing vacant hotels through the duration of the pandemic.

- Repurposing vacant apartments including condominiums, co-ops, and rental units across the city.
- Immediately offering eligible people vacant supportive housing units and eliminating bureaucratic barriers to placement.
- Immediately developing a plan to renovate vacant apartment units and construct permanent housing for the homeless and begin renovations and construction as soon as it is safe for workers to perform this work.

Reducing the demand on overwhelmed drop-in centers. This includes:

- Enacting the [provider-informed plan](#) to pair DHS drop-in centers with commercial hotels, ensuring that DHS drop-in clients can move into their own rooms.
- Identifying potential sites for pop-up DHS drop-in centers, potentially using school gyms or recreation centers. These sites would need to be arranged to maximize social distancing and minimize spread of infection, including screening at entrance and following all DOHMH recommendations for preventing infection spread.

Catching up with the [CDC guidelines](#) by providing showers and restrooms in areas often frequented by unsheltered homeless New Yorkers across the city. This includes:

- Meeting the demands of Picture the Homeless' #FreeToPee campaign by providing access to portable latrines with handwashing facilities across the city, using expertise from homeless New Yorkers and DHS-contracted outreach teams to identify high-need areas.
- Ensuring all public restroom facilities have functional water taps, soap, and dryers.
- Ensuring all public restrooms are open 24 hours per day.
- Continuing to equip outreach teams with alcohol wipes and socks and expand to providing hand sanitizer if it becomes available.
- Further equipping outreach teams with backpacks, pants, shirts, and jackets.
- Enacting the recommendations put forth by City Council Speaker Corey Johnson and General Welfare Chair Stephen Levin regarding portable showers, sinks, and toilets.

Opening and staffing supervised consumption sites (SCS).

- With the loss of public spaces and continued enforcement of quality of life offenses by police, injection drug users are losing safe places to use substances. The SCS model is an evidence-based intervention that reduces the harm faced by drug users.

Signed,

Alliance for Positive Change
 Bannon Consulting Services
 Coalition for the Homeless
 Communities United for Police Reform

Exponents
Harlem United
Housing Works
Human.nyc
#MEAction New York
National Working Positive Coalition
Neighbors Together
Picture the Homeless
Safety Net Project of the Urban Justice Center
New York City Relief
NYLAG
The Center
The Legal Aid Society
Treatment Action Group
Unity Fellowship of Christ Church
VOCAL-NY

cc:

Speaker Corey Johnson, NYC Council
Council Member Stephen Levin
Council Member Mark Levine