

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: Ending the criminalization of homelessness and police-involved outreach**

The COVID19 crisis requires that Mayor de Blasio institute immediate changes to policing practices in order to ensure the survival and safety of homeless New Yorkers. Mayor de Blasio has embraced a “broken windows” strategy that encourages police to target low-level offenses like sleeping on subways and removal of homeless people from public space. Using this approach, the NYPD has largely targeted people of color for the issuance of summonses, arrests, and removal from sidewalks and subways.

Broken windows policing poses an additional crisis for homeless people in context of COVID19: it leads to increased incarceration in jails that are high-risk areas for COVID19 contagion, pushes homeless people further away from visible places where outreach teams can engage them, and prioritizes punitive engagement over health needs.

We call for Mayor de Blasio to make immediate changes to his policing strategy, proportionate to the crisis New York City currently faces, and take the following steps without delay:

**End the criminalization of unsheltered homeless people in the public transit system:**

- Stop arrests or summonses for low-level offenses like sleeping on subways or fare evasion.
- End the “Subway Diversion Program” where police issue summonses to coerce homeless people into engagement with a service provider.

**End the police-involved approach to homeless outreach:**

- Remove police from homeless outreach.
- Use a harm reduction, trauma-informed approach to street outreach.
- Stop dispatching police in response to 311 calls about people who are homeless. Instead, dispatch outreach workers.

**End the criminalization of visible street homelessness:**

- Direct police not to issue “move-on” orders that target homeless people who are panhandling, sitting down, or lying on the street.
- In line with [CDC guidance](#), stop all NYPD, DSS and DSNY sweeps of people and their belongings on the street. Instead, provide outreach teams with resources to directly place people into individual housing, provide harm reduction supplies such as socks, blankets, and hand sanitizer, and employ doctors to check on people so that medical needs are met.
- Close the Street Homeless Joint Command Center and re-invest all its costs into meeting the immediate survival needs of homeless people.

**Mobilize resources to create emergency housing** for people who are homeless to decrease the likelihood of unnecessary engagement with police in public spaces and to reduce crowding in shelters that are unable to follow social distancing and other public health protocols. The same focus that has been applied statewide to repurpose properties and to construct new hospital sites should also be applied to the need for creation of permanent housing units for people who are homeless, including:

- Repurpose vacant hotels through the duration of the pandemic.
- Repurpose vacant apartments including condominiums, co-ops, and rental units across the city.
- Immediately offer eligible people vacant supportive housing units. Eliminate bureaucratic barriers to placement.
- Immediately develop 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.

Signed,

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

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