

The Monitor

Free Newsletter by the Coalition for the Homeless Client Advisory Group

Fighting for Better Food in Shelters

By Cynthia

The fight for better food, larger portions, and more variety is a fight that anyone who has ever lived in shelters should feel passionate about! For the past several months, the dedicated members of the Client Advisory Group (CAG) have been actively involved in gathering signatures from shelter residents all around the city.

Residents who were dissatisfied with the food provided by shelters researched how to draft a petition and created one that speaks directly to the DHS administration and its food vendors. This petition identifies the mandates within DHS's own rules that state DHS must provide proper diets for the various religious and medical needs of shelter residents. Basic nutritional needs often go unmet and people have become ill, undernourished, and unable to save any money because their diets must be supplemented or completely supported by food bought outside of the shelter.

This petition demands that DHS work with their vendors to provide the food options required by the City and State as well as DHS's own policies and procedures, which include the variety and quality that everyone deserves.

To date, we have collected over 500 signatures, compiled photographs of meals served in shelters, and collected testimonials from residents who have been adversely affected by the poor food provided.



CAG member
Angela. Interview
by M.A. Dennis.

CAG Member Spotlight

By Angela

I've been homeless off and on for about 12 years. The first time I was homeless, I was with my children. We went through the EAU system – the family system where they had to place you at a residence for 14 days while they investigated your case. It was very gruesome and we struggled tremendously. When I was there it was just chaos. Sometimes you would have to sleep on benches. To me, it was exactly like a refugee camp. There were people everywhere and children running around. It was a two-story building and on any given night there'd be at least 200 families in there. There was no order. Everybody had to set up their little spot on the floor.

I have often suffered with depression while being homeless. It is hard for me to stay on track sometimes. I always have my faith in God, so that's what gets me through. I would have crumbled, if I didn't have my faith. I knew I had to go through what I did because there was no other way – my kids were depending on me.

My kids also struggled greatly with being homeless. Homelessness was literally making them sick. They didn't eat well – the food was horrible, so they often didn't eat. They also got colds all the time, and one time all of them got pink eye.

My kids are older now and I'm in the single adult system, and being homeless is still challenging. I'm very proactive – I try to go out looking for housing. I do a lot of phone calling and searching. However, some weeks I get discouraged and leave it alone because it gets so frustrating when all your efforts feel like they are in vain. You get tired of not producing anything, not getting anywhere. When you're single they want you to take a Single Room Occupancy, but I need a one-bedroom apartment so I can have my kids stay.

When I get housing, I'm going to move on with my life. I'll be able to travel and see family that I haven't seen in almost 10 years. I'll be able to have a stable place, so I can go out, and also have my kids over. I will also be able to be out late if I need to and not worry about curfew. The curfew is a big limitation: Sometimes I want to attend church services that are late in the evening and I can't go. I often can't see my family.

My message to everyone who looks down on homeless people is to stop it. We're all human beings and no one's better than the other. No matter what, we're all the same people, we all have the same blood. Things happen in life – anyone can become homeless.

State of the Homeless 2019

Photo by Seze Devres Photography.



By Giselle

In April, Coalition for the Homeless released its annual *State of the Homeless* report, which graded both the Mayor and Governor on their handling of the homelessness crisis, stemming in large part from New York's serious shortage of affordable housing. The report found that both elected officials have failed to address the problem and, in some cases, have implemented policies that have exacerbated homelessness.

The Coalition gave Mayor de Blasio a failing grade for stubbornly refusing to build an adequate supply of affordable apartments for homeless New Yorkers and handed Governor Cuomo multiple failing grades for shortchanging NYC on reimbursements for shelters and housing subsidies as well as homelessness prevention.

State of the Homeless 2019 revealed that the shelter census is on track to increase by 5,000 people by 2022 unless the Mayor immediately changes course and increases the number of new apartments set aside for homeless New Yorkers through his *Housing New York 2.0* plan. To achieve that, the Mayor will need to implement the House Our Future NY Campaign's recommendation to build 24,000 new apartments – and preserve at least 6,000 more – for homeless families and individuals.

Further, the report found that the Governor continues to exacerbate homelessness in New York City by failing to implement effective reentry planning for individuals coming home from State prisons. In 2018, more than half of all individuals released from State prisons to New York City were released directly to a shelter.

The full report card, analysis of recent trends, and policy recommendations can be found at www.coalitionforthehomeless.org/soth.

CAG members attend the House Our Future NY Town Hall and pose for a picture with Council Member Vanessa Gibson.



My Homelessness Experience

By Minnie

I have experienced being homeless three times in my life. Each time I was homeless on the streets, and it was scary. I had no hope of getting a stable place to live. The first time I became homeless, I was living in a single women's shelter. I was 24 years old and my mother kicked me out of the house. I had to fend for myself.

The second time I became homeless was because I was struggling with addiction. I was on the streets for seven years. Finally, I decided to get the help and support I needed to change my life. I have been clean and drug free for 26 years now. In 1999, when I had my son, I was finally able to hold down my first apartment.

The third time I was homeless was in 2011. I decided to give up

my apartment in the Bronx and move to Florida. I was hoping to start a new life for me and my son. However, that didn't work out so we came back to New York. We lived in shelters from 2012 to 2013.

I was fortunate to get back into NYCHA housing, and I have been living in that same apartment since 2013.

Being homeless taught me to appreciate and value having a place to live and call my own. I've been living stably in my apartment for six years, and I am very thankful for the roof over my head.

I may not be where I want to be, but I thank God that I am not where I used to be – living on the streets of New York City!

Shelterizm

By Montgomery

*Humiliating? Demoralizing?
Degrading?*

What better place to start than from the beginning? I was evicted from my apartment – overeducated and hopelessly unemployed.

Suddenly, there I was, gazing up beyond the scaffolding at Bellevue – a menacing 18th-century brick building, an old asylum, a pavilion for the insane. This was the men's intake center at the Department of Homeless Services (DHS).

I saw people of all types before me: veterans from the past and soldiers with fresh cases of PTSD, elderly people in need and those with severe disabilities – mental and/or physical – those displaced by their families for being LGBTQ, young Bloods and original gangsters, formerly incarcerated folks and drug runners, men deeply addicted to alcohol and drugs, and more. For some, the categories bleed over, but it all runs deep.

Forget about being pigeon-holed – we were all marginalized in one form or another – *and we were all in this together*. It soon became a game of “us versus them.”

Shelter staff did not care about us – they were too busy being glued to their phones, choosing favorites, and enforcing the

rules at their leisure. You think stealing from the homeless and disenfranchised seems unspeakable, but, honestly, it happens every day. Forget speaking up – that can get you transferred in a heartbeat, or worse.

You very quickly learn that it's hard to maintain anything when you're living in a shelter – hard to maintain a job, to maintain sobriety, to maintain family ties, to maintain your very sanity. Forget your overall health and well-being, but, go ahead, try to get some sleep!

Becoming a shelter monitor with the Coalition for the Homeless has been rewarding and even enlightening for me. It's difficult to consider it all in hindsight – to run down the list of clients' rights and DHS regulations, to think of every violation that I've encountered firsthand, and to hear about the hardships of others, especially those with children.

It's nothing nice, but there is hope. It's important to recognize that we do have rights and our voices will be heard. The Client Advisory Group gives us a break from all the madness and a chance to air our grievances. Amongst family.

Things will get better.

Harlem Died

By M.A. Dennis

“Harlem died this morning.”
The passing wasn't unexpected
Yet it still caught us off-guard
Why, God?
We were holding out hope that
It wasn't too late
Maybe a miracle would save Harlem
Dr. Luke Cage could perform heroics
In the operating room
Turn the prognosis around
Prove the medical tests wrong
Show that the results of the scans weren't right...

But according to the text I'm reading right now
We were wrong
Harlem died
This mourning isn't easy
After so much difficulty
Harlem was about to bounce back
Experience another Renaissance
If only Harlem had been
Returned to the water in time
There'd be no returning to dust
Harlem wasn't made to live in a shelter
Subsisting off an Eric Garner income
The second-hand smoke from loosies
Making it hard to breathe
Harlem went too long without oxygen
Gentrification performed an illegal choke-hold
Yet Harlem almost broke free
Almost avoided being done in like the others
Like M&G Fried Chicken
A fixture on The Corner
Killed by Jack the Realtor
Harlem had one foot out the shelter
About to be planted in a James Baldwin studio
Furnished with newfound dignity
If only Harlem had made it
Paris awaited
Purpose
Aspirations
Redemption
Improvement
Serenity

Prayer
Cannot change some things
This is one
Rest in peace, Harlem.



FREE 15-week job training program for women

First Step Program

Computer Training - Microsoft Word, Excel, PowerPoint, Outlook • Internet Research • Resume Writing
Interviewing Skills • Job Placement Assistance
Self-Esteem Building • 2 Month Internship
Case Management • Typing • Literacy Building • Mentoring
Yoga & Meditation • Support Groups • Empowerment

GED not required • New class starting soon!

FREE Continental Breakfast & MetroCards Provided

For more information, please call (212) 776-2074

www.coalitionforthehomeless.org/first-step



Crisis Intervention Program

If you need help, please visit our office during intake hours. No appointment necessary.

We provide assistance with: Problems accessing shelter, including PATH and AFIC
Problems in shelter • Benefits (Public Assistance, Food Stamps, SSI/SSD, Medicaid, etc.)
Establishing a mailing address • Information about housing options • Tenants' rights information • Problems with housing subsidy programs.

129 Fulton Street

Corner of Nassau Street. Located in Lower Manhattan

Walk-in Intake:

Mon, Tues & Thurs: We see the first 50 clients

Wed & Fri: We see the first 30 clients

Return carfare provided.

No appointment necessary, however, intake is limited. Please arrive before 9:00 am to sign up.

Directions:

A, C, 2, 3, 4, 5, J, or Z train to Fulton Street Station.

We also provide referrals for:

Shelter • Clothing • Food pantries and Soup kitchens
Eviction prevention assistance • Legal services • Counseling
Substance use treatment • Job training • Mental health services
Domestic violence issues • Other services



Who We Are

About the Client Advisory Group (CAG)

Formed nearly two decades ago, the Coalition for the Homeless' **Client Advisory Group (CAG)** helps organize New Yorkers living in NYC shelters. CAG is a multifaceted mutual support and activism group that engages in advocacy, education, empowerment, and socialization. *The Monitor* is written by homeless and formerly homeless members of CAG.

Each CAG meeting is facilitated by a Coalition Shelter Specialist, who leads the group in discussions about topics relevant to the members' needs, such as Department of Homeless Services policies and procedures, voting rights,

and ways to cope with the trauma of being homeless.

The group reviews issues they have experienced in the shelters. As the court- and City Hall-appointed independent monitor of the City's shelter system, the Coalition is responsible for making sure shelters are responsive to residents' needs. Shelter Specialists help residents advocate for themselves and empower them with information and education.

The roundtable style of the weekly meetings gives CAG members the chance to share how they have dealt

with similar situations in their shelters, helping to give each member a valuable sense of belonging and purpose.

Outside of the meetings, CAG plays a central role in the Coalition's advocacy efforts. In addition to informing other residents about their rights, CAG members join the Coalition at news conferences, rallies, and marches – even traveling to Albany to challenge government and social policies.

*CAG meets 5 -7 p.m. every Tuesday at the Coalition's office: 129 Fulton Street in lower Manhattan. Dinner and MetroCards are provided. All are welcome! **No one will be admitted after 6 p.m.!***

About the Coalition for the Homeless

The **Coalition for the Homeless** is the nation's oldest advocacy and direct service organization helping homeless men, women, and children. We believe that affordable housing, sufficient food, and the chance to work for a living wage are fundamental rights in a civilized society. Since our inception in 1981, the Coalition has worked through litigation,

public education, and direct services to ensure that these goals are realized.

The Coalition's effectiveness derives from our unique role as both an advocacy and direct service organization. Our programs, shelter monitoring, and grassroots organizing enable us to meet homeless people

where they are – giving voice and hope to the most marginalized among us. Our advocacy is informed by the very real daily struggles of our homeless neighbors, and seeks practical, humane, and cost-effective long-term solutions proven to work. **Because every New Yorker deserves a home.**