

December 14, 2020

Testimony of Cynthia English

Submitted to

The New York City Council's Committee on General Welfare on
Outreach to Unsheltered Individuals

Int 2177-2020: A Local Law to amend the administrative code of the city of New York, in relation to outreach to unsheltered individuals.

Thank you for the opportunity to submit testimony regarding Int. 2177.

As a formerly street homeless New Yorker, I feel I am uniquely qualified to comment on this very serious matter. Unfortunately, my story is not all that unique.

First let me begin by telling you a little bit about my experiences while living on the streets of New York. I became street homeless in the year 2000, largely due to my inability to navigate my life during a period of extreme mental illness. I have a dual diagnosis that includes Bi-Polar 1 disorder and chronic clinical depression. I was in my late 30s and had been up and down for many years. My life became completely unmanageable and I lost everything. I lost my job, my children and finally my apartment. I had no support system and nowhere to go. At this point in my life, I had never had any interaction with the police and no criminal record. I do now.

When police patrolled the streets doing the "sweeps" that were so prevalent during that time, they were a profound source of terror to the homeless community. In my specific case, I was terrified at the thought of being locked up and would immediately go into a state of panic upon seeing them. After my first arrest, which was (I believe) for "resisting arrest," I was completely traumatized. What the police deemed "resisting arrest" was simply my reaction to them coming toward me in a hostile manner, which was my perception of their approach at the time. Now whether or not they were indeed hostile can be left to interpretation. However, what matters is that to my unmedicated and unbalanced mind at that time, my fear and flight instinct took over and I tried to get away from a perceived threat. I ended up in handcuffs, searched by male police officers (which was extremely violating) and thrown into a police van. My subsequent behavior was in line with my mental and emotional state, and I was then treated like a problem. I then spent 10 days on Rikers Island, and my phobia of police was cemented. I was released from jail with a week's worth of medication and a token for the train. I went back to the streets.

Even today, 20 years later, I hold a profound distrust for anyone in a police uniform. I went through similar scenarios over the next six years without ever getting any referrals for mental health treatment or housing. I was arrested 30 times for minor and often trumped-up offenses. These were all chance meetings on my part – no one in the community ever called the police to have me removed as an emotionally disturbed person, a threat to the community, or for committing any crime against property or persons.

I can tell you that through my own experience and my many interactions over the years with those who are still experiencing street homelessness, I am not alone in my fear and distrust of the police. Under ordinary, non-violent circumstances, the people interacting with individuals experiencing street homelessness should be mental health professionals and advocates who are trained in de-escalation techniques and can speak directly to the needs of those who have mental health issues, and who can offer them real resources.

The presence of the police during these interactions often promotes distrust of the other professionals involved and gives the homeless person the perception that they are going to be locked up even if they've done nothing wrong and the intention is to provide assistance. We don't need police presence to accomplish this, and outreach teams might actually be more effective without a police escort. I probably would have left the streets sooner but for the trauma of my many police interactions.

I implore the Council to pass this very important bill which, if implemented correctly, will go a long way in encouraging unsheltered New Yorkers to come in from the cold.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify in favor of Int. 2177-2020.