



Testimony of
Coalition for the Homeless

on

Oversight - The City's Policing Reform Plan

submitted to

New York City Council Committee on Public Safety

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Homelessness in New York City

In November 2020, the number of single adults sleeping in Department of Homeless Services shelters each night reached an all-time record 20,515. October 2020 marked the first time the number of homeless single adults in the shelter system topped 20,000. This drastic increase arises from multiple economic and policy failings, including the lack of affordable and supportive housing for single adults, as well as an increase in homelessness among individuals who were precariously housed prior to the pandemic.

Since the beginning of the pandemic, Coalition programs have seen increased demand for services, particularly among people bedding down on the streets – many of whom report being afraid for their safety in congregate shelters. Unsheltered homeless New Yorkers have long faced daunting challenges and cruel indignities as they draw on meager resources and their own perseverance to survive life on the streets. Their day-to-day struggles include meeting the basic needs for food, clothing, and restrooms, as well as avoiding abuse, including unnecessary, traumatic interactions with law enforcement personnel.

Criminalization of Homeless New Yorkers

Interactions with law enforcement personnel are unfortunately all-too-common for homeless individuals, particularly those who are unsheltered. People of color experience disproportionate rates of homelessness, and the systemic oppression of homeless people of color makes these interactions with law enforcement even more fraught. Depending on where they are located, homeless New Yorkers routinely encounter representatives from multiple law enforcement agencies, including NYPD, MTA Police, DHS Police, Amtrak Police, and Port Authority Police. People who sleep in public spaces encounter frequent interactions with police and are often targeted for a variety of low-level offenses related to their basic survival needs.

The most effective way to reduce unnecessary interactions between police and homeless individuals is to provide affordable and supportive housing on a scale to match the need. The solutions to homelessness are simple: supportive housing, affordable housing, and low-threshold shelters such as single-occupancy hotel rooms.

Ending the criminalization of homelessness in the immediate term will require action by both the City and the State. To that end, the City and State must immediately:

- Prohibit NYPD from responding to 311 calls requesting assistance for homeless individuals and remove NYPD from all homeless outreach functions. Calls to 311 should only result in the deployment of contracted DHS outreach workers.
- Cease encampment-clearing operations and street sweeps, and focus instead on connecting people to resources they want.
- Implement the CCIT-NYC campaign's proposal for non-police responses to mental health crises.

- Administratively clear all summonses issued to homeless individuals for violating transit rules as part of the now-defunct Subway Diversion Program, and clear all other low-level summonses related to surviving unsheltered.
- Reinstate 24-hour subway service, and cease police profiling of homeless individuals in the transit system.
- Prohibit the use of CCTV to monitor unsheltered New Yorkers in the transit system and public spaces.
- Open and staff supervised consumption sites.

The efforts to reform policing in New York City are long overdue, but these discussions must center the voices and experiences of the most vulnerable New Yorkers through genuine engagement and bold solutions. We thank the Council for the opportunity to testify today, and for your steadfast commitment to addressing homelessness and reforming policing.

About Coalition for the Homeless

Coalition for the Homeless: Coalition for the Homeless, founded in 1981, is a not-for-profit advocacy and direct services organization that assists more than 3,500 homeless and at-risk New Yorkers each day. The Coalition advocates for proven, cost-effective solutions to the crisis of modern homelessness, which is now in its fourth decade. The Coalition also protects the rights of homeless people through litigation involving the right to emergency shelter, the right to vote, the right to reasonable accommodations for those with disabilities, and life-saving housing and services for homeless people living with mental illness and HIV/AIDS.

The Coalition operates 11 direct-services programs that offer vital services to homeless, at-risk, and low-income New Yorkers. These programs also demonstrate effective, long-term, scalable solutions and include: Permanent housing for formerly homeless families and individuals living with HIV/AIDS; job-training for homeless and low-income women; and 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, which usually distributes about 900 nutritious hot meals each night to homeless and hungry New Yorkers on the streets of Manhattan and the Bronx, is now regularly serving more than 1,100 meals per night and distributing PPE and emergency supplies during the COVID-19 pandemic. Finally, our Crisis Services Department assists more than 1,000 homeless and at-risk households each month with eviction prevention, individual advocacy, referrals for shelter and emergency food programs, and assistance with public benefits as well as basic necessities such as diapers, formula, work uniforms, and money for medications and groceries. In response to the pandemic, we are operating a special Crisis Hotline (212-776-2177) for homeless individuals who need immediate help finding shelter or meeting other critical needs.

The Coalition was founded in concert with landmark right-to-shelter litigation filed on behalf of homeless men and women (*Callahan v. Carey* and *Eldredge v. Koch*) and remains a plaintiff in these now consolidated cases. In 1981, the City and State entered into a consent decree in *Callahan* through which they agreed: "The City defendants shall provide shelter and board to each homeless man who applies for it provided that (a) the man meets the need standard to qualify for the home relief program established in New York State; or (b) the man by reason of physical, mental or social dysfunction is in need of temporary shelter." The *Eldredge* case extended this legal requirement to homeless single women. The *Callahan* consent decree and the *Eldredge* case also guarantee basic standards for shelters for homeless men and women. Pursuant to the decree, the Coalition serves as court-appointed monitor of municipal shelters for homeless adults, and the City has also authorized the Coalition to monitor other facilities serving homeless families. In 2017, the Coalition, fellow institutional plaintiff Center for Independence of the Disabled – New York, and homeless New Yorkers with disabilities were represented by The Legal Aid Society and pro-bono counsel White & Case in the settlement of *Butler v. City of New York*, which is designed to ensure that the right to shelter includes accessible accommodations for those with disabilities, consistent with Federal, State, and local laws.