



February 26, 2021

The Honorable Bill de Blasio
Mayor of New York City
City Hall
New York, NY 10007

The Honorable Andrew M. Cuomo
Governor of New York State
NYS Capitol Building
Albany, NY 12224

Dear Governor Cuomo and Mayor de Blasio:

We write as organizations serving homeless New Yorkers and transit riders who are concerned about the recent response to the tragedy of people seeking shelter in the subway system.

People do not choose to sleep on the subways. Rather, they choose to avoid shelters for a number of rational reasons. New Yorkers who remain unsheltered or cycle back and forth between being sheltered and unsheltered may work with City-contracted homeless outreach teams to find transitional or permanent housing. However, this is a lengthy process that can take months or even years as outreach teams work to secure an appropriate placement. Relying on agencies that cannot actually house people, such as the police, to engage homeless people will only exacerbate their trauma and force unsheltered New Yorkers to move around, breaking their ties with outreach teams and extending their homelessness. Housing is the answer to homelessness, and it is essential that the State and City address the root causes of this crisis in order to reduce the number of our neighbors who resort to sleeping in the transit system. To truly address the root causes of homelessness in the subways, we urge you to implement the following recommendations:

Governor Cuomo, we urge you to:

1. Reopen the subways 24/7

Forcing people off the subways, even for two hours, during the middle of the night breaks their ties with homeless outreach workers and forces them out into the harsh winter weather. Reopening the subways 24/7 would better enable outreach teams to help people move out of the subways.

2. Pass Home Stability Support and the Housing Access Voucher Program to help people obtain and retain stable housing

The supply of apartments affordable to low-income renters, including those relying on a public assistance shelter allowance, is virtually nonexistent, and many New Yorkers have been shut out of the housing market entirely. Since the lack of affordable housing is the fundamental cause of the homelessness crisis, it is fiscally prudent and, at the same time, far more humane to bridge the difference between incomes and rents to enable people to stay in their homes and communities, and to help those who are already homeless move out of shelters, off the streets, and out of the transit system.

3. Accelerate the supportive housing pipeline and fully fund the remaining 14,000 units of the Governor's 20,000-unit commitment

The shortage of permanent supportive housing prevents many New Yorkers from moving off the streets and out of shelters. For every five eligible applicants, there is currently only one unit of supportive housing available. We are grateful that you promised in 2016 to fund 20,000 units of desperately needed supportive housing over 15 years and committed funding for the first 6,000 units. The Executive Budget Proposal includes funding for another year of the supportive housing plan, but it is imperative that the State continue to fund the balance of the 20,000-unit commitment and bring units online as quickly as possible.

4. Invest in more voluntary mental health care, not involuntary measures

The Executive Budget Proposal has advanced the idea of involuntarily removing homeless people from the streets by force, and taking them to hospitals and other locations against their will. New Yorkers with mental illness need support and access to care, not involuntary removal. Too often, people in psychiatric crisis encounter insurmountable obstacles when they seek inpatient or outpatient mental health care on a voluntary basis. Regrettably, the mental health system has largely been dismantled through the commercialization of mental health care as a "managed care" Medicaid benefit that actually benefits few. State leaders must eliminate these involuntary commitment proposals and instead invest in expanding access to mental health care and supportive housing.

Mayor de Blasio, we urge you to:

1. Expand the successful stabilization bed program and offer every unsheltered New Yorker a single-occupancy hotel room for the duration of the pandemic

People do not sleep on the subways because they want to; rather, they sleep on the subways because they feel it is their safest option. Stabilization beds – single or shared rooms often set up in hotels, faith-based sites, or YMCAs – provide a much better option for homeless New Yorkers seeking an alternative to the subways: According to data obtained by the *New York Times*, “just 29 percent of people who went from a subway station to a traditional shelter decided to spend the night. Of those taken to a stabilization bed, 66 percent remained for the night.” As it stands, the stabilization bed program is at capacity with a long waitlist, as the demand for such beds still far exceeds the supply.

The City should add at least 3,000 beds in single-occupancy hotel rooms or faith-based sites to its stabilization bed program so that people have a better alternative than the subways as they work to secure permanent housing and stability.

2. Pass Intro 146 to bring the CityFHEPS voucher up to Section 8 levels

Many people sleeping on the subways do not want or need the additional supports that come with supportive housing, which is often the first permanent housing option outreach teams suggest. Rather, they are homeless because they cannot afford rent. Some homeless New Yorkers are able to obtain a CityFHEPS voucher from the Department of Homeless Services and try to find an apartment using the voucher. Unfortunately, the voucher allowances are so far below Fair Market Rent levels that fewer than 5 percent of voucher holders are able to find an apartment month-over-month. By passing Intro 146, the City could make the CityFHEPS voucher significantly more effective and empower people to find housing on the free market.

3. Expand the City’s supportive housing capacity and adopt a true Housing First model

Supportive housing is likely to be the most appropriate housing option for many homeless New Yorkers currently sleeping in the transit system, and so the City should expand and accelerate its commitment to building supportive housing. The City must also immediately reduce bureaucratic barriers in the supportive housing application process for unsheltered individuals and work to ensure that providers accept those who need supportive housing most, rather than only those whom they deem “ready for housing.” In a true Housing First model, everyone is housing ready and should receive housing assistance even if they have other unmet needs. The City must also ensure that undocumented New Yorkers have equal access to affordable and supportive housing.

4. Hire peer outreach workers

The City should provide additional funding to its homeless outreach teams to hire formerly homeless New Yorkers as “Peer Outreach workers” to serve on outreach teams. Homeless New Yorkers often express a desire to work with outreach workers who can empathize with them from firsthand experience. Peers would be an excellent complement to any additional mental health support.

Again, housing is the answer to homelessness, and it is essential that we address the root causes of this crisis in order to reduce the number of our neighbors who resort to sleeping in the transit system. We appreciate your attention to this urgent issue and look forward to future collaboration on ways to help our homeless neighbors move out of the subways and into homes of their own.

Sincerely,
Coalition for the Homeless
Human.nyc
Riders Alliance