

The Monitor

Free Newsletter by the Coalition for the Homeless Client Advisory Group

CAG Member Spotlight: Larry

BY M.A. Dennis

How It Started

In 2017, I was released from prison after being incarcerated for two decades. I was paroled to a shelter, starting at 30th Street Intake before I was transferred to Wards Island. After about a month, I started with The Doe Fund's Ready, Willing & Able program and transferred to Porter Avenue Men's Shelter in Brooklyn. I was working to help clean the streets, and my main place was Brooklyn Bridge Park and Downtown Brooklyn. About four months after my release, I met my lady, Tracy. Eventually, I found a job on my own at Hornblower Cruise Lines, as a dishwasher, and, shortly after that, I moved to Harlem to live with my lady.

Then tragedy struck: My lady had a stroke, and she later passed away in July 2020. I went back into the shelter system to find my own place. I started in Brooklyn, then got transferred. Due to COVID-19 they started placing homeless people in hotels. I was sent to the Washington Jefferson Hotel, operated by Project Renewal, and while there I started going to St. Bart's Church where the Coalition for the Homeless was giving out food and clothing. That's where I met Coalition worker Vera. We started talking and became friends. I told her how the shelters were run, but I was just venting. She was like my release valve. She told me maybe I should write down my

experiences.

I found a job in the Brooklyn Navy Yard, making face shields for the hospitals and helping the essential workers. Eventually, I was moved to the Lucerne Hotel, and that is where I started advocating for the homeless. I wrote out what I was going through in dealing with the Mayor's office. They were moving us around like we were cattle. Jacquie, who is the Senior Policy Analyst for the Coalition, encouraged me to write an op-ed. Next thing I knew, I had an op-ed in the Daily News.

I went to Gracie Mansion and spoke about how the Mayor was using us like chess pieces. That got the attention of City officials. Then they tried to move us to the Radisson Hotel, and that's when we went to court to fight against the constant shuffling. We won a temporary stay against the City moving us. Around that time, I also got approved for a new apartment with help from Project Renewal. At press conferences, I talked about how I was approved for housing more than once, but the City's constant shuffling of me from shelter to shelter delayed my move into permanent housing.

How It's Going

In November 2020, I finally moved into my new apartment. It's a railroad flat with a hallway, bathroom, living room, kitchen, and bedroom. I actually cried my first night in my apartment because it'd been such a long journey. After doing two decades in prison and then being released to a shelter, and also losing my mother and brother, I was released, literally, to nothing and no one. Moving into my apartment was like a relief, a big burden off my shoulders. Finally, I was able to say, "I got my own something." My goals had always been to have my own apartment and a nice job, and to meet a nice lady. I cried tears of happiness and sadness because all the people who kept pushing and supporting me were not around to see my accomplishment. My feelings are mixed; but, at the end of the day, I'm grateful and happy that I made it.

SHELTER MONITOR HOTLINE

We want to hear from you about conditions in shelters, including those related to bathrooms, elevators, excessive or inadequate heat, general maintenance, laundry, meal service, rodents/vermin, security, etc. Call the Shelter Monitor Hotline at **212-776-2003** or email monitors@cfthomeless.org. Please include your name, phone number, and the name of your shelter.

VIRTUAL CAG

The Coalition's Client Advisory Group (CAG) meets every Tuesday via Zoom! See back page for details.



Larry

Exquisite CAG Poems

BY CAG Members, as recorded by M.A. Dennis

Untitled #1

You never know
What you might say

That could change Somebody's day
Just pick up something
And keep plugging away

A whole lotta
Little differences

Stuck together

Is a big difference

Super Spreader

I wanna get past
This
The 'virus
We should be
Focused
The surge is here
I don't wanna be
In a bubble
Forever

Aw Damn, or How I Got to Yes

BY Rhonda

I was asked if I would take the COVID-19 vaccine when it became available, and had I given it more than a passing thought or deeper consideration, I might have immediately said yes and not have needed to push back. Thanks to my new hero, Dr. Anthony Fauci, I want to amend my answer. Initially, I said that I would not take the vaccine because I wanted evidence that the vaccine would work. I remember getting shots in my arm, which were supposed to inoculate me, and I also remember the Tuskegee experiment. Therefore, I have become a bit of a conspiracy theorist and automatically said, "No."

In search of answers, I began to listen to Dr. Fauci talk about the science of COVID-19 and I began to understand the formula. The vaccine means less chance of getting sick. The vaccine is prevention.

Community engagement will build trust and convince people to get vaccinated. The vaccine is key to getting this virus under control. Although I want tangible proof, I can't afford to wait and see; waiting to see could kill us all. This is about social responsibility, but there are no guarantees. There is only precaution, preparation, and protection.

This virus invades the immune system through inhalation, and it is deadly. Therefore, I will commit to my social responsibility, and I will take my shot to protect my community and myself.



Cynthia gets her first dose

My Journey to Permanent Housing

BY Michel

I am a fashion photographer by trade and have been published internationally for over 30 years with some success and fame. I am now 62.

I declared bankruptcy in 2017, after my divorce. Since I couldn't afford to renew my lease, I shared apartments with generous friends for about two years before I decided to go into the shelter system. I had no clue what it would be like. I had been going to therapy at Bellevue Hospital after being diagnosed with PTSD. That was where I heard about 30th Street Men's Shelter.

The next day, I was assigned a bed and given a lock, and stayed there for six months. Then I was transferred to Harry's Place in Brooklyn. At Harry's Place, there were 50 men instead of 850, but it was still difficult.

One day I was told about the CityFHEPS rent supplement. My therapist knew a real estate agent, and they were very eager to get me out of the shelter. It took four months of endless paperwork mistakes by the shelter's housing specialist to finally get me into a studio in Flushing. I was very lucky that the place stayed on the market that long while the lease was redone three times.

Altogether, I was in shelters for a year and a half. It was probably one of the most difficult times of my life and I am glad it's over now. My blood pressure went back down to normal. I have been in my studio four months now, and I am putting as much effort as I can into finding work.



Michel

My Vaccination Experience

BY Mary

At the end of 2020, months into the COVID-19 pandemic, the tireless work of scientists brought a light at the end of the tunnel: a vaccine. Pfizer and Moderna vaccines began rolling out and it felt like a hopeful marker for our eventual recovery. In January, the eligibility criteria expanded, and I became eligible to receive a vaccine. I navigated the complex online scheduling system and got an appointment for a Sunday. I followed the instructions sent to me via email, and completed the pre-screening form the morning of the appointment, which generated a QR code to be scanned at the vaccination site. I made sure to bring a photo ID and a letter to verify eligibility to the appointment.

When I arrived at the vaccine hub, a line snaked from the entrance down the ramp outside. Staff checked appointment IDs and scanned QR codes. I was not asked for other documentation. I waited over an hour; however, some people bypassed the line due to age or disability.

Once inside, I was directed to a table where the medical practitioner who would administer the vaccination was seated. She gave me information explaining the vaccine and possible side effects, and a CDC vaccine card with the date of my second dose. I chose the arm to be injected and she gave me the shot – a quick and mostly painless process!

I was then directed to another room where I was monitored for 15 minutes. EMS was nearby in case a rare allergic reaction occurred. My arm felt itchy for a few minutes and was a bit sore, but I felt fine otherwise. I scheduled my second dose appointment for mid-February, via the online portal, which also went smoothly aside from feeling some mild side effects the day after. Despite the complex rollout, I am hopeful that in the coming months everyone will have the opportunity to be immunized to help us move forward into a healthier future.

Showers: Care Plus Community BY Tommy

In April 2020, I received an email alert stating that Médecins Sans Frontières, in collaboration with Coalition for the Homeless, was looking for attendants to help operate a mobile shower trailer for New York City's homeless population. Many places where homeless people usually showered or freshened up closed due to the pandemic and a massive spike in street homelessness occurred. This project was and still is a dire necessity for so many of our neighbors. I applied for and got the job.

Over the course of the summer, I worked with an extraordinary team of hardworking people dedicated to ensuring dignity, justice, and compassion for some of New York's most vulnerable. We provided thousands of hot showers, towels, body wash, shampoo, conditioner, toothbrushes, toothpaste, combs, deodorant, underwear, razors, shaving cream, snack bags, and much more.

I was blessed to meet hundreds of guests who visited our showers regularly, people fighting for their humanity in an often dark and unjust world. Many of the guests visited each and every day, and I always got up in the morning excited to see the people I grew to love.

There isn't really a way to prepare for the

emotional journey one takes working on a project like this. Countless relationships were formed. People shared stories of the adversity they've faced. I watched people enter the showers feeling hopeless and then leaving with a sense of dignity and pride. It's rare to work on a project that makes one feel excited about every day, and I was lucky to have found such a place in a time of uncertainty and chaos.

On my final day working at the showers, I felt sentimental and walked past the various

"I watched people enter the showers feeling hopeless and then leaving with a sense of dignity and pride."

shower locations we had operated. After the final stop, I walked to the subway station to head home and bumped into a guest who was particularly special to me but hadn't come to the showers after we moved locations. She started dancing

and clapping when she recognized me, and we sat together for a while. I felt myself so moved by this reunification.

This coincidental encounter is a stark reminder that care plus community doesn't begin and end at the shower trailer, folding towels and distributing hygiene kits. They live in everyday interactions, in conversations with those around us, in the fight for housing as a human right, food sovereignty, and access to essential needs. The lessons and love from working on this project are lessons and love I will carry with me every day for the rest of my life. May we all be so lucky to be part of something that makes us clap and dance.



The shower trailer staff

Update on the Coalition for the Homeless' Advocacy

BY Jacquie

The Coalition's Advocacy team remains focused on the COVID-19 pandemic. Our shelter monitors continue to respond to calls about shelter issues and conduct in-person outreach outside shelters throughout the city. They speak with clients about shelter conditions and raise awareness of the Coalition's services, in addition to providing information about COVID-19 testing and vaccination.

Our policy team has continued to advocate for comprehensive policy responses related to shelters and outreach, public assistance, and housing in order to protect vulnerable New Yorkers from COVID-19. We have continued to urge City officials to provide public restrooms for people on the streets and to resist the misguided and short-sighted calls to move people back into congregate shelters before it is safe to do so.

Fall 2020 was marked by the filing of two major lawsuits. On October 23rd, The Legal Aid Society and Jenner & Block LLP filed *Fisher v. City of New York* on behalf of the Coalition for the Homeless and homeless single adult New Yorkers because DHS has failed to adequately protect all single adults in need of shelter by temporarily providing safe shelter that is free of significant health risks from aerosol transmission of the coronavirus. The lawsuit seeks to require the City to offer a single-occupancy hotel room to each single adult homeless New Yorker for the duration of the COVID-19 pandemic, among other forms of relief.

Our efforts to ensure that homeless students have access to the online classroom also culminated in litigation. On October 8th, the law firm Milbank and The Legal Aid Society sent a letter on our behalf to DHS regarding

the lack of internet access for school-age children in DHS shelters – following months of Coalition and Legal Aid staff raising the issue to City officials without progress. Facing mounting public pressure, the City responded that they would install WiFi in family shelters by next summer – essentially writing off the entire schoolyear for thousands of homeless children. On November 24th, The Legal Aid Society and Milbank, representing the Coalition for the Homeless and shelter residents, filed *E.G. v. City of New York* against the de Blasio Administration for its failure to provide students who reside in City shelters access to reliable internet service so they can attend school remotely. The lawsuit sought a quicker timetable for installation of WiFi in family shelters. Visit coalitionforthehomeless.org to learn more.



FIRST STEP

Free Six-Week Human Services ONLINE training opportunity

REQUIREMENTS

- Be 18 or older
- Identify as female
- Access to a desktop or laptop computer with a camera (ALL classes held via Zoom) and reliable internet
- Live in one of the 5 boroughs
- Have work authorization
- GED or high school diploma
- Ability to commit to the timeframe and have childcare if applicable

Gain skills in the human services field

May 10 - June 18; Mon. - Fri. 9:30am - 2:30pm

To register for our upcoming information session, please call (347) 731-2339

Crisis Intervention Services

Due to the public health crisis caused by COVID-19, Crisis Intervention Services are available remotely, but we still want to hear from you!

Please call us if you need help with any shelter, housing, or benefits issues, including:

- Finding or accessing shelters
- Shelter placement problems
- Reasonable accommodations in shelters
- Applying for benefits
- Problems receiving benefits
- Information about housing options
- Finding food, a shower, or clothing
- Obtaining a mail account
- Your rights on the streets and in the subways

Call our emergency Crisis Intervention Services hotline at 1-888-358-2384. We will return your call the same day and do our best to answer your question or advocate on your behalf. Be sure to leave your name and phone number.

About the Client Advisory Group

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.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, CAG will not meet in person. Until further notice, CAG will meet every Tuesday from 5 to 6 p.m. via the Zoom app. All are welcome to join!

Please email monitors@cfthomeless.org to request an invitation containing a link to the virtual meeting. You can join by phone even if you do not have consistent internet access.

About the Coalition for the Homeless

The **Coalition for the Homeless** is the nation's oldest advocacy and direct service organization helping homeless individuals and families. 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.**