

Meeting the Needs of Unsheltered New Yorkers: Policy Recommendations

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. Now, as the pandemic continues to shape life in New York City, unsheltered New Yorkers face even greater challenges. New York City and New York State must immediately decriminalize unsheltered homelessness, meet the immediate needs of homeless New Yorkers, and provide them with ready access to stable, permanent affordable and supportive housing options.

To expand access to **permanent housing**, the City and State must immediately:

- Accelerate the supportive housing pipeline and eliminate bureaucratic barriers to placement, with a true Housing First model.
- Ensure that undocumented New Yorkers have equal access to affordable and supportive housing.
- Reform the process for documenting unsheltered homelessness for the purpose of eligibility for supportive housing by eliminating unnecessary barriers and needlessly complex requirements.

To create **alternatives to congregate shelters and improve outreach**, the City must immediately:

- Open at least 3,000 new Safe Haven and stabilization beds in single-occupancy rooms and offer them to all unsheltered homeless individuals.
- Expand the number of Safe Haven and stabilization beds for women.
- Allow individuals with multiple disabling conditions, intellectual or developmental disabilities, or chronic/severe medical issues to enter Safe Havens without first proving they have been on the streets for nine months and/or out of the DHS municipal shelter system for six months.
- Reform the process of providing outreach to unsheltered homeless individuals to a client-centered, harm reduction approach. This reform should include expanding the number of providers that conduct outreach in the subways.
- Create a role for peers to provide outreach services and ensure that unsheltered New Yorkers have a voice in policymaking.

To address the **basic survival needs** of individuals on the streets, the City must immediately:

- Open a network of public restrooms and showers across the city that are staffed and cleaned consistent with COVID-19 precautions. Public restrooms should be available 24 hours a day.
- Equip outreach teams with essential items such as socks, masks, hand sanitizer, backpacks, clothing, and coats.
- Expand access to low-barrier medical and mental health care, including medical respite programs, virtual care, and street medicine.

- Open a sufficient network of 24-hour warming centers throughout the city with proper air filtration and ventilation, appropriate safety protocols, and adequate PPE.

To **end the criminalization** of unsheltered homelessness, 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, focusing 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 overdose prevention sites as a harm reduction model.