



Testimony of
Coalition for the Homeless

before the NYS Assembly Standing Committee on
Social Services

Public Assistance Benefits

submitted by

Shelly Nortz
Deputy Executive Director for Policy
Coalition for the Homeless

October 26, 2022

Thank you for the invitation to submit testimony for this timely and important public hearing. My name is Shelly Nortz, and since 1987 I have had the privilege of working for the Coalition for the Homeless in Albany to secure State support for programs and policies that prevent and address homelessness and the socioeconomic problems that cause homelessness.

As we testified in [2020](#), [2021](#), and [2022](#), the pandemic has had a devastating impact on homeless New Yorkers, and it continues to present a dangerous threat to those who sleep in shelters, those living unsheltered on the streets, and those who are at risk of becoming homeless due to the economic fallout. While the number of people sleeping in New York City shelters had fallen in the past two years, largely due to the eviction moratoria, the number of families and adults sleeping in Department of Homeless Services (DHS) shelters recently reached, and continues to eclipse, an all-time [record](#).

The recent surge in demand for shelter in NYC stems in part from a large number of individuals and families, many seeking asylum, who have arrived in New York City in recent months, and also in part because those already homeless face daunting obstacles as they seek permanent homes in a very expensive real estate market as well as rampant discrimination.

Further, the [average length of stay](#) in DHS shelters has risen to all-time highs, with single adults spending an average of 509 days in shelters, families with minor children spending 534 days, and adult families spending a staggering 855 days. This underscores the fact that homelessness is both increasingly inevitable and exceedingly difficult to overcome in the absence of a coherent policy that supports poor New Yorkers in stable homes.

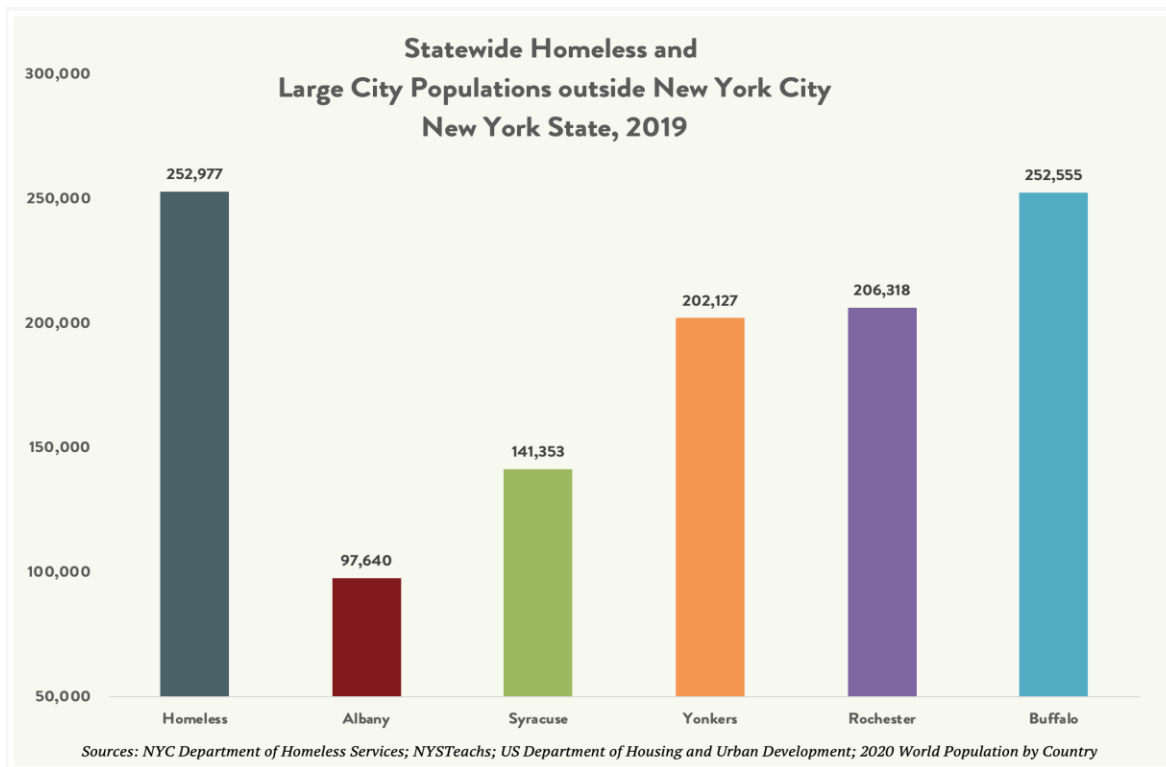
The obstacles homeless families and individuals encounter as they seek housing are truly insurmountable for those who rely on public assistance. Their extreme poverty is the single greatest problem that leads to – and extends – their homelessness. Indeed, the allowances poor people are provided to live on through public assistance equal only 34 percent to 44 percent of the Federal Poverty Level (for households of three) and leave recipients so destitute that few are able to secure and retain stable housing. It is a shocking failure of government given the mandate to aid the needy enshrined in our State Constitution.

Too many New Yorkers are precariously housed – renting rooms by the week, living doubled-up, surviving paycheck-to-paycheck – and their fragile hold on a safe place to stay in the midst of a pandemic is jeopardized, especially now that the eviction moratorium has unfortunately been allowed to expire while there may still be billions in outstanding rent arrears.

Many, including very large numbers of individuals living with various disabilities and serious health conditions, are left with a choice between entering a shelter system that inappropriately relies on congregate facilities where they may be exposed to aerosol transmission of the deadly coronavirus, or sleeping rough on the streets, where they may die of exposure or as a result of a violent act. Furthermore, due to systemic racism and persistent inequities, New Yorkers of color are more likely to experience homelessness *and* more likely to succumb to the virus.

In 2019, there were more than 250,000 New Yorkers who were homeless at some point (statewide), exceeding the entire population of Buffalo. New York City, where 85 percent of the state's homeless population lives, remains the epicenter of the worst homelessness crisis since the Great Depression. And,

as the epicenter of the COVID-19 crisis, and with the recent influx of immigrants from the southern border, the city is already seeing the next wave of homelessness. The economic impact of the pandemic continues to foster displacement and drive rents into the stratosphere.



Over the course of City fiscal year 2021, 107,510 different homeless adults and children slept in the New York City DHS shelter system, and this included 31,947 homeless children. The number of homeless New Yorkers sleeping each night in municipal shelters is now 15 percent higher than it was 10 years ago, and the number of homeless single adults is 89 percent higher than it was 10 years ago.

The Right to Shelter is Essential, and a Right to Stable Housing is Too

It has been more than 40 years since the right to shelter was first established in New York City with the signing of the *Callahan* Consent Decree in August of 1981. At that time, it was inconceivable that the number of New Yorkers without homes would grow almost unchecked for four decades, creating a need for a shelter system that, at its pre-2022 height in January 2019, provided beds for nearly 64,000 people each night.

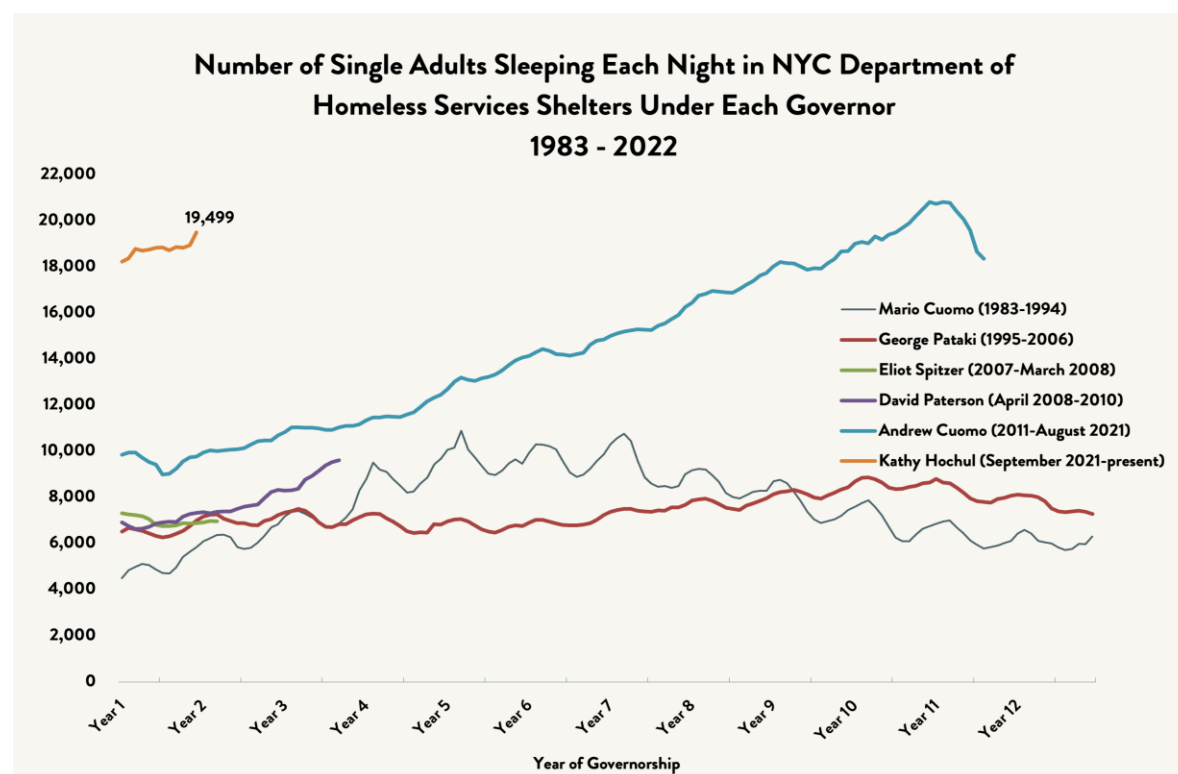
The root of this problem is the Federal government's abdication of its responsibility to provide housing for low-income renters, along with the subsequent failure of the City and State to view it as a housing crisis and not a homelessness crisis. This mindset has fueled decades of shortsighted policies and a reflexive retreat into simplistic, often ideological attempts to manage the problem, rather than solve it. The cost of this failure has been massive in both its human and monetary quotients.

While the right to shelter in NYC creates a critical baseline of decency in our city – and has, over the past four decades, saved countless lives by providing those who have lost their homes with an alternative to bedding down on the streets – shelters do not solve homelessness. Housing does. The moral imperative of providing all with the dignity and safety of a home has never been more strikingly obvious than it has during the pandemic.

Legacy of State Inaction

There are far more single individuals seeking shelter each night now in New York City than at any point since modern mass homelessness began. The reasons for this are clear. Former Gov. Andrew Cuomo:

- failed to ever raise the “shelter allowance,” the amount allotted to recipients of cash assistance, which was last updated for families in 2003 and most adult households in 1988;
- eliminated State funds for a mediocre rent subsidy program without ever replacing it with a better one;
- failed to spend rent supplement funds appropriated by the Legislature;
- dragged out the process of starting a new State supportive housing program for years; and
- released increasing numbers of people from State prisons directly to NYC shelters rather than investing in adequate reentry planning.



Worsening Affordable Housing Shortage Leaves Public Assistance Households Homeless

The supply of apartments affordable to low-income renters, including those relying on public assistance, has rapidly disappeared, 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 instead of being forced into the costly and impermanent shelter system, and to help those who are already homeless move out of shelters. ***The FY2022 Fair Market Rent for a two-bedroom apartment in New York City is \$2,026, far beyond the means of those who receive public assistance.***

Not surprising, given the outdated and inadequate shelter allowance and the absence of adequate programs to enable New Yorkers to afford rent, a 2016 analysis found that two-thirds of the 171,000 households receiving public assistance shelter allowances statewide have rents that exceed their allowances, placing them at risk of homelessness. Of these, more than 80,000 households were then on the brink of homelessness, and surely their number has grown, their circumstances even more acute since then. According to the NYS Action Plan Amendment filed in September 2020 with the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD):

“Over 59,000 individuals are at-risk of being homeless each year,” and “966,000 (79%) of the state’s 1.22 million extremely low-income (ELI) households are simply or severely cost-burdened... They face an estimated statewide shortage of 595,900 affordable and available housing units... financial cost burdens in conjunction with the shortage of affordable units (which) puts these extremely low-income households at continuous risk of homelessness.”

In fact, according to City and State plans submitted to HUD (prior to the impact of the pandemic), 23,000 more New Yorkers become homeless than escape homelessness each year. Because homelessness rose so dramatically between 2011 and 2019, New York had to add 31,918 new shelter beds (up 62 percent in that time) even as the State cut back on funds for local housing assistance and shelter operations, shifting many of these costs to municipal governments and taxpayers. With rapidly rising demand for shelter in New York City recently, ***the Department of Homeless Services has added nearly 70 new shelter facilities for single adults and families since April.***

State Policy Needlessly Makes Matters Worse

Further exacerbating the problem, the 2022-23 State Budget again places certain restrictions on State reimbursements to New York City for various rent supplements, including those funded via Temporary Assistance to Needy Families, Safety Net Assistance, and General Fund appropriations and re-appropriations.

It is obvious to anyone who works with poor New Yorkers that unless they win the rare housing lottery apartment, or their name comes up on the very long waiting lists for public housing or Section 8 vouchers, they are destined to face periodic displacement and literal homelessness. It is a simple and appalling fact of life.

And, it doesn't have to be this way. It is within the power of the Governor of the State of New York to fix the problem with the stroke of her pen. She has the power to provide every single recipient with an amount of public assistance sufficient to fully meet their needs by adopting revised regulations. ***In the absence of enough assistance to keep a roof over their heads and meet their other needs, poor New Yorkers have effectively been abandoned, and the commandment in our constitution that the State and localities provide aid, care, and support to the needy has been rendered nothing more than an empty promise.***

In addition to raising public benefit levels to fully cover the needs of all public assistance recipients consistent with the constitutional mandate to aid needy New Yorkers, Governor Hochul should remove all of the appropriation restrictions cited above in order to:

- maximize the number of homeless and at-risk households that can be assisted with rent supplements;
- ensure State financial participation in this proven remedy to address homelessness; and
- ensure that both homeless and at-risk households are assisted simultaneously so that homeless individuals and families can exit shelters, and those at risk can also avoid the loss of their homes.

This is the best way to optimize the impact of State assistance without unintended consequences inherent in the short-sighted restrictions.

The Coalition for the Homeless also supports legislation to raise the paltry personal needs allowances (as low as \$45 per month) provided to individuals and families sleeping in certain shelters to a level equal to the non-shelter cash assistance provided to others residing in most shelters or in their own apartments. It is impossible to meet one's personal needs on \$45 per month.

Thank you for the opportunity to submit testimony. We look forward to working with the Legislature in the coming weeks and months to address homelessness.