



TIME'S UP

Homeless New Yorkers Demand Alternatives to Bloomberg's Failed Five-Year Plan

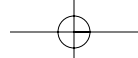


A REPORT BY
PICTURE THE HOMELESS

“ HSP is a program that has been designed to create failure. From experience, I can say that this program is negligent in their responsibilities and reckless in their handling of finances. Due to this mismanagement, I have become homeless again—after being on HSP for thirty months.”

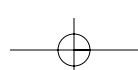
-ABDUL SABUR, PICTURE THE HOMELESS





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I. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

More people are living in homeless shelters now than when Mayor Bloomberg took office in 2002. On June 24th, 2004, Mayor Michael Bloomberg unveiled his Five Year Plan to reduce homelessness in New York City by two-thirds. The failure of Bloomberg's plan is evidence that what is needed are fundamental changes to housing policy in NYC, which is at the root of what is falsely portrayed as a homeless crisis.

New York Magazine has said that his homeless policies are "the single biggest failure of the Bloomberg administration."¹ The 2009 Mayor's Management Report found an across-the-board increase in the shelter census. As the five years of Bloomberg's plan comes to a close, this report focuses on the failures of one of its cornerstones, the Rental Subsidies Programs. Family and child homelessness have increased under these programs, even with thousands of households receiving vouchers, the rental subsidies have built-in obstacles to employment and self-sufficiency so crucial to making the transition out of the shelter system possible.

THE ADMINISTRATION'S RENTAL SUBSIDIES HARM THE HOMELESS

Picture the Homeless conducted in-depth, face to face interviews with 500 homeless New Yorkers over an 18 month period, interviewed landlords and shelter providers, and collected ethnographic evidence. We found that the current rental subsidy programs are not viable avenues to reducing homelessness or sustaining housing. Key findings include:

69% of respondents had been to housing court because of a subsidy-related issue. Instead of enabling homeless people to attain housing stability, these subsidies create a whole new nightmare for people exiting the city's shelter system.

41% of respondents were in rent arrears because of the city's failure to pay its portion

of their rent, with an average debt of \$3,000. City agency ineptitude puts homeless people at risk of eviction and return to the shelters.

While 84% are currently unemployed, 71% said they were mentally and physically capable of working. Far from being a helpless community in need of expensive services, homeless families are kept in poverty by a lack of living-wage-paying jobs and excessive rents.

NEW HOMELESS POLICIES CONTINUE THIS TRACK RECORD OF FAILURE

On May 9, 2009, homeless shelter residents with jobs received word that they were now expected to pay up to 50% of their income in rent. This policy inexplicably only applied to homeless families with children.² After two weeks of bad press and massive outcry from homeless people, shelter staff, and some elected officials, the City announced that "technical issues" had forced them to stop the policy.³ On June 4, NYC papers reported that the Department of Homeless Services was putting homeless families up in vacant luxury condos⁴; one week later, in the face of headlines like "Luxury Lunacy," Bloomberg told the press "We want to move them out."⁵

To fix these flawed programs and create effective avenues for homeless folks to gain housing and keep it, we recommend the following policy changes that are immediately actionable.

CREATE A RENTAL SUBSIDY THAT WORKS FOR ALL HOMELESS NEW YORKERS

The "Advantage" subsidies introduced in 2007 comprised a dizzying array of five different homeless sub-populations—and they still leave out massive numbers of homeless people. Without a subsidy that works for all homeless people, our city's homeless policies will continue to be haphazard, expensive, and ineffective.

"I was pregnant when I went into the apartment I found with my HSP voucher. First thing, half of the bathroom ceiling fell in. Then all the ceilings caved in. They were repaired a month later, but last week the ceiling caved in again, and had to be repaired again."

– GLORIA, PICTURE THE HOMELESS

HRA MUST ISSUE A MORATORIUM ON STOP-PAYMENT NOTICES.

Current welfare policies result in the regular issuance of stop-payment notices for temporary case closures, which lead to nearly half of the city's subsidy recipients getting into rent arrears. Since 92% of sanctions are reversed upon appeal – generally due to caseworker error - a failsafe mechanism must be put into place to ensure that payments continue until final review of the sanction.

NEW YORK CITY MUST ISSUE A MONTHLY LETTER TO SUBSIDY HOLDERS RELAYING THE STATUS OF THEIR SUBSIDY

For many rental subsidy tenants, an eviction notice is their first notification that HRA has stopped paying their rent. The city must provide subsidy holders with monthly documentation of the status of their subsidy, in order to prevent folks from becoming homeless again.

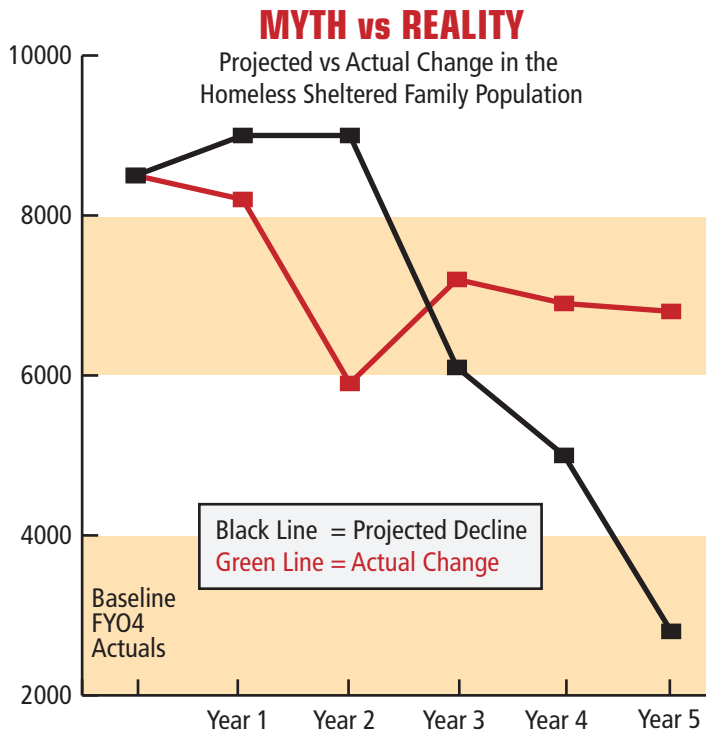
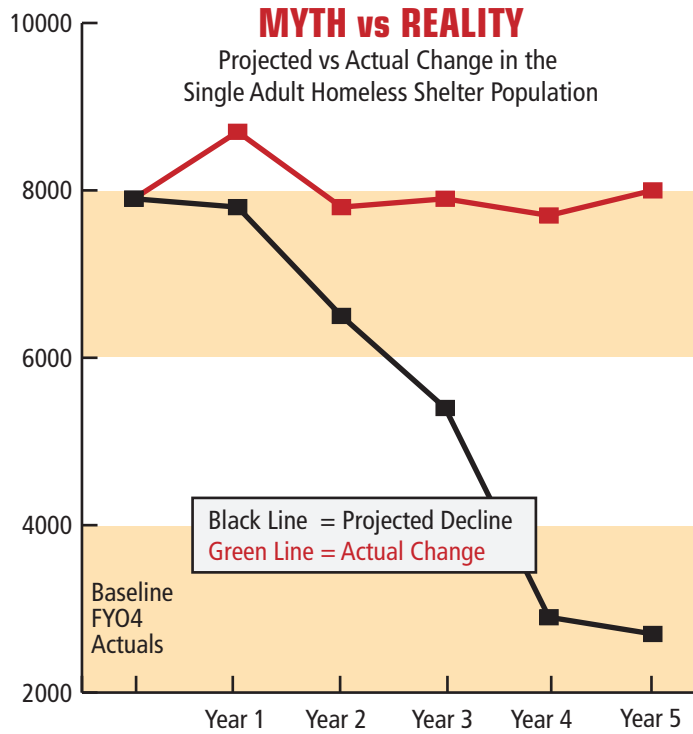
HOUSING, NOT SHELTER!

It makes no sense to pay over \$3,000 a month for a shelter room that doesn't have a bathroom or cooking facility, but to pay less than \$1,000 per month for an apartment – as is the current practice. If the city's policy really was to assist homeless folks to move from shelter to housing, that's where the city's resources would be spent.

Finally, homelessness must be ended, not managed. Homelessness is evidence of the tremendous harm caused to communities of color in extreme poverty by community development practices that privilege some sectors of the community over others. Democracy requires that all members of the community have a voice and a stake in the outcome of policies and practices.

MAYOR BLOOMBERG'S FIVE-YEAR-PLAN IS A FAILURE

Five years after Mayor Bloomberg gave himself the goal of reducing homelessness by two-thirds in five years, the city's own statistics reveal the extent of its failure. As these graphs demonstrate, Bloomberg has failed in his goal of reducing the family shelter population. ■



II. ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This report was prepared jointly by Jamie K. McCallum at the Graduate Center, City University of New York, with Linda Contes, Lynn Lewis and Sam J. Miller at Picture the Homeless. Additional support was provided by Peter Frase and Rachel Swaner. Nikita Price, former Rental Subsidies campaign organizer and a graduate of the first round of the Picture the Homeless organizer trainee program, was key to the success of this project.

Nikita was one of the earliest recipients of a rental subsidy as a shelter resident and single father. He became an expert in all of the program flaws of the first subsidy, Housing Stability Plus. Having personally confronted the lack of a transfer process from HSP to Work Advantage when he secured employment with Picture the Homeless – proof of a major flaw in the program itself—his organizing skills enabled him to translate his individual and anecdotal experiences into an investigation of systemic breakdowns. His ability to build relationships with case workers within the system, and his unwillingness to compromise the dignity of Campaign members when confronted with the paternalism of the Bloomberg Administration, provided the backdrop to our ability to get these interviews.

Campaign leaders such as Sophia Bryant, Delores Williams, Carlos Rosario, Abdul Sabur, Farida Hughes, and Linda Contes also made significant contributions to the development of the Rental Subsidies campaign, to force the Department of Homeless Services to make changes in the voucher programs—for themselves as well as the thousands of other homeless households caught up in the system. Their personal experiences were invaluable in the formation of the survey questions, as well as in conducting interviews and data analysis. Their commitment inspired Emmaia Gelman, at the time a recent MIT graduate, to craft a database and train members on data entry in 2007, so as to enter surveys regarding the Housing Stability Plus program, which in turn helped improve the survey questions and interview techniques.

Time's Up marks the culmination of four years of work by the Rental Subsidies Campaign at Picture the Homeless. Other campaign leaders included Lenora Johnson, Ayesha Rahman, Maria Walles, Manny Contes, Hugh Pressley, Tamela Pacheco, Faizal Baksh, Richard Corley, Michael Garrett, Lisa Davall, Sandra Sage, Nakimuli Francis, Dan Taylor, Katrina Williams, William S. Burnett, Leroy Parker, Willis Garner, and Ryan Gibbs. In addition to risking retaliation for exposing cracks in the

Rental Subsidies Voucher Program, leaders who invested time and skills into this Campaign were also facing the same challenges outlined in this report, including evic-

GLOSSARY AND COMMONLY-USED ACRONYMS

ACS—Administration for Children's Services (New York City).

DHS—Department of Homeless Services (New York City).

EAU—Emergency Assistance Unit; notorious central intake center for homeless families with children seeking shelter. Closed in 2006.

Home Base. A central component of Mayor Bloomberg's Five Year Plan, HomeBase was intended to provide "prevention services" such as back-rent payments and family counseling, so at-risk households would not need to apply for shelter.

HRA—Human Resources Administration (New York City).

HSP—Housing Stability Plus, the city rental subsidy for homeless shelter residents from 2004 to 2007; funded with city, state, and federal money.

OTDA—Office of Temporary and Disability Assistance (New York State).

PA—Public Assistance.

PATH—Prevention Assistance and Temporary Housing; the family intake center that replaced the EAU in 2006, located in the Bronx.

Shelter Industrial Complex. New York City's massive network of city-funded homeless shelters, where 35,000+ people are warehoused at any given moment, at a cost of over \$750 million every year. Thousands of jobs depend on this complex, mirroring the prison system by creating jobs through other people's oppression.

TANF—Temporary Aid to Needy Families (US Federal Government).

WEP—Work Experience Program; forced labor program that mandates NYC welfare recipients participate in unpaid menial work to continue receiving assistance.

tion and a return to homelessness.

Emmaia Gelman, Theresa Okeh of the Kickin Azz Van Club, Darya Vladimirovna (a New School student when we met her), the Radical Homosexual Agenda, and the members of the Asociacion Pro Derechos de los Confinados, were all allies who provided moral and material support to the Rental Subsidies Campaign. Finally, the two campaign organizers spanning the four years of the campaign, Tyletha Samuels and Nikita Price, as well as organizer trainees assigned to the Campaign, Letitia Ledan, Rosemarie Santiago and summer organizing intern, Dalida Javier, all played important roles in the development of this project.

Finally, we are grateful to Trinidad M. Peña of Impact Design Graphics for her powerful graphic representation of our work.

While we acknowledge the participation of everyone who assisted Picture the Homeless with this project, without the organizers, organizer trainees and members and leaders who were personally impacted by these programs, who had the expertise and access to other homeless people subject to the flaws inherent in the program design and who also had access to the highest levels of the Department of Homeless Services as representatives of Picture the Homeless, this report would not have been possible. ■

III. ABOUT THE ORGANIZATION

Picture the Homeless is a grass roots organization that was founded and is led by homeless New Yorkers. Individuals and families who are homeless are the best equipped to determine the problems, the solutions and the tactics required to end homelessness, for themselves as well as for their communities. Over the past ten years, we have built an organization which provides the space, the resources and the opportunities to organize and collectively carry out campaigns which address the root causes of homelessness. We utilize multiple strategies to move our organizing campaigns forward. Outreach, issue identification, documentation, direct action, civil disobedience, participatory research, public education, public policy work, litigation, media work, popular education and ally work are among the tools that we use in various combinations to both build power among people who are homeless,

as well as move targets to cede our demands.

Picture the Homeless was founded by two homeless men, Anthony Williams and Lewis Haggins, in November, 1999. Both were staying in Bellevue Men's Shelter.

If the silence of the poor, and our acquiescence to oppression, is necessary to maintaining inequality, we have learned that making our voices heard is only the first step in dismantling it.

Like most homeless folks, they knew that real solutions to homelessness are possible. We were born out of the need to end the mass institutionalization of homeless individuals and families in shelters and jails and to change the negative images of homeless people in the public imagination – an image based on negative, racist stereotypes of criminality, mental illness, addiction. Images based provide cover for punitive public policies.

Today, Picture the Homeless is a citywide, multiracial, bilingual organization and our constituency includes homeless people living in shelters as well as those living on the streets. We challenge the conventional wisdom that everyone is a paycheck away from being homeless.

ABOUT THE ORGANIZATION

Misrepresenting homelessness as something that can happen to anyone takes the focus away from the reality of homelessness and the relationship between extreme poverty, race and housing exclusion.

Homeless folks are the very poor whose incomes are simply too low to afford housing. They are overwhelmingly African American and

Latino in New York City. Whether they belong to other communities, such as LGBT, formerly incarcerated, mentally ill, etc., is secondary to extreme poverty. The question of how to categorize the hundreds of thousands of households living in doubled and tripled up conditions is more nuanced, and a significant number can be considered

homeless, in terms of having no other options by which to obtain their own housing. These numbers are more difficult to quantify, but we shouldn't exclude them from our analysis because we haven't developed the language to discuss them. Hopefully, this will be the topic of further study.

Civil Rights and Housing are the two issues areas within which we have developed organizing campaigns. Our Civil Rights

campaigns demand the right to be in public space free of police harassment, through selective enforcement of the law and Quality of Life ordinances. While housing is not a civil right in the United States, the intersection of race, poverty and homelessness demand that housing exclusion and policing practices be viewed through a broader social justice lens. Our Housing campaign demands the right to housing, not shelters for all homeless and poor people. We primarily focus on the issues of the warehousing vacant buildings and lots and the misallocation of public funding that privileges community development practices that result in gentrification and funding housing development for middle and upper class folks at the expense of the poor. More information on both the Civil Rights and Housing campaigns is available on our website, www.picturethehomeless.org. Our Rental Subsidies campaign monitored and fought for improvements in the Rental Subsidies programs that are the primary source of rental assistance for homeless families to move from shelter to housing, (apart from supportive housing), since 2004. Their hard work has resulted in the following report. ■

The problem is not that there is no money to help homeless people, it is that money is being used to warehouse poor people in shelters and jails – who are overwhelmingly Black and Latino.



IV. CONTEXT, DATA COLLECTION AND METHODOLOGY

The Shelter campaign at Picture the Homeless began analyzing the Mayor's Five Year Plan to Reduce Homelessness upon its release in June of 2004. The Plan itself was comprised of nine components, with homeless prevention and Rental Subsidies being two critical innovations. The Rental Subsidies Campaign emerged in early 2005. We immediately began monitoring the implementation of the first Rental Subsidy, Housing Stability Plus (HSP). Monitoring the consequences of this disastrous program was a vital element of our organizing efforts to force the city to create a housing subsidy program that would help homeless folks get housing and keep it. From monitoring we moved to documentation and data analysis, which this Report is the result of. While participatory research is an important tool, we don't believe that homeless folks need to legitimize their experience through excessive data collection. "Further research" is sometimes code used to quiet dissent, as in "we can't do anything about the problem, until further research is conducted." We hope that this Report is a tool for structural changes in the administration of rental assistance programs for the very poor.

As a homeless membership organization, we had the unique capacity to identify potential program design flaws in HSP and to document its implementation. Many of our members and staff were directly impacted by this subsidy program. In 2006, we began conducting the research and data analysis for this report. For a grass roots organization with 3 paid staff to carry out such an endeavor is testimony to the degree of outrage at the amount of waste and failed promise exemplified by the Rental Subsidies Program. The survey questions reflect-

ed the themes which emerged during outreach. When we approached the DHS with these issues, we were told to refer individual clients to the Advocacy Department. However, as this report reveals, the problems that homeless households encountered are structural, and inherent to the programs design.

The Riverview Welfare Center on 125th St. in Harlem is the designated welfare center for rental subsidy recip-

ients, we focused a lot of our survey collection there. Since all homeless subsidies are administered through HRA, all recipients are obliged to visit the Riverview for regular appointments as well as in emergencies such as requests for fair hearings to appeal a case closure – which triggers rent stop payments. Twice a week, we set up a table on the sidewalk outside of the Riverview Annex and we also infiltrated the center, standing in line and chatting with folks until security noticed us and asked us to leave. For the most part, surveyors were homeless members of our Rental Subsidies Campaign, with some assistance from youth interns and allies, under the coordination of Campaign Organizer Nikita Price. Other survey locations included soup kitchens and shelters. Emmaia Gelman, a graduate student in Urban Planning at MIT, collaborated with the Rental Subsidies campaign organizer Nikita Price (himself a participant in the Housing Stability Plus program), and campaign members to develop a survey and database that could

serve as a tool for documenting the failures of the program. Through this process of data collection and critical analysis, we identified the most egregious issues faced by homeless households caught in the Rental Subsidy programs, collectively brainstormed solutions and developed campaign demands.

Campaign meetings back at the office focused on

"I was the first person to receive a voucher for Child Advantage. Under this program you receive an interview with NYCHA for Section 8. I complied with everything. My paperwork was lost, and DHS offered no apology or explanation. What they offered was one more year on Child Advantage. The Revolving Door Syndrome is very real."

**—SOPHIA BRYANT,
PICTURE THE HOMELESS**

CONTEXT, DATA COLLECTION AND METHODOLOGY

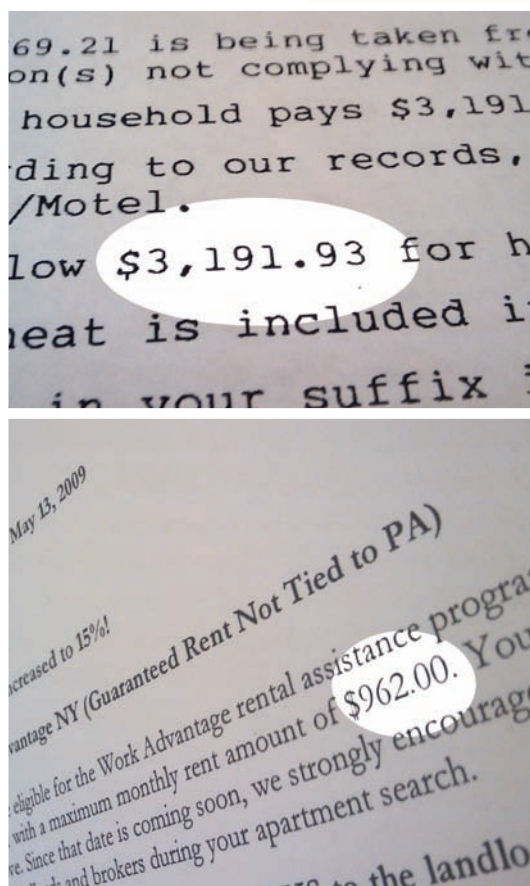
examining the range of issues identified during outreach and survey collection with greater depth. Members identified and analyzed the most commonly cited problems and mapping clusters of issues, such as eligibility, apartment conditions, and housing sustainability. From 2005 until 2009, we waged an organizing campaign to make substantive improvements in the Rental Subsidies programs, some of which we won in April of 2007 with the creation of the Advantage subsidy program.

Over a period of eighteen months from April 2007 to October 2008, Picture the Homeless members, volunteers and staff completed 500 in-depth surveys with New Yorkers who were in homeless shelters and approved for a housing subsidy (about one third of the total sample), or were in housing subsidized by one of the Rental Subsidies programs, were applying for housing subsidies from the Department of Homeless Services, or who were homeless again because they had been evicted from housing due to problems with their rental subsidy. Our survey includes residents of all five boroughs. Data were coded, entered into SPSS, and aggregated to report frequencies. Technical assistance provided by Sociologist Jamie McCallum was instrumental in our ability to sort through our stack of 500+ surveys, code the data, and take the findings back to campaign leaders to begin the data analysis. Additional data was collected through follow-up phone interviews with subsidy clients, as well as face-to-face at the Picture the Homeless office in March and April 2009. Other testimonies used for this report were gathered during the Homeless People's Trial of Mayor Bloomberg, on the 4th anniversary of his Five Year Plan in June of 2008. Interviews with landlords were completed via phone in May 2009 by Jamie McCallum

and Linda Contes.

Finally, the city's decision to prioritize families for these housing subsidies, and therefore the high numbers of survey respondents with children, seems to be dictated more by the intricacies of available funding than from any concern for the well-being of the children and parents. After all, while homeless singles have a right to shelter in New York City, homeless families do not, and for years the city has turned homeless families away when they apply for shelter. The majority of persons in the NYC shelter system are families with children. ■

"BUT THERE'S NO MONEY"



Administration officials like to claim poverty when they're explaining why they can't come up with real solutions to homelessness and the housing crisis. Yet this argument is clearly made in bad faith, considering that the city is already spending massive amounts of money to keep people in shelter—far in excess of what it would cost to provide rental assistance, totaling \$750 million a year. One member of Picture the Homeless received confirmation from HRA that the city was paying over \$3,300 a month to keep them in a tiny shelter room with a shared bathroom and no kitchen. But when that same couple was offered a Work Advantage voucher, the amount was just over \$960 a month! The city has no problem spending massive amounts of money, as long as (1) homeless people continue to represent an opportunity for

other people to profit, and (2) real estate business as usual can continue.

V. STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

A Brief History of Rental Subsidies: A Track Record of Failure

It has been well documented that the failure of government to investment in the creation of new units of housing for people at the lowest income levels (making less than minimum wages, on fixed incomes such as Social Security, receiving public assistance, or working subsistence labor) is the primary cause of the contemporary onset of mass homelessness, beginning in 1980. *It should therefore be no surprise that the ongoing lack of investment in new units of housing for the very poor presents the greatest obstacle to ending homelessness, resulting in an institutionalized homeless service industry on which NYC alone will spend \$750 Million in 2009.*

Through recession and economic boom times, homelessness has steadily increased in NYC since 1981, when shelter utilization was first tracked by the city. It may be counterintuitive, but during both economic good times and bad, the very poor are negatively impacted. The lack of regulation of the housing market and lack of investment in housing for the very poor result in housing exclusion for the very poor. During recession, there are of course less jobs, less money to go around. Yet in economic boom times homelessness has also increased. Rents go up because there is more money circulating around and those at the lowest income levels are squeezed out of the housing market. Often, this increases gentrification, which in turn, drives out the poorest residents of low-income neighborhoods, overwhelmingly comprised of people of color. Indeed, gentrification has been running rampant from the late 1990's until the recent economic bust in the fall of 2008 in the same neighborhoods producing the highest numbers of homeless families into the shelter system. Among these are Harlem, E Harlem, Bedford Stuyvesant and many areas of the South Bronx.

Entry into shelter, management of the shelter industrial complex, and exit from shelter into housing are the three primary components to New York City's intervention into homelessness – as opposed to making structural changes in the housing market itself. This report does not address the hundreds of thousands of New Yorkers living in overcrowded and illegal housing units, although they do often comprise the pool from which sheltered homeless originate.

Entry into shelter for homeless families is tightly controlled and highly restricted. The City has sought to decrease the ever increasing number of homeless families in shelter by limiting access to shelter for homeless families through its widely criticized intake process at the

Emergency Assistance Unit and more recently the PATH family intake facility. Homeless families have been accused by every city administration since the early 1980's as "using" the shelter system, just to get housing "as if trying to better their often deplorable housing arrangement was some awful character flaw,"^{vi} in the words of Danny Kronenfeld, a member of the Family Homelessness Special Master Panel appointed to oversee reforms of the city's intake process for families with children, pregnant women and childless couples. *As recently as July 2, 2009, Mayor Bloomberg stated in a Mayoral debate sponsored by the Working Families Party, that there are more homeless people in shelters today because he has made the shelter system more attractive!*

Each City Administration over the past 30 years has been forced to address homelessness because it has been unabating, even as they attempt limit access to shelter for families. Each has attempted to manage – not solve - homelessness by expanding the shelter system – due to advocacy and litigation brought on behalf of homeless New Yorkers and the resistance of homeless New Yorkers themselves. The result however has most probably saved lives, but not reduced homelessness. Exit from shelter has largely relied upon the creation of a hodgepodge of special needs housing programs, and assigned preference to homeless families for NYCHA and Section 8 vouchers. To a certain extent, this approach mirrors how funding for homeless programs is doled out by the federal, state and city governments. Each City administration's approach to housing homeless New Yorkers has relied upon privileging certain sub-populations of homeless people over others—mentally ill over addicts, singles over families, etc., again due to eligibility criteria for "homeless housing" as dictated by funding. Section 8 and NYCHA have also been avenues out of shelter and into subsidized housing for homeless New Yorkers.

At the start of 2000, the city still relied primarily on Section 8 vouchers and the availability of public housing to move at least a percentage of homeless folks into permanent homes, because even during these relatively flush economic times, new housing for the very poor was not in the cities' capital budget. Section 8 has been successful because it allows folks to pay 30% of their income for rent and there is no time limit to the housing subsidy – which is critical in the New York City housing market.

In 2004, 5,777 homeless families transitioned from shelters to homes with Section 8 vouchers and federally-subsidized public housing, by far the most since 1990. *The fact that the total shelter numbers did not decrease*

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

since that time is a sign of the increasing numbers of folks coming into the system - an indicator of the worsening of the housing crisis under Mayor Bloomberg.

Then in 2005, in a stunning reversal of two decades of city policy, the Bloomberg administration removed homelessness as a priority for the two primary housing subsidies that had been working: Section 8 vouchers and public housing programs, ostensibly in response to massive Section 8 cuts from the federal government. However, when 12,000 new Section 8 vouchers were released to New York City in early 2007, and 5,000 new public housing units made available homeless New Yorkers were not reinstated as a priority. It was actually Picture the Homeless in 2002, who initially informed the Department of Homeless Services, at a meeting with then Commissioner Linda Gibbs, that welfare (TANF) dollars could be spent on housing.

Yet, instead of using TANF funding *in addition* to Section 8 and NYCHA to expand housing resources for homeless New Yorkers, the Bloomberg Administration replaced Section 8 and NYCHA with time-limited subsidies that paid at less than market rate – effectively reducing housing options for homeless families! This, incredibly, during a period of hyper-gentrification where landlords in low income neighborhoods are refusing even Section 8.

Picture the Homeless had been engaged in the plan-

ning and monitoring of the Five Year Plan to Reduce Homelessness since its announcement. Not that we imagined that the City was committed to really reducing homelessness, but out of the understanding that if homeless folks aren't at the table, then even modest reforms don't often materialize. We were active in the task forces created by the Implementation process of the Five Year Plan after its unveiling, beginning in the summer and through the fall of 2004. In fact, we were often the only homeless folks with actual experience with these programs at meetings once Housing Stability Plus was implemented and a monthly workgroup was created to monitor implementation. Some of the early improvements to HSP were a direct result of Picture the Homeless members, who brought photos of substandard housing to these meetings, and proof that landlords were charging them illegal surcharges, in addition to the rent on the lease. When cuts and changes in eligibility criteria for Section 8 and public housing was announced in the fall of 2004, we mobilized homeless folks and housing specialists to look at the impact of these cuts, particularly the over 1,000 households in shelter who already had a Section 8 voucher but were stuck in shelter and desperately seeking housing.

Housing Stability Plus – A Catch 22

Housing Stability Plus (HSP) incorporated fundamental elements of welfare because (TANF) dollars provided the funding for the rental subsidies. This is why being on welfare was a requirement for eligibility for HSP. HSP is administered by the Human Resources Administration

FAILURES OF HOMEBASE

“Homelessness prevention” was another element of Mayor Bloomberg's Five Year Plan that received a great deal of positive media attention. Initially created to help families stabilize their existing housing situations, so they would not need to go into the shelters, in practice the program's structural flaws meant that many people simply could not access any assistance. The initial nine neighborhoods selected were based on their sending the majority of homeless families into the shelter system.

A former case manager at one of the city's HomeBase “homelessness prevention” providers, who asked to remain anonymous, gave Picture the Homeless extensive testimony about the failures of the prevention programs. “There was initial optimism about the program as described by the Department of Homeless Services,” the case worker told us. “Problems cropped up when DHS began to micro-analyze our periodic reports, telling us not to focus on specific issues so much. In effect, DHS created an unwritten “priority system” that severely restricted the program's effectiveness. We were urged not to work on people applying for shelter from NYCHA and Section 8 apartments. This was especially problematic because in the district in which we operate, the vast majority of the people who approached us for help were coming from living doubled-up in these exact situations... Within six months of the implementation of the “homeless prevention” program, the word on the street in this neighborhood was “don't bother; they can't help you.” A housing court judge told us “our experience with HomeBase is that it's totally unrealistic given the timeline at housing court.” I know many HomeBase case workers at other organizations who are leaving, because dissatisfaction and frustration is high across the board.”

(HRA) which also oversees other forms of public assistance like Medicaid, food stamps and cash. Tying rental assistance to welfare guidelines however, meant that getting a low wage job that still kept you within the poverty guidelines but slightly over welfare eligibility criteria, could make you at once ineligible for rental assistance for HSP but also unable to afford rent on your own. This is at the core of the HSP Catch – 22 but there were additional problems in program design and implementation.

Testifying before the New York City Council in December of 2004 about the proposed HSP rental voucher program for homeless New Yorkers in shelter, Linda Gibbs, then Commissioner of the Department of Homeless Services and now Deputy Mayor, was asked what would happen to the homeless people who got a job and lost their subsidy and ended up back in shelter. She responded that “we are not designing a program around the people who fail,” as if getting a job was a sign of failure, as opposed to a rental assistance program that discouraged employment!

DHS's poor inspection process prior to tenant move in, combined with the low dollar value of the subsidies, forced many people into unsafe apartments. Because homeless families are subject to sanction by shelter workers as non-compliant, there was tremendous pressure exerted on families to take apartments through HSP. However, this also created an environment for landlords to charge shelter residents illegal side deals (money above the amount stated on the lease) in order to approve them for apartments because the value of the voucher was far below market rate. Many were obligated to pay out of pocket side deals directly to the landlord in order to get a lease, over and above their on-paper contribution to the rent. Yet when shelter residents didn't get an apartment fast enough, they were sanctioned as non-compliant.

Tremendous obstacles to maintaining housing for HSP tenants, and which is also fundamental to welfare policy, is the 5 year lifetime limit. The HSP subsidy featured a 20% reduction in assistance for each of the 5 years. Under HSP, tenants have to come up with the increased rent balance each year but are prohibited from working at the same time to earn more money without losing the entire subsidy. When asked what would happen to tenants who could not pay the higher rents after the first step-down, Linda Gibbs told the Gotham Gazette “Maybe landlords won't act on evictions – when the rent goes down, they'll let it go.”^{vii} However, the apartments rented through the HSP program are not low income housing but market rate housing. So once the subsidy or

the lease ended, tenants were expected to assume the full amount of the rent.

We were successful in moving the Department of Homeless Services to establish a monthly HSP workgroup to monitor the implementation of the HSP program, yet it took an entire year to get an HRA representative at this meeting, although many of the problems caused by HSP came from HRA and its system of rental payments. Neither the General Welfare Committee, nor the State Social Services Committee has held hearings on the Rental Subsidies programs to date. Although both entities have oversight power and can hold DHS and HRA accountable for systems failures and win improvements for homeless New Yorkers, they have failed to do so.

HSP was widely praised in the media by conservative think tanks and homeless service non-profits that get massive amounts of city money. In a *Daily News* editorial by Doe Fund founder George Macdonald, he praised “Mike's tough love,” and said the new program represented “a quantum leap toward moving homeless people away from a mentality of dependency and entitlement, toward one of self-regeneration and self-sufficiency”^{viii}. However, HSP was immediately recognized by homeless people as inherently flawed with potentially catastrophic consequences. Members of Picture the Homeless testified before the New York City Council and the New York State Assembly in 2005 to highlight the program's internal contradictions, prepared with graphs and charts that were far more detailed and sophisticated than anything the city bureaucrats could offer in support of the plan. It is typical of these processes however, that the policy makers and public officials speak first and then leave, while the people directly impacted by the programs speak last, to a generally empty hearing room.

Because HSP was designed to disallow work and required welfare participation, it kept folks in poverty. Inconsistencies in rental payments by HRA created another set of obstacles for homeless families to maintain housing. HRA is notorious for caseworker and computer errors that result in case sanctions, the majority of which are overturned once participants file for a “fair hearing”. After the first generation of HSP apartments were up for lease renewal, many landlords refused to renew HSP leases, and it was a challenge to find new landlords were interested in accepting the program. While the Department of Homeless Services replaced HSP with the “Advantage” programs (detailed below) thousands of tenants are still stuck in HSP apartments—as indicated in our survey results, and in our interview with HSP recipient

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

Delores Williams on page 19. Poorly conceived and poorly implemented, the issuance of new HSP vouchers was officially abandoned in April of 2007.

Inefficiency with HRA funded rental payments resulted in disruption to tenants who were dragged into housing court, subject to eviction. Imagine the devastation of being in shelter and getting an apartment through HSP and then being evicted, often losing your

belongings, because the city failed to pay its portion of your rent. HSP participants received misinformation, or sometimes no information, that resulted in sanctions, case closures, eviction notices, in many cases, loss of subsidies. Although the City has officially shifted to the Advantage rental subsidy programs described below, and HSP ended effective April 2007, there are still thousands of formerly homeless households, the majority with children, who are in HSP funded apartments and who are still subject to these flawed policies. As our survey results will indicate, there is no effective transfer

OPPOSITION TO HSP

From the moment of its introduction, homeless people fought to fix or eradicate HSP. Here is a capsule history of the organized opposition that ultimately resulted in its destruction. This report represents the culmination of this organized resistance!

June 2004. Mayor Bloomberg releases his Five Year Plan to end homelessness. Picture the Homeless protests outside his gala breakfast at the Grand Hyatt, because no homeless people were involved in developing the plan. One component of the plan involves reducing the shelter population by taking away incentives for homeless people to enter shelter.

November 2004. Mayor Bloomberg announces that homeless people will no longer receive a priority for Section 8 vouchers. Over 1,000 people who had already received a Section 8 voucher were informed they were no longer valid—and case workers are calling us up saying they have clients talking about committing suicide.

December 2004. Mayor Bloomberg releases "Housing Stability Plus." Picture the Homeless travels to Albany to meet with State welfare commissioner to demand that he block approval of State funding for this disastrous plan. A photograph of our protest at the Rockefeller Center Christmas tree, singing homeless carols such as "Bloomberg the Red-Faced Mayor," was one of Time Magazine's "Photos of the Week."

January 2005. We hold an accountability session in our office with high-ranking DHS executives.

February 2005. Homeless people host a workshop at the annual conference of the New York State Legislature's Black and Puerto Rican Caucus, regarding the flaws in the rental subsidies program and the need for comprehensive housing policies for low-income people.

May 2005. Our work to document and expose the failings of HSP results in increased media attention and DHS commitments to fix the biggest problems.

2005-2006. We target Bloomberg, DHS, HRA, and State OTDA Commissioner Robert Doar through direct actions, letter-writing campaigns, town hall meetings, and other actions.

January 2007. We take two busloads of homeless people up to Albany to meet with newly-appointed OTDA Commissioner David Hansell and demand that he block further funding of HSP.

April 2007. Under new Commissioner Robert Hess, DHS acknowledges failure of HSP and eradicates it, replacing it with the "Advantage" rental subsidies.

April 2007. Newly-appointed DHS Commissioner Robert Hess attends an accountability session with members of Picture the Homeless; commits to expand eligibility to the "Advantage" program to domestic violence survivors.

October 2007. At a press conference on the steps of City Hall, Mayor Bloomberg commits to meet with Picture the Homeless. He later reneges.

September 2008. After we meet with with DiBlasio staff, the General Welfare committee holds a hearing on the Mayor's Five Year Plan—but refuses to include testimonials about the rental subsidies.

October 2008. After our sleep-out protest at the New York State Office Building, we meet with State Assembly Member Keith Wright to demand oversight hearings at the state level into the rent subsidies.

Fair Market Rent	\$1,185.00
HSP	\$765.00
Work Advantage	\$962.00

Full-time Minimum Wage	\$1,240.00
SSI/Disability	\$674.00

New York City Monthly Rental Subsidies vs. Sample Monthly Incomes

process in place for HSP clients to move to an Advantage program that fits their household needs.

The Advantage Rental Subsidies

The Advantage subsidy program is actually five different subsidy programs targeting homeless households with distinct types of income, as well as one for domestic violence survivors. Homeless families are competing for market-rate apartments with less-than-market-rate vouchers. The Advantage programs remain a reflection of Mayor Bloomberg's refusal to address the housing crisis.

1. Work Advantage offers shelter residents a full year's rental subsidy, with the possibility of a one-year extension. Recipients are required to save 20% of their monthly income and pay a \$50 fee directly to the landlord each month. At year's end, the City may match the client's savings up to 20% of the rent and will evaluate the possibility of extending the subsidy another year. A minimum wage worker doesn't stand much of a chance under this arrangement.

2. Fixed Income Advantage targets families living in shelters who have a family member receiving federally recognized disability benefits. It is a one year rental subsidy, with a priority application for a Section 8 voucher, but with no guarantee to transitioning to Section 8. The tenant under Fixed Advantage will need to assume the entire rent amount, which may be higher than their monthly income.

3. Children's Advantage subsidies may be available to homeless families with an open child welfare case. Like Fixed Income Advantage, it is a one year subsidy and prioritizes the client for Section 8, again with no guarantee of transitioning to Section 8.

4. Short Term Advantage offers four months of rental assistance, one month's security deposit, and a small broker's fee.

Domestic Violence Work Advantage clients in HRA domestic violence shelters may receive the Work Advantage subsidy for up to six months. The work and savings requirements may be waived if the client moves out of the shelter and into an Advantage apartment.

The Advantage subsidies do not apply to all homeless people. Homeless single adults and undocumented immi-

grants still do not qualify for rental subsidies. Homeless families are not eligible to apply until they have been in shelter for *six months – during which time the Department of Homeless services is paying up to \$3,300.00 per rent just for a room for a homeless family!* Perhaps most importantly, the subsidies are not part of any comprehensive strategy to create decent jobs, or to create new units of housing for low income people. The rental subsidies represent a homeless management system, not a strategy to reduce homelessness, and certainly by two-thirds as intended by the Mayor's Five Year Plan. While time limits to housing assistance have been spun by the city and the mainstream media as a generous hand-out in order to help homeless people to become self sufficient, it is simply unrealistic to expect that folks with fixed incomes and low wage workers can assume the full rent amount after one year given the rent amount of even a studio apartment in New York City.

The same implementation problems that plagued HSP also apply to the Advantage programs. The arbitrariness of the Bloomberg Administration's homeless policies is in evidence as well. Single homeless folks' eligibility for rental assistance was suddenly terminated by DHS in August 2007, just 5 months after the launching of the Advantage programs. With no public announcement, Picture the Homeless was surprised to discover that single adults in shelters were barred from joining the Advantage program, which was initially available to them. No official announcement was made—we only learned this when shelter providers posted a crude flyer in a single family shelter, even though we were in constant contact with the DHS Commissioners office during this period and had the majority of seats on the DHS Commissioners Consumer Advisory Committee.

The creation of the Advantage subsidy programs and their expanded eligibility to cover working shelter residents, as well as to those on fixed incomes, represented a major victory for the Picture the Homeless Rental Subsidy campaign as well as the advocacy groups who worked hard to pressure DHS to end HSP. However, the lack of a transfer process for the thousands of families with HSP left those formerly homeless households subject to the Catch 22 described above. ■

VI. FINDINGS

Mayor Bloomberg received a lot of positive media coverage for his Five Year Plan when it was unveiled in 2004. Announcing a plan to significantly reduce homelessness is big, and the hoopla surrounding its release was designed to impress. For journalists and others without much of an understanding of the root causes of homelessness, it sounded good. Yet the numbers of homeless people in the New York City shelter system have not substantively gone down overall—and the number of families with children entering shelters rose 38%, from 3,308 to 4,550—because what is needed is a comprehensive housing plan, not a homeless plan.

During the Five Year period covered by Mayor Bloomberg's plan to reduce homelessness, the numbers reveal the extent of his failure:

34% increase in the number of adult families entering the Department of Homeless Services (DHS)

3% increase in single adults in shelter.

38% decrease in placements of single adults into permanent or temporary housing

9% increase in family homelessness from 2007 to 2008. In November 2008, 9,720 homeless families lived in shelters, the highest number since the city began collecting such data in 1981.

85% increase in the Department of Homeless Services' budget since the Mayor's Five-Year Plan began. According to a 2008 report by the New York City Independent Budget Office, with little results.

Shelter utilization rates were all taken directly from the New York City Department of Homeless Services' website.^{ix} The portfolio of rental subsidies at the center of Mayor Bloomberg's shelter-to-housing pipeline for New York City's homeless have fallen short of even the most pessimistic expectations. While DHS reports include a small number of "success stories," the truth lies, as is so often the case, hidden in the details. The results of our survey paint a grim picture of Bloomberg's much-hyped rental subsidies. They also reveal critical demographics of the folks most impacted by these subsidy programs. Of our 500 surveys, we found that:

87% of respondents had children.

88% of respondents did not have another working adult in their household, even if they themselves were working.

87% had been homeless at least once before in their life.

84% of respondents were unemployed

80% of the respondents were female, and the median age was 31.

71% report being capable mentally and physically capable of working.

70% could not pay their portion of the rent on their own, in spite of the city's claim that their subsidies would allow homeless families to sustain themselves in housing once the subsidy period was up – again placing tenants at high risk of returning to homelessness.

69% of respondents had been to housing court because of a subsidy-related issue. This is a staggering disruption into the lives of households already struggling to keep afloat. Since many landlords demand exorbitant up-front fees or outright refuse to rent to clients who are listed in the infamous "blacklist" of tenants who have been to housing court, this further stigmatizes homeless people and makes it even harder to find real housing.

41% had arrears on their apartment, averaging \$3,000—an average backlog of about six months, putting them at high risk of becoming homeless again. Note our map on page 17, illustrating the distribution of arrears. The highest-density zones are indicated in deep red and are mainly located in neighborhoods north of the Harlem River, but also in East New York in Brooklyn, and a few neighborhoods east of the Rockaways, in Queens.

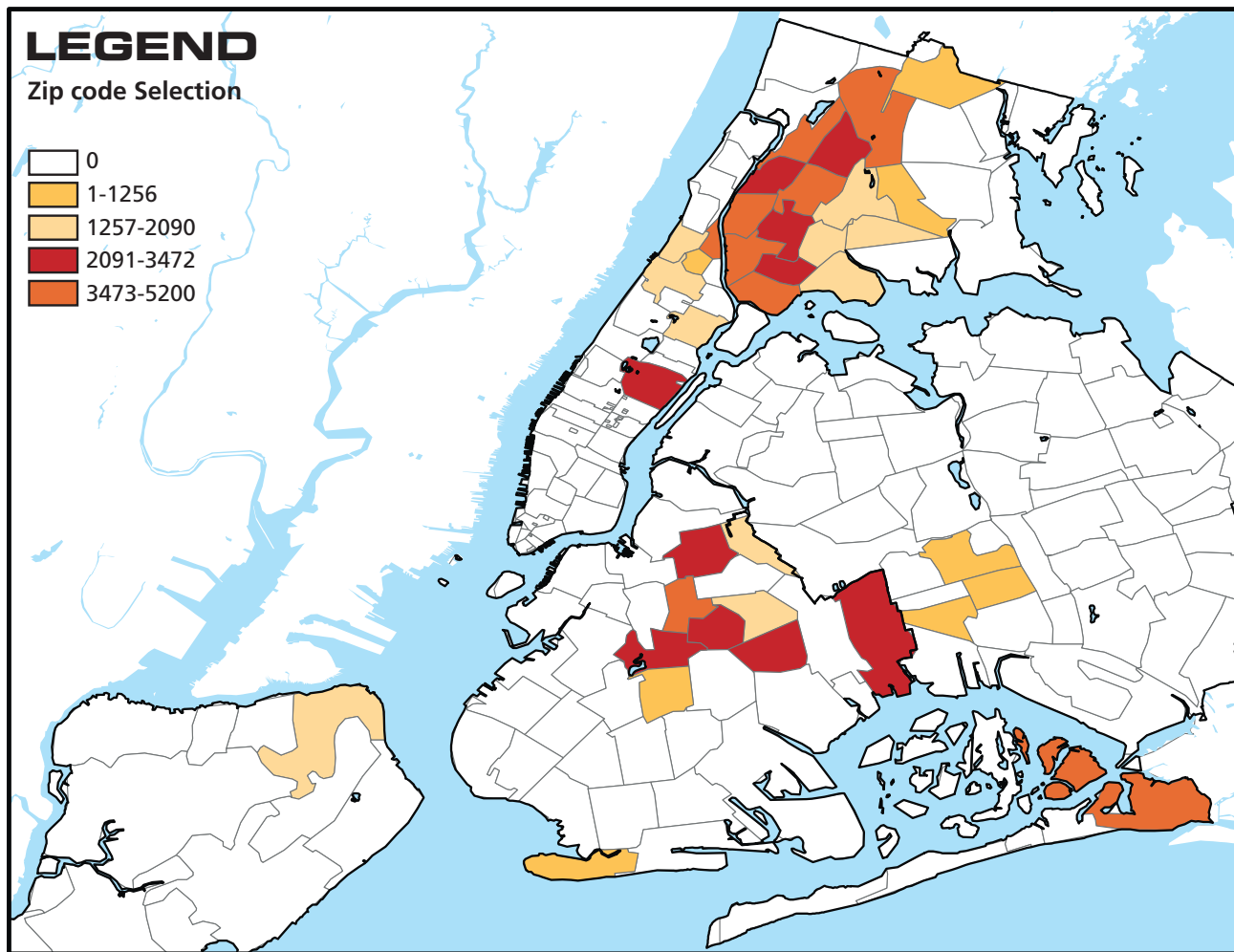
73% had HSP, 13% had Advantage NY, and 9% had Section 8 vouchers, of those respondents who had rental subsidies,

44% of those surveyed (nearly 74% holding HSP vouchers) had never heard of the Advantage program.

21.7% had heard of the Advantage program but never received any information or application materials from their DHS or HRA case workers. Of the few that were able to transfer from HSP to Advantage, many reported that the transfer process was unreasonably long, complex, and arbitrary.

15% of our respondents with a rental subsidy were still living in homeless shelters due to their inability to locate housing with their rental subsidy voucher.

While our survey did not inquire about race, numerous other studies, such as those done by the Vera Institute for Justice and the statistics provided by the NYC Department of Homeless Services, have documented the racialization of homelessness. According to the Vera Institute's report "Understanding Family Homelessness," 64% of homeless families were black, and 35% were Latino.^x Additionally, the Manhattan neighborhoods of highest subsidy density correspond to the results of Picture the Homeless' 2006 count of vacant buildings and lots in Manhattan. In addition, these are the same neighborhoods impacted by many other indicators of socioeconomic instability—such as rates of incarceration, housing code violations, HIV seroprevalence, obesity, and lack of access to health care.



Distribution of rent arrears on city-subsidized buildings

FINDINGS

Subsidy recipients have also become cynical about these vouchers, because the apartments available to subsidy holders are often sub-par dwellings that are controlled by the City's most despicable landlords. The City Councilperson who is Chair of the General Welfare committee which oversees DHS and HSP, Bill diBlasio, claims the rental subsidies the city has developed "have disproportionately steered shelter clients into

dangerous apartments managed by slumlords"^{x1}. A report from the Coalition for the Homeless on HSP subsidies shows that the city moved one thousand families into substandard units with broken windows, vermin infestations, cold water, collapsed ceilings and floors, and lead paint.

Picture the Homeless member Gloria, of the Bronx, for example, moved into an HSP apartment only to have the ceiling collapse twice. Forced to leave a dangerous situation, and unable to find another landlord that accepted HSP, she was told to go back to the shelter. "I just get turned away. No one wants to take HSP," she says. "I don't want my children to go back to the shelter. I don't want to go back to shelter myself. I cry every night and pray."

Substandard apartments are a common complaint among tenants, who are obligated to live in any apartment their case manager finds for them. One such person was Linda Contes, an expectant mother, who says that she has been looking for a decent apartment for months with her husband. "I just hope I find one before my case manager does, because I don't want to be forced into some shit hole to raise my kid." Additionally, when Linda was given her voucher she was informed that it expired in 30 days and she would not be allowed to reapply - leaving little time to find an apartment.

The failures of HSP and the Advantage subsidies go deeper than the subsidies themselves, and speak to the longstanding crisis of housing for low-income New Yorkers. In a May 2009 survey of landlords who accept Section 8 vouchers, 25 out of 26 of them told a Picture the Homeless leader that they would not accept an Advantage voucher under any circumstances. This is in spite of a recent New York City law that forbids housing discrimination based on source of rental payment - meaning that it is illegal to refuse to consider a tenant because they have a rental voucher. No mechanism exists to enforce this law, and when you have 30 days to find an apartment there is little incentive to stand up for your rights. The housing crisis has grown so severe that residential landlords have the power to break laws and practice discrimination with impunity... to say nothing of warehousing vacant property and harassing low-income tenants.

Our findings regarding the employability of Rental Subsidy holders challenges the conventional wisdom about homelessness, which portrays homeless people are severely challenged by mental illness, substance

LANDLORDS SPEAK OUT

HSP has also had lasting effects that have poisoned the waters of future homeless policy. First, many landlords have been turned off from accepting subsidy clients of any kind, including the new Advantage programs. This is because there were so many complications with late payment, evictions, and misinformation from the City. Further, the inability of applicants to prove how they will pay rent once the voucher ends is a common-sense disincentive to landlords to rent to them.

Horace Griscombe, a New York City landlord who has hundreds of HSP subsidy tenants, says the system "does not work at all. I have so many problems [with the subsidies] that it makes it very difficult to do my job and do it well. What the city pays is far too low. It makes it just about impossible."

Another local landlord, Mr. Barron, says he has given up on renting to those with subsidies too. "I'll never do that again," he said. "I still have people living here...and what the city is paying is too low."

Conversations with landlords who accept Advantage tenants indicate that many of the same problems that plagued HSP persist with the new program. Where homeless people do qualify for Advantage programs, and when city officials allow them to join the program, many landlords simply will not accept the subsidies because the city has such a horrible track record for late payment or non-payment. "They just changed the name, the program is still a waste," says Barry Susman, a landlord in the Bronx and Brooklyn. "Section 8 I will do—these other programs, I don't touch 'em, and I know very few respectable people who will."

abuse, and other disabilities, requiring a broad array of expensive services in order to sustain themselves in housing. *In reality, what the respondents to our survey have in common is extreme poverty and an inability to sustain themselves in housing without a rental subsidy in the current economic context.* The solution, therefore, is not more services—it's a real housing subsidy that works for all homeless households without the bureaucratic bungling characterized by the Rental Subsidies programs implemented by the Bloomberg administration.

Charting the rise of homelessness against the total collapse of public funding for housing for very poor people since 1980 indicates that only a federal commitment to fully fund HUD initiatives targeting the very poor will allow us to really solve homelessness. Having undermined previous attempts to help homeless New Yorkers transition into decent homes, Mayor Bloomberg has chosen programs designed to fail. It is important now to recognize the extent of those failures and the possibility for real alternatives to take their place. ■



D. WILLIAMS: TRANSFER FROM HSP

I moved into my HSP apartment in November of 2006. When HSP was replaced with Advantage, I never received anything from DHS - I only found out about it through Picture the Homeless. I called DHS to find out if I was eligible for Work Advantage - I was told NO, because I work less than 20 hours. I increased my hours to 20, to qualify for Work Advantage. Which resulted in my case being closed, because at 20 hours I was over the income limit for HSP for one person. With my case closed, I lost my HSP as well - this was around March 2008. I appealed; I reduced my hours at work to get back on HSP. I asked DHS how I could get a transfer to Advantage and I got the same story - they told me I had to increase my hours to more than 20 hours a week. So we went to the DHS Office of Client Advocacy to find out about switching from HSP to Work Advantage without having my case closed. They gave me a printout of a Work Advantage letter that said I could switch, and that would pay \$889 a month. They said that my landlord said that he would accept the switch. While I was waiting to sign a new lease, my case was closed - for excess income - because DHS had told me to raise my hours again. All of this didn't get resolved until July/August of 2008, so I was about five months in arrears. I had to go to the Public Advocate's office to get HRA to produce the checks to pay my landlord. And in December of 2008, I happened to call my landlord and found out that I had my own personal portion of the arrears, because HRA had given me a step-down but they had never alerted me. So I'm still working part-time, still under HSP, was applying for some apartments, some of which take Work Advantage, I got a printout of an HSP letter, and said I'm still not eligible for Advantage. Now they want me to do WEP. I'm a CNA - surgical assistant - and I was trained as a specialist in vascular surgery. And they want me to rake leaves in a park, or something along those lines. They want to make me work for free - and it might conflict with my current job, so it could result in me losing my job.

VII. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Mayor Bloomberg's Five Year Plan had lofty goals but no way to achieve them. Having gutted time-proven programs like Section 8, and replacing them with time-limited subsidies like HSP and Advantage NY, the Mayor played a shell game with homeless New Yorkers, citing how many households received subsidies as a measure of success, not whether or not housing was sustainable. Yet given the thousands of homeless households moving from shelter to housing, the fact that the overall numbers keep rising tells us that the Mayor is completely out of touch with how low income New Yorkers are impacted by the housing crisis as a whole. With the numbers of households exiting shelter, the lack of a decrease in the shelter census means that more folks keep becoming homeless than ever before!

The Rental Subsidies campaign at Picture the Homeless proposes the following strategies to strengthen rental subsidy policies in New York that could also serve as a model for other communities as well:

1: A RENTAL SUBSIDY THAT WORKS FOR ALL HOMELESS NEW YORKERS

New York City is a city of renters. The lowest income New Yorkers either need a massive increase in wages and income supports, or a comprehensive Rental Assistance program to stem the increasing tide of homelessness. Until a real subsidy is developed that works for all low income New Yorkers, New York City's homeless policies will continue to be a series of Band-Aid solutions.

2: HRA: ISSUE A MORATORIUM ON STOP-PAYMENT NOTICES.

The city council and the state legislature must force HRA to amend existing policies to cease the issuance of stop-payment notices for temporary case closures. Every time a subsidy recipient gets an interruption to their public assistance benefits, HRA stops paying their rent. Sanctions are routinely imposed in error and reversed when challenged—only 7.8% of sanctions are upheld after a fair hearing.^{xii} So when a person's rent is tied in to their public assistance, even a temporary stoppage of payment could result in eviction or a build-up of rent arrears that could land someone in housing court.

3: HRA: ISSUE A MONTHLY LETTER TO SUBSIDY HOLDERS RELAYING THE STATUS OF THEIR SUBSIDY

Many tenants do not learn that HRA has stopped paying their rent and they are in rent arrears until they receive

an eviction notice. Communication with HRA case workers is often . As a matter of policy, HRA should begin to issue monthly letters to all subsidy holders, informing them of the status of their subsidy—including how much time they have left on the subsidy and a confirmation that the city is still paying its share.

4. INCREASE DOLLAR VALUE OF SUBSIDIES TO EQUAL SECTION 8

The dollar value of these subsidies is significantly below the Fair Market Rent identified by HUD for New York City. As a result, homeless households with these vouchers are unable to compete on the open residential real estate market, and are forced to choose from a very small number of inferior apartments, with often unscrupulous landlords. Raising the dollar value of city subsidies to coincide with the dollar value of Section 8 vouchers (which are pegged to Fair Market Rent) would give homeless people a fighting chance at getting a decent apartment.

5. HOLD STATE HEARINGS ON CITY AGENCY FAILURES OF COMMUNICATION

The New York State Office of Temporary and Disability Assistance must hold hearings on the failures of communication between the New York City Department of Homeless Services and the NYC Human Resources Administration. Both HSP and the Advantage Programs depend upon money from the state, and as such the State has the power to hold these two agencies accountable for their repeated refusals to implement the urgently-needed changes outlined by homeless people.

6. HOLD CITY HEARINGS TO SCRUTINIZE AGENCY BUDGETS

The New York City Council's General Welfare Committee has the authority to block passage of the budget for the city agencies under its purview, including the Department of Homeless Services and the Human Resources Administration. Historically, this committee has been extremely reluctant to go up against the Mayor by taking this step. As a first step to forcing city agencies to amend these programs, the General Welfare Committee must hold hearings into the failures of HSP and the Advantage Program, and where the commissioners will be obligated to sit through and address the demands of homeless people living out the consequences of these disastrous agency policies.

7. ISSUE "KNOW YOUR RIGHTS" PAMPHLETS TO ALL SUBSIDY RECIPIENTS

Homeless people with city rental subsidies are subject to numerous violations of their rights. Shelter workers try to force them to accept substandard housing, under threat of expulsion to the street. HRA employees close their cases arbitrarily. Landlords violate laws by outright refusing to accept these subsidies, or by forcing the tenants to pay "side deals" over and above their own contribution to the subsidy. Many homeless people do know their rights, but do not know of any recourse when their rights are violated. DHS and HRA must issue "Know Your Rights" pamphlets to all subsidy recipients, with clear steps that they can take against people who break laws—and a commitment from the city to actually enforce these laws.

8. SUPPORT "HOUSING NOT WAREHOUSING" LEGISLATION

Throughout New York City, there are still massive amounts of vacant buildings and lots. These properties represent a major opportunity for the development of low-income housing as a tool to stabilize neighborhoods and fight gentrification. A city administration that is seriously committed to ending homelessness should support the "Housing Not Warehousing" legislation developed by Picture the Homeless and allies, which would institute an annual citywide count of vacant buildings and lots, and ensure that development of these properties includes a minimum of 50% set aside for homeless people.

CONCLUSIONS

Picture the Homeless has been engaged with decision-makers with the power to provide oversight and to hold the city accountable for the successes and failures of the Rental Subsidies programs, from their inception. Among them, include the Commissioners of the Department of Homeless Services and the Human Resources Administration, Deputy Mayor Linda Gibbs, the City Council General Welfare Committee Chair Bill DiBlasio, and the New York State Social Services Committee Chair, Keith Wright, New York State OTDA Commissioner David Hansell and his predecessor Robert Doar. Even at the urging of homeless families subject to these flawed programs, to this day, there have not been emergency hearings on the failures of the Rental Subsidy programs. Hence the need for homeless New Yorkers caught up in the Rental Subsidies fiasco to conduct our own research and issue our own report.

Homeless New Yorkers know what conditions create homelessness. Merely managing a homeless system does nothing to change the root causes of homelessness. Once you lose your housing, effective rental assistance programs are critical. Picture the Homeless urges the city council and the state legislature to force the Department of Homeless Services and the Human Resources Administration to the table, to be held accountable and to adopt the recommendations of those directly affected by these programs. Further, we hope that eyes opened as a result of reading this report will get involved in supporting our Housing Not Warehousing campaign, which is designed to bring about real, systemic change to housing preservation and production for homeless and poor New Yorkers. ■



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“ Picture the Homeless has been tracking the City’s previous and present failed policies on dealing with the homeless issue in an attempt to get this City to place the homeless population at the table when policy is being designed and implemented on their behalf. Homeless people do have a plan. Our Housing not Warehousing legislation would create tens of thousands of new units of housing out of vacant buildings.”

-RYAN GIBBS, PICTURE THE HOMELESS





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