

Testimony of New York City Homeless Services Commissioner Seth Diamond
Subcommittee for Insurance, Housing and Community Opportunity
Committee on Financial Services
United States House of Representatives
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Good morning Chair Biggert, Representative Gutierrez I am Seth Diamond, Commissioner of New York City's Department of Homeless Services and I am pleased to be with you today to discuss the city's ongoing efforts to prevent family homelessness and to work with those who are homeless to return to the community as quickly as possible. New York City's approach emphasizes preventing homelessness, increasing economic security through employment, improving access to mainstream programs and improving health and stability for vulnerable populations.

The Department of Homeless Services administers a number of programs designed to assist those who are homeless or at risk of becoming homeless. The largest service we run, in cooperation with a range of not for profit providers, is the city's shelter system. These shelters are temporary housing for those with no other options. Shelter residents are temporarily placed in 250 locations throughout the city, some for single adults with no children and others for families. During that time they receive the services necessary to allow them to leave shelter and to return to the community.

We have found employment assistance is an essential element of ensuring families who leave the shelter system find greater stability in the communities to which they move. Employment is important not only for the income it provides but for the structure and foundation it can bring to a family. Shelter residents want to work and our responsibility is to create the environment in shelter that will assist those residents in initially entering the work force and in retaining the employment they need to support their families and re establish themselves in the community.

This year alone 7,500 shelter residents have gone to work. The available employment varies but includes opportunities in health care, tourism, security and retail among many others. Some residents have found jobs on their own but many have done so with the assistance of employment and training providers under contract to New York City. These providers are generally the same ones who serve those enrolled in the city's broader TANF program. Just as in the TANF program, shelter residents who can work, must work and we want to help them in their efforts to do so. We continue to improve our services to those in shelter and to find ways to help those beginning jobs to move up the economic ladder. A solid employment system is an essential component of efforts to assist shelter residents.

The city's support for working shelter residents does not end when they begin a job or even when they leave shelter. Through a range of programs many with special features designed to assist working New Yorkers, the city helps those beginning entry level jobs to gain stability and raise their income, particularly in what can be those difficult early months. Food Stamps, health insurance, child support and course child care are critical

benefits that can ensure a parent does not just enter work but is also able to retain that job.

We do not however believe the definition of homelessness should be expanded to include those identified by school and child care professionals and other groups. We agree with H.R. 32 that teachers are critical partners in our efforts to better serve homeless families. In New York City staff from the Department of Education work closely with shelters to ensure children are enrolled and attending school. Attendance data is provided to shelter staff so they can check that parents are working to get their children to school every day. We also work with school staff on a range of tutoring and homework initiatives designed to improve academic performance.

HUD resources however should be focused on those with the greatest need. With financing already stretched thin, to further dilute those allocations would hurt the substantial efforts being made in New York and across the country to assist those in shelter. Dedicated resources are essential to provide those in shelter with needed housing, employment, and rehabilitative and case management services. While those living with others may be in need of services, those needs can be addressed through other funding streams, such as ESG. Existing allocations such as the TANF program also provide an opportunity to assist those at risk of homelessness. In New York City for example one time TANF grants can help families who have an ongoing ability to pay rent but have fallen behind due to an unforeseen emergency. We certainly should do all we can to assist families from becoming homeless but we cannot let those efforts come at the cost of services to those in shelter.

Administering the shelter system is the most well known part of our agency, but we also work tirelessly to prevent homelessness. While there are no families sleeping on the street of our city, there are single adults and we deploy a range of providers 24 hours a day, seven days a week to work to move those individuals as quickly as possible to housing. Through these efforts with our providers we have seen the number of unsheltered individuals reduced by 40 percent in the past five years.

Our family prevention efforts recognize that it is far better wherever possible to keep a family in their home, where their children are enrolled in school and where they have community supports, than forcing that family to be uprooted to come to shelter to receive services. Shelter is an expensive resource and in many cases, prevention services can be administered more cheaply than a stay in shelter. It is not always possible to avoid a family entering shelter but in many cases early action in which the family takes an active and accountable role, can help them avoid a stay in the shelter system.

New York City prevents homelessness primarily through a network of 13 prevention offices called Homebase located throughout the city. These offices use a range of services to assist families in stabilizing their housing situation.

The service mix is different in each case but our Homebase offices are operated under two important principles.

First those who ask for assistance must take concrete and verifiable steps to improve their situation and assistance is contingent on their taking those steps. Individuals, working with a case worker, must design a plan to address the circumstances that put them at risk of homelessness and then put that plan into action. The plan might include, for example, an aggressive job search, actively looking for a new apartment or attending financial counseling. While some initial help may be provided, proof of compliance with a service plan must be presented before further assistance will be given.

Second, as called for in the Open Door report, Homebase is an evidence-based effort where we continually and rigorously review our work to ensure it is efficient and cost effective. Especially at a time of limited resources, it is critical that our services must be based on solid and reliable data. Homebase meets that test and its programs are continually evaluated to both ensure we are targeting those most in need of services and that wherever possible, we are providing the services that are not only beneficial to the family but will prevent those households from needing shelter.

To further ensure Homebase prevention services are effective, we have undertaken a series of independent evaluations of the program. These reviews, conducted by leading researchers from universities across the country as well as a random assignment study undertaken by Abt Associates, one of the nation's leading social sciences research firms, look at a series of the most critical questions involving our prevention efforts. Researchers are examining if communities served by Homebase send fewer families to shelter than those not served by Homebase, how can Homebase services best be targeted, but for Homebase services would targeted individuals have entered the shelter, how can services best be designed to target those most in need and a variety of related questions. The research is underway and we look forward to sharing the results as those findings become available.

Prevention efforts have become a greater part of the national discussion of homelessness and we are gratified the new Emergency Solutions Grants supports prevention work. We think this change will be critical in encouraging communities across the country to direct more resources toward prevention and believe if those programs are established and operated under the high standards we have used, they can be effective and believe it would be a good investment of taxpayer dollars to expand ESG funding to allow additional prevention services to be put in place.

I thank you for the opportunity to testify and look forward to answering your questions.