

THE CHALLENGE

Thousands of people enter shelter each year without having benefited from homeless prevention programs. Some attempt to receive aid, but the assistance fails or is otherwise insufficient. Many do not seek aid from existing programs that might have stabilized or saved their housing.

Families who become homeless in New York City typically enter shelter after leaving a shared living situation, usually with immediate family members. Single adults generally become homeless after leaving an institution or losing housing. Most of these families and individuals are grappling with underlying issues that precipitated their housing crisis.

Today, the overwhelming majority of resources and programs that help those with housing instability only take effect after someone has become homeless. While ensuring shelter to those in need is critical, the thrust of resources should be spent preventing rather than sheltering homelessness.

SOLUTIONS

The initiatives outlined in this chapter shift priorities and services to homelessness prevention, primarily by strengthening programs, resources, and collaborations at the community level. Innovative programs that focus on helping landlords and tenants avoid evictions at housing court will also be pursued. It is at these community locations that the underlying needs of those at risk can be spotted and addressed.

Making this shift will require some trade-offs, as well as disciplined decision making. This will include taking affirmative steps to ensure that prevention programs offer meaningful alternatives to shelter services, using data and cross-agency partnerships to target resources to those at risk, and creating strong accountability provisions to ensure providers, agencies, and those receiving prevention services all take necessary steps to make preventive interventions work.

It is well documented that preventing an episode of homelessness costs less than sheltering an episode of homelessness – and the potential to generate cost savings is important. But shifting the city's reliance away from an ever-expanding network of shelters to expanded and integrated community-based prevention services presents the potential for achieving something more important: diminishing the trauma and dislocation that homelessness causes in the lives of too many individuals and families.

