



*City Council Hearing*  
*General Welfare Committee*  
*“Oversight: Conditions and Operations in DHS Family Shelters”*  
Thursday, February 27, 2014

Good morning Chair Levin and members of the General Welfare Committee. I am Gilbert Taylor, the Commissioner of the Department of Homeless Services (DHS). Joining me is Julia Davis Moten, Deputy Commissioner for Family Services, and Yianna Pavlakos, Deputy Commissioner for Facility Maintenance & Development (FMD). Today, we will provide an overview of our Family Services system, and discuss conditions and operations in facilities that serve homeless families with children.

Thank you for hosting this hearing and for highlighting the important issue of family homelessness. I did read the *New York Times* article, which the Committee referenced in scheduling this hearing, prior to my arrival at DHS and I, too, was struck by the need to improve the conditions in our shelter system for families. I began work in this position seven weeks ago and committed to the Mayor and to the clients that we serve that I would work with the dedicated staff at DHS to make a difference in this area.

I will begin my testimony this morning by sharing two examples which illustrate the complex and varied needs of the families we serve in the New York City shelter system.

Family A, entered shelter last November and was comprised of a single mother with two children, ages 22 and 15. Family A had left shelter several years ago with the assistance of an Advantage rental subsidy but returned after the building in which they lived fell into foreclosure. The family was placed in a shelter in Queens where the mother and the eldest child maintained their employment and routinely met with their case worker to plan for their return to independent living. After only three months of working closely with their case manager in shelter, Family A was able to secure an apartment. Last Friday, with the additional help of

the Human Resource Administration's (HRA) enhanced one-shot deal, which provided the family with four months of rent in addition to the \$1,700 which they had saved, the family exited shelter for their new apartment.

The case of Family B is more complex. Family B is comprised of a two-parent household whose 10 children and 4 grandchildren have been part of their family composition during their shelter stays. After an eviction, the family first entered shelter 17 years ago. Over the course of that time, Family B exited twice with the assistance of a rental subsidy and both times returned to shelter after being evicted. The family is currently raising their grandchild in shelter, while some of their own adult children are now also shelter residents with families of their own. Family B has lived in nine different shelters operated by nine different social service providers. The parents have multiple barriers including a history of mental health issues, substance abuse, medical issues, and a limited benefits income. Family B has had difficulty engaging with case workers who have tried to connect them to the financial benefits and other resources which they will need to live independently. At this time the family has begun working with shelter staff towards obtaining permanent housing.

The work that we do at DHS requires compassion, collaboration and transparency. As Commissioner of this agency it is my intention to learn more about our clients in shelter to better address their needs. I will also prioritize working closely with the communities in the City that host our shelters and strive to strengthen the relationship between our various nonprofit and government partners who assist us in this challenging work.

## **BACKGROUND AND THE CITY'S LEGAL MANDATES**

As you may know, the City of New York is legally mandated to provide shelter to every homeless family and individual who is eligible for services. This obligation sets us apart from many other cities across the nation— many of whom turn families away or place them on waiting lists once shelters are full.

In New York, families seeking shelter must apply at the Prevention Assistance & Temporary Housing (PATH) intake center— a state-of-the-art, eco-friendly facility

which opened in the spring of 2011. Located in the Bronx, PATH is designed to serve families more efficiently, and to make them feel secure in their surroundings from entry to departure. PATH brings several City agencies under one roof to coordinate care including HRA, the Administration for Children’s Services (ACS) and the Department of Education (DOE), and has been physically structured and staffed to meet the complex needs of the families we serve. As I’ve discussed with Chair Levin, I’d be honored to host the General Welfare Committee on a tour of PATH in the coming months. We at DHS are extremely proud of PATH, and I plan to build on its successful function to improve every family’s experience by providing them with the most appropriate, safe and well-run shelters that we can.

Under State and local law and court order, DHS must place families in shelter pending investigation of their application for temporary housing assistance. As a practical manner, this means that the agency must shelter homeless families the same day they apply – a feat that we achieve 24 hours a day, seven days a week, 365 days a year.

As part of the shelter placement process, the agency’s Housing Emergency Referral Operations unit, also known as HERO, is responsible for placing families in shelter. HERO takes into account various factors unique to each family, such as the household size and composition. In cases of domestic violence, HERO also has to consider placing families in specific boroughs to ensure the safety of all family members. HERO strives to place families in the school district of their youngest child, and if medical conditions exist they consider proximity to a client’s health care provider. Each and every day, HERO must, and does, balance each family’s placement needs against the current availability of units that best meets those needs in making shelter placements.

## **PROFILE OF THE FAMILY HOMELESS SYSTEM**

Currently, DHS oversees 151 shelters that serve more than 10,000 families with children throughout the five boroughs. In an effort to meet families’ specific needs as outlined above, we utilize several shelter models. All shelters are required to provide services in a safe, decent and clean environment. These services include the development of an independent living plan setting forth specific steps the

family will take to return to the community and assisting the family with completing each step such as applying for public assistance or other benefits, or helping families search for apartments.

The shelter system is currently comprised of 88 Tier II shelters, 48 non-Tier II shelters and 15 cluster programs.

- Tier IIs are contracted, standalone buildings operated by non-profit providers and four sites that DHS directly operates, which offer rigorous services including case management, recreational space and programming and services to link families to housing resources. Some Tier II shelters provide on-site medical services and on-site child care.
- Cluster programs provide services similar to Tier IIs; however, in most cases the apartment units are located in multiple buildings. Formerly known as “scatter-site apartments,” families with children residing in contracted cluster units are provided with an array of social services including case management and housing referrals.
- Hotels refer to buildings that historically functioned as hotels prior to their use as shelter. Staff at these sites also provide services to assist families in exiting shelter for permanent housing.

The safety of our families in shelter is a top priority for DHS. We staff our directly-operated shelters with a combination of DHS Peace Officers and contracted security guards. Living by the motto, “policing with compassion,” DHS Peace Officers regularly manage their enforcement duties, while understanding that clients in shelter are often households in crisis. Revolutionizing the methods of policing within a social services framework, Peace Officers pledge to maintain the public peace, value human life, respect each individual and render services with courtesy, pride and civility, while displaying the highest standard of integrity. All of our nonprofit provider partners are also required to take measures at the shelters they operate to ensure client and staff safety.

DHS maintains 24 City-owned buildings that serve as shelters for families with children. Of these, four are currently directly-operated sites (Auburn, Catherine

Street, Jamaica and Flatlands), while the remaining 20 are operated by non-profit service providers. While DHS is responsible for the management and execution of capital projects at all two-dozen facilities, we also oversee the day-to-day maintenance of the four shelters we directly operate.

## **SHELTER INSPECTIONS**

Prior to the opening of any new family shelter or cluster site, the agency's FMD Division inspects all the units to ensure that they are in good and safe physical condition. If not, families will not be placed there until remedial action is taken. Thereafter, FMD conducts bi-annual inspections of all family shelters to ensure that they remain in good condition and free of hazardous conditions. FMD utilizes a 350-item instrument in conducting these inspections, known as Routine Site Review Inspections, or RSRI's, which entail a thorough review of the physical condition, including cleanliness of each unit, the common areas, and the building's integrity as a whole. All items requiring repair are noted and shelter operators are required to submit corrective action plans detailing what action will be taken to rectify each issue and a timeline for completion.

DHS also responds to repair requests by shelter families or community representatives acting on their behalf. We ensure that the repair is promptly made and if this cannot be done quickly, we take the unit off line and move the family to another unit.

DHS' Family Services Division also conducts bi-annual performance evaluations of each shelter, which includes a two-pronged assessment — an evaluation of the staff's programmatic efforts to assist families in returning to the community and an assessment of the physical condition of the shelter, including the cleanliness and overall condition of each unit. Here again, upon receipt of the performance evaluation, the provider is required to submit a corrective action plan for Family Services' review and approval.

In addition to FMD inspections and Family Services performance evaluations, each shelter is required to conduct bi-weekly health and safety inspections of each unit. Unit inspections are conducted on a weekly basis for families with newborns, those

with active ACS cases and those who have been in shelter for more than two years. The shelter staff is responsible for ensuring that needed repairs are made and that families who require additional counseling on maintaining a safe and clean unit receive the service.

## **PLAN FOR AUBURN/ CATHERINE STREET**

Last week, DHS announced a plan to convert the Auburn and Catherine Street shelters from family with children sites to facilities that will serve homeless adult families. The agency has been working vigorously with families at both sites—helping them to transition to permanent housing and transferring them to other shelters where they will continue to receive comprehensive case management and services. The transfer process is being structured to maintain educational stability and continuity of school enrollment, with special attention being paid to the youngest school aged children in each household.

Due to our significant and ongoing need for shelter capacity, we cannot close the Auburn and Catherine Street shelters entirely. Rather, we will invest substantial funds into the overhaul of both facilities. These upgrades will make both sites well-equipped to serve the adult family population, while also allowing families with children to move to private units that are more suitable for children. In addition, our planning also includes projects that will be of value to the communities that host these shelters.

The Mayor's preliminary budget directs \$1.3 million in Fiscal Year 2014 to improve security and programming at both shelters. Funds for facility renovations have already been included in DHS' capital plan for Auburn and Catherine Street. These include:

**Increased Security:** DHS has enhanced security at both sites. There has been an increase of more than 100 licensed security guards at Auburn and an additional 20 guards at Catherine Street who are assigned to monitor all operational client bathrooms at the site. DHS is also in the process of installing new Closed Circuit Television (CCTV) systems in both Auburn and Catherine Street to provide an additional level of monitoring.

**Facility Improvements:** Scheduled to commence shortly, physical plant improvements will begin this year and will include modifications to the existing units, and a complete gut-renovation of the bathrooms at each facility.

**New Programming for Adult Families:** At Auburn, DHS plans to work with the community to create a culinary arts training program on the ground floor of the shelter. This resource will be accessible for use by both Auburn clients and neighborhood residents. The Catherine Street plan includes a security training and job placement program in the facility's newly-renovated gymnasium, which will also be used for adult basketball leagues and be accessible to members of the surrounding community on the Lower East Side.

Since January of this year, DHS has successfully re-located a number of families who had been residing at Auburn either to non-congregate shelters or to permanent housing. The agency has utilized the resulting vacancies to shelter families during Code Blue Periods, which are triggered by inclement winter weather conditions. As one of Mayor de Blasio's first directives in office, he instructed DHS to suspend the discharge of ineligible families and automatically grant temporary shelter to all re-applicant families during Code Blue periods.

## **CONCLUSION**

The transformation of the Auburn and Catherine Street facilities is the first step in the de Blasio Administration's efforts to reform and improve the families with children shelter system. I am acutely aware, and focused, on the agency's efforts to improve the quality of shelter for the City's homeless families. Together, with our non-profit providers, we can successfully assist many more New Yorkers to transition back to independent living. By conducting thorough inspections, holding ourselves to consistently high standards, and providing intensive case management and an abundance of support to our clients, we will be successful in these efforts.

I look forward to working with each of you to advocate for additional resources, and funding where necessary, to make our goal a reality. I will also keep you informed so that we can work together to enact the much needed policy solutions that will help our families and individuals through their crises and stabilize them in their own homes.

The Deputy Commissioners and I are now available to answer any questions you may have. Thank you.