



win

THE FORGOTTEN FACE OF HOMELESSNESS

HOUSING INSTABILITY

MAY 2, 2019

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LETTER FROM CHRISTINE C. QUINN

Homelessness is a journey. When a family first arrives at a Win shelter, they usually aren't coming from a stable apartment of their own; more than a third of them have already moved twice in the past year. And when a family first leaves shelter, many of them aren't gone for good; last year, over 700 families who left shelter were forced to return within a year.

In other words, the path to housing stability is seldom straight. It's jagged. And that's true for a reason: our city is experiencing the worst housing instability crisis in its history.

We can no longer ignore the links between our city's surging homelessness crisis and its declining stock of quality, affordable housing. We'll never solve one problem without addressing the other. This moment requires every stakeholder - from policymakers, to advocates, to every New Yorker on the front lines of these crises - to find creative and actionable solutions.

At Win, we take that responsibility seriously. We're committed to doing more than just providing exceptional services for our 4,600 clients every night. We want to change the conversation around the issue itself.

The Forgotten Face of Homelessness: Housing Instability, the third in a series of dynamic reports on the homelessness in our city, does just that. It shares some hard truths about the state of the crisis, and it offers a holistic look at how we arrived in the place we're in today. It deals frankly and honestly with the full scale of the hardship homeless families endure - from declining educational outcomes, to scarce employment prospects, to long-term health complications. And it calls on our team's decades of experience to offer specific policies that can move the ball forward.

Our first report, released in late 2016, called the city's attention to the women and families at the heart of this crisis. The second, released last year, offered

concrete ideas to ease the enormous burden homelessness can place on children. Both reports sought to shift the narrative away from hysterical accounts of unsheltered single men, and toward a compassionate, inclusive, and solutions-driven dialogue with our neighbors.

We'll need more of that spirit if we're going to take on the housing crisis, which has been driving New Yorkers into the shelter system in record numbers. Some of the solutions we propose will require the government to crack down on bad actors; housing laws on source of income discrimination, for example, are broken with abandon. Other solutions will ask all of us to pitch in; taxpayers, we believe, should support an increase in the value of rental assistance vouchers that prove inadequate for too many families.

These proposals are diverse, but they all share a common vision of a fairer and more equitable New York.

The Win team talks a lot about breaking the cycle of homelessness. It's a lofty goal that lies at the forefront of everything we do for our clients. This path, too, will be jagged. But by traveling it together, and by focusing our efforts on preserving housing stability for New Yorkers across the income spectrum, we can do it—once and for all.



Christine C. Quinn

President & Chief Executive Officer

INTRODUCTION

In the first months of 2019, an average of 2,600 families per month sought shelter in New York City.⁴ For the majority of homeless families with children who apply for shelter, this is not the first time they have packed their belongings without knowing where they will sleep next. Homelessness is often part of a longer cycle of housing instability, marked by periods of being unable to pay rent; living doubled-up with friends or family; living in overcrowded conditions; and living in homeless shelters. Housing instability can last for months and sometimes years, with parents and children routinely experiencing the stress, insecurity, and anxiety of knowing they might not be able to stay where they are, but no better options exist. **The arrival of families at the City’s Prevention Assistance and Temporary Housing (PATH) intake center—the central location for families with children to apply for shelter—is a point at which this housing instability enters the public sphere, and it is a critical moment for intervention.**

Over the past few years, Win has worked with partners in government, homeless services, and advocacy organizations to center the city’s approach to homelessness on mothers and their children. This is reflected in the release of *The Forgotten Face of Homelessness* report issued in October 2016, and the subsequent release of *The Forgotten Face of Homelessness: Children*, in April 2018. Both reports confront the myriad problems that drive homelessness for families and identify concrete steps that New York can take to break the cycle of homelessness that traps thousands of families.

The number of New York City families in shelter has risen by 17 percent over the past five years, and the average length of stay in shelter continues to be over a year. Escalating rents across the city and a sharp decrease in the number of affordable housing units continues to put inordinate pressure on low-income families, who face difficult struggles to maintain housing. If they do enter shelter, homeless families must overcome multiple barriers to return to a home of their own. To help shine a light on the ways in which families struggle to secure a stable home, Win is releasing the third in a series of annual policy solutions that empower families in need: *The Forgotten Face of Homelessness: Housing Instability*. This work focuses on creating solutions to help New York families secure and maintain permanent housing in an effort to break the cycle of homelessness and reduce periods spent living in shelter. If enacted, these steps will meaningfully reduce instability and improve outcomes, ensuring greater housing stability for the thousands of families and children who experience homelessness. ***The Forgotten Face of***

Homelessness: Housing Instability identifies solutions that can make a difference for homeless and formerly homeless families, including:

- **Ensure that families in need can access appropriate shelter services** through reforms to PATH and the creation of a shelter development fund for proven nonprofit providers.
- **Help families obtain stable housing** with an increase in the rental assistance voucher amounts and enforcement of fair housing laws.
- **Provide families with tools to maintain a permanent home**, including 18 months of aftercare, subsidies for child care, and pathways to quality employment.

The data presented on Win families in the following pages is drawn primarily from CARES, New York City's homeless management information system. CARES is New York City's computerized case management system and database administered by the NYC Department of Homeless Services (DHS) and used by City agencies and homeless service providers. To protect client privacy and confidentiality, access is limited and service providers can only access information on the clients they serve. To ensure that CARES data on Win families is current and accurate, Win verifies key information with clients during intake and through on-going case management. For service and program performance management purposes, Win gathers additional information regarding income, employment, education, and participation in Win services and programs. These data are housed in the Win IMPACT Network, Win's comprehensive intranet data warehouse and metrics system. The Win IMPACT Network tracks and reports on client outcomes and organizational performance. Additionally, Win's Research and Evaluation team conducts surveys, focus groups, and other research in which clients are invited to participate. Client participation in Win research projects is completely voluntary and confidential.

The following pages begin with an outline of the state of family homelessness, followed by an overview of key reforms since the release of Win's 2016 and 2018 reports, and the work ahead.

ABOUT WIN

For over three decades, Win has provided homeless families and their children with the safe housing, critical services, and groundbreaking programs they need to succeed on their own. Founded in 1983 as Women In Need, Win started with four homeless women and their six children. Today Win continues to evolve and adapt to help families break the cycle of homelessness. Across 10 family shelters in four boroughs, last year Win provided shelter and services for nearly 3,000 families, including more than 5,000 children. Win serves approximately ten percent of all New York City children in homeless shelter.

I.

FAMILY HOMELESSNESS IN NEW YORK CITY

On average, 12,585 families with children went to bed in a New York City homeless shelter each night in 2018.¹ Over the last five years, families with children have represented approximately 70 percent of all people in shelter.¹ The magnitude of the crisis is such that the number of homeless children in shelter on the average night last year exceeded the capacity of Madison Square Garden.¹

Despite these numbers, the plight of homeless families with children can go unrecognized. It is difficult for the average New Yorker to ignore the struggle of the homeless adults they see living on the street on the way to the subway station, but may not be aware that the mother and child waiting on the platform are taking the train to a homeless shelter. And for many New Yorkers, the prolonged housing instability of which homelessness is a piece is even less visible.

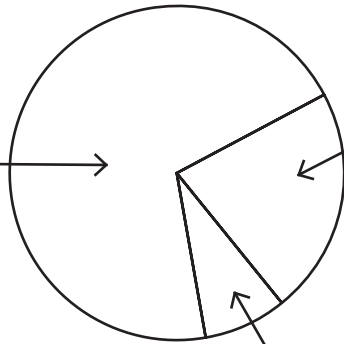
Last year saw a slight (4.2 percent) increase in the number of families who left shelter for a permanent home.² This was driven by a considerable increase in the number of families who left with a housing subsidy,² which has been shown to be the most stable exit type. With more families leaving shelter, the number of homeless families in shelter

decreased last year after consecutive years of increases. But last year's decrease of 1.8 percent¹ is not sufficient to significantly alter the five-year trend: between 2013 and 2018, the number of homeless families in shelter increased by approximately 17 percent (10,728 in 2013, compared to 12,585 in 2018).¹

Notwithstanding this recent improvement, a number of critical indicators reveal that too many families with children continue to experience housing instability. Last year, over 740 families who left a New York City shelter for a permanent home returned to shelter in less than one year.² Indeed, the citywide return rate remained stubbornly consistent at just above eight percent in 2017 and 2018, after having decreased from 2016 to 2017.² Looking beyond the one-year mark reveals a more distressing rate of return; in 2015, about 81 percent of

NYC HOMELESSNESS OVER THE 5 YEAR PERIOD OF 2013-2018

70% of those in shelter have been families with children



22% have been single adults

8% have been adult families (families without children)

families in shelter had been in shelter at some point before.³ For many families, housing instability, with periods in homeless shelter, spans multiple years.

The prevalence of housing instability can also be seen in the consistently high number of families with children who apply to the Department of Homeless Services (DHS) for shelter each month, an indicator easily overlooked in light of last year's slight decrease in the number of families entering shelter.² In the first half of this year, an average of 2,600 families applied for shelter each month.⁴ The number of families seeking shelter each month is approximately equal to 20 percent of the existing family shelter population.

In any given month in the first half of 2019, DHS only found about 41 percent of families who applied for shelter

eligible,⁴ which frequently forces families in need to endure precarious housing arrangements as they undergo the application process multiple times before finally being placed in shelter.

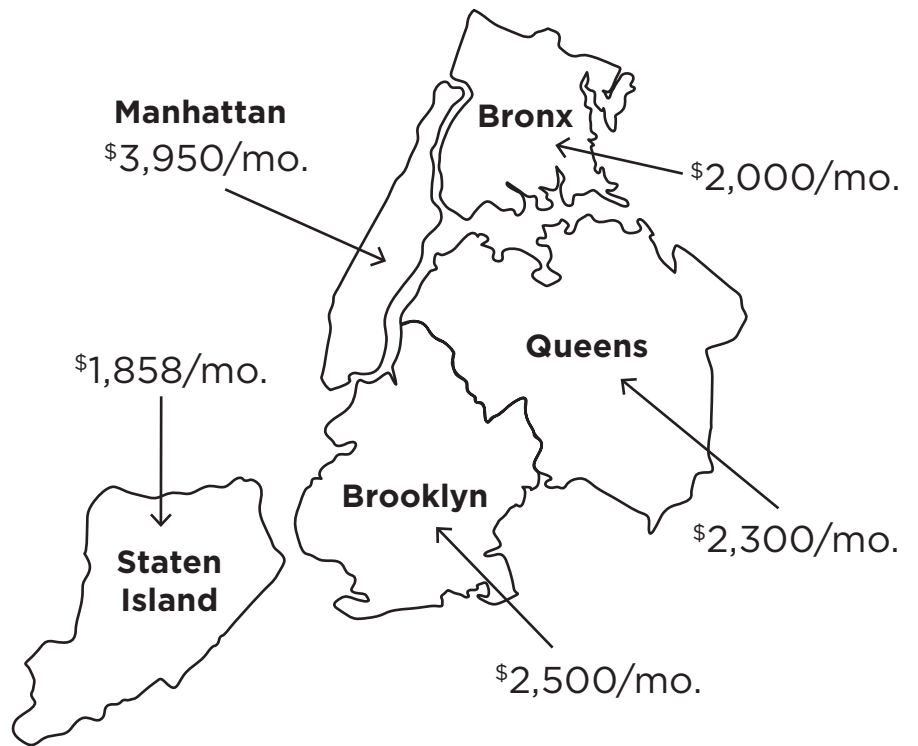
Among families found eligible in 2019, nearly 45 percent had applied at least once before.⁴ This means that in order to access needed services, approximately 470 of the families entering shelter each month packed their belongings and underwent the stress of the application process and the insecurity of not knowing where they would be staying at least twice.

Once in shelter, families with children are staying slightly longer than in the past. Last year, the average length of stay for families in shelter was approximately fourteen and a half months, about three weeks longer than in the previous year.² Longer stays may signal that families are accessing the

In any given month, DHS only found about **41 percent** of families who applied for shelter eligible, which frequently forces families in need to endure precarious housing arrangements as they undergo the application process multiple times before finally being placed in shelter. Among families found eligible in 2019, nearly **45 percent** had applied at least once before.

MEDIAN ASKING RENT BY BOROUGH MAR. 2019

In a city where the median asking monthly rent for a two-bedroom apartment ranges from **\$1,858 in Staten Island** to **\$3,950 in Manhattan** (and **\$2,500 in Brooklyn**, **\$2,300 in Queens**, and **\$2,000 in the Bronx**) finding an appropriate apartment below the \$1,557/month rent limit of New York City's rental assistance voucher is a time consuming and onerous process for many families.



support services they need to achieve long-term housing stability, and are not necessarily problematic if families are placed in safe, quality shelters with reasonable transportation to children's schools. But, as of September 2018, approximately 34 percent of homeless families with children (over 4,400 families) were in commercial hotels or "cluster" units.⁵ Hotels and clusters do not offer the safety or facilities (e.g., kitchenettes for preparing a hot meal or laundry rooms for keeping school uniforms clean) that families with children need. Neither do they offer the on-site support services, such as income building programs, child care and youth recreation, or housing search assistance, that families with children need to meaningfully improve their economic situation. In recognition of the inappropriateness of cluster placements, Mayor de Blasio has announced a plan to end their use by 2021, but progress has been slow.⁶

Longer lengths of stay are a symptom of the scarcity of affordable apartments. In New York State, there are only 37 affordable, available rental homes for every 100 extremely low-income households.⁷ Even families leaving shelter with a rental assistance voucher report struggling to find an appropriate apartment. In a city where the median asking monthly rent in March of 2019 for a two-bedroom apartment ranges from \$1,838 in Staten Island to \$3,850 in Manhattan (and \$2,500 in Brooklyn, \$2,300 in Queens, and \$2,000 in the Bronx),⁸ finding an appropriate apartment below the \$1,557/month rent limit of New York City's rental assistance voucher is a time consuming and onerous process for many families. The challenge of finding an affordable apartment, and a landlord willing to accept a voucher, unnecessarily prolongs homelessness and length of stay in shelter for many families.



In New York State, there are only **37** affordable, available rental homes for every **100** extremely low-income households.

The Administration of New York City Mayor de Blasio has recognized the profound challenges facing homeless families and has made important commitments to addressing the family homelessness crisis. The launch of the City’s rental assistance voucher program put a valuable tool for achieving housing stability in the hands of homeless families. Mayor de Blasio has also committed to ensuring homeless families with children are safe and connected to services by expanding the City’s stock of appropriate, quality shelters and moving to end the use of costly, subpar clusters and inappropriate hotels. *The Housing New York 2.0* plan will also move the City closer to the needed level of affordable housing, the lack of which is linked to higher levels of homelessness.

Despite these significant commitments, the family homelessness crisis continues. Thousands of families and children continue experiencing the disruption and toxic stress of housing instability, punctuated by periods

spent in homeless shelter. Continued commitment and innovation are needed to deepen and continue the progress seen last year. As New York City’s largest provider of shelter and services for homeless families, Win will continue to partner with families, communities, elected officials, City agencies, service providers, advocates, funders, and the larger community of stakeholders to deepen awareness and understanding of the family homelessness crisis and to advance solutions to break the cycle of homelessness.

II.

WIN POLICY ADVOCACY YEAR IN REVIEW

*Win launched its policy advocacy efforts in 2016 with the first **Forgotten Face of Homelessness** campaign. Following its launch, the de Blasio Administration announced a plan to tackle many of the issues outlined in the **Forgotten Face of Homelessness**, adopting a number of Win's proposed solutions. Building on the success of that first year, Win has continued to advocate for policy solutions to the family homelessness crisis. Over the previous year, Win has catalyzed and solidified progress toward reforms needed to improve the lives of homeless families with children. This section summarizes our policy achievements from this past year.*

Win advocacy seeks to expand the resources available to homeless families with children and improve the systems that serve them, while also addressing the larger, systemic drivers of the homelessness crisis. Win accomplishes this through efforts to increase awareness and understanding of family homelessness, as well as through system and policy reform efforts. Win's policy advocacy engages New Yorkers—including elected officials, community leaders, government agencies, social service providers, advocates, funders and philanthropists, and the community at large—to recognize, understand, and solve the family homelessness crisis.

TARGETED SOLUTION: LINC REFORM

In response to the homelessness crisis, the de Blasio Administration launched Living In Communities (LINC) program, to provide rental assistance vouchers to New Yorkers in shelter – a proven tool for gaining and maintaining permanent housing. While the program was an important investment aimed at reducing the homeless population in the City, Win identified potential pitfalls in the program and proposed reforms to ensure its effectiveness. Win's advocacy around reforming LINC has included the following proposals to more effectively fulfill the promise of helping families leave and stay out of shelter:

- eliminating the five-year limit on assistance so eligible families in need would not see their housing cost skyrocket abruptly;
- increasing the rental assistance amount to more realistically reflect housing costs in New York City;
- incorporating annual increases in assistance amount to account for annual increases in rent; and,
- applying time spent in foster care to satisfy the homelessness eligibility requirement so young families aging out of foster care would not be required to enter shelter in order to qualify for assistance.

Win's initial legislative advocacy resulted in:

- Drafting all Win LINC reform recommendations into City Council bills in 2017, which were reintroduced in the 2018 session (Intro. 148–2018 and Intro. 146–2018)
- Gaining support for homeless families from City Council members. A majority of City Council members (35 and 22) signed on to the two respective LINC reform bills.
- Securing significant reporting and opinion writing to better inform New Yorkers on the need for LINC reform to ensure hundreds of families did not return to shelter when their vouchers expire.
- Advocacy before city policymakers as they secured funding sources to make changes to LINC through administrative and regulatory channels in advance of the Council voting on the 2018 bill.

On the heels of Win's legislative advocacy, the NYC Human Resources

Administration (HRA) announced in August of 2018 the streamlining of LINC and other City and State rent vouchers into one program. The streamlined program, CityFHEPS, incorporates most of Win's proposed reforms. CityFHEPS continues to provide families with rental assistance for as long as they remain eligible to receive it, and annual increases are automatic based on those set by the Rent Guidelines Board. Further, under CityFHEPS, parenting youth leaving foster care at risk of homelessness are eligible for rental assistance without being required to spend time in shelter.

Win will build on the progress made to make New York City's rental assistance voucher an effective tool, through continued advocacy to raise the assistance amount.

TARGETED SOLUTION: SOCIAL WORKERS IN NYC SCHOOLS

In recognition of the trauma that homeless families and children contend with and the need for supports to heal from trauma, Win has called for access to social workers in schools and in shelters to work with each member of the family. In particular, Win has advocated for the city to place social workers in schools with high proportions of homeless students to address the specialized issues homeless students face.

Win's Results to Date:

- Partnered with advocates and elected officials last summer to stop FY19 budget cuts that would have eliminated social workers for homeless students in schools.
- Resulted in restored funding for

existing social workers and secured additional funds from City Council to expand the program to bring social workers to an additional 16 schools—a total of 69 Bridging the Gap social workers are working with homeless students this school year.

The Mayor’s proposed budget for fiscal year 2019 discontinued funding for the 43 school-based “Bridging the Gap” social workers serving homeless students at the time. Through budget testimony, briefing papers, and a press conference on the steps of City Hall, Win and partners informed elected officials and the public of the impact homelessness can have on academic outcomes, and of the critical role school-based social workers play in meeting the socio-emotional needs of students and helping them stay on track academically. The press conference brought together the expressed support of four Councilmembers and garnered media coverage in a number of outlets including the Daily News.

Through coalition advocacy, the final City budget not only restored funding for existing social workers, but expanded the program to bring social workers to an additional 16 schools with high proportions of homeless students. Despite this victory, more is needed. Sixty-nine social workers are not enough to meet the needs of the more than 114,000 students who are unstably housed (living in a shelter, doubled up, or in other temporary arrangements, such as a motel) for at least a portion of the school year. With one in ten students experiencing homelessness, school-based social workers focused on homeless students are a critical tool for helping vulnerable

students overcome the risks they face of poor academic outcomes.

Win will engage in budget advocacy this year to increase the number of Bridging the Gap Social Workers to at least 100. Win will also advocate to baseline funding so that the future availability of services for homeless students does not depend on the annual success of advocates.

TARGETED SOLUTION: LICENSED SOCIAL WORKERS IN NYC SHELTERS

In recognition of the potentially traumatic circumstances and experiences that impact homeless families and children, Win first advocated for social workers in shelter in 2016. Win’s vision was for licensed social workers to engage each family member in an holistic assessment of needs and strengths across domains and to lead the social service team in developing and following-up on person-centered service plans. Social workers would also engage clients in specialized services such as behavioral or mental health counseling, if needed.

Win’s Results to Date:

- Worked with the Thrive NYC mental health initiative and the Department of Homeless Services (DHS) to deploy social workers to shelter, making a needed resource available to homeless families system-wide.
- Collaborated with DHS to shape the program’s implementation to fit shelters and the needs of families.
- Thanks to ongoing feedback and discussions between Win and DHS, the social worker concept was operationalized and integrated seamlessly into social service teams in Win shelters, meeting the

needs of families, and ensuring appropriate, requisite supervision of social work practice.

Additionally, Win was able to make the case for earmarking a number of social work positions to work exclusively with children and youth. DHS funded services and reporting requirements focus primarily on the head of household; and the Thrive initiative in shelters, as initially conceptualized by DHS, did the same. Through conversations and negotiations with DHS, Win was able to show the need and importance of shelter-based supports to ensure the developmental and socio-emotional health and well-being of children and youth. As a result of this advocacy, Win is implementing the Thrive initiative in shelter with social workers specialized in working with children and youth. Through this and other demonstration efforts, Win will continue to identify and advocate for promising practices to better meet the needs of homeless children and youth for system-wide implementation.

TARGETED SOLUTION: INCREASE PUBLIC AWARENESS OF FAMILY HOMELESSNESS

Win's success is predicated on the support and commitment of New Yorkers to addressing the family homelessness crisis. In order to garner support, Win sets out to deepen awareness of family homelessness by disseminating information and facilitating fact-based, values-driven discussions in various forums.

Win's Results to Date:

- Convened the first-ever candidate

forum on family homelessness for the New York City Public Advocate special election.

- Contributed findings to the Pathways to Gender Equality Conference in Washington, D.C.
- Continued efforts to do storytelling in the media around who the majority of homeless actually are

Win's candidate forum, held in February 2019, was an opportunity for the sector and Win clients to hear directly from the candidates for Public Advocate about how they would use the office of the City's ombudsman to advocate on their behalf. Win families were amply represented at the Forum, and asked questions and engaged directly with candidates. Three candidates participated in the conversation, which was included moderators Win President and CEO Christine Quinn, Catherine Trapani, Executive Director of Homeless Services United, and Nikita Stewart, New York Times reporter who covers homelessness. The Forum was held at a Win shelter and attracted various members of the press. Win and its efforts were prominently highlighted at the official Public Advocate debate the same evening, televised on NY1. Family homelessness emerged as a central issue in the special election.

At the Pathways to Gender Equality Conference in Washington, D.C., members of Win's policy & planning team presented at a first of its kind forum, bringing together scholars, policy experts, advocates, and lawmakers who see gender-focused data analysis as key to solving our most

important local and global economic issues: the increase in inequality and poverty.

Win's submission to the conference, entitled "How Homeless Shelters Can Address Economic Drivers of Homelessness for Female-Headed Families," contributed to this vital conversation on inequality by highlighting how shelter supports and key policy decisions can address core economic drivers of homelessness—employment and wage inequality, limited affordable housing access, and childcare responsibility—that disproportionately affect women and their children.

Win advocacy has advanced understanding of family homelessness and created positive changes in the programs, policies, and systems that aim to address homelessness in New York City. As long as the family homelessness crisis persists, Win will build on this progress by continuing to advocate for smart policies to address the drivers of homelessness and to holistically meet the needs of families experiencing homelessness.

TARGETED SOLUTION: EXPAND THE CITY'S FAMILY SHELTER CAPACITY WITH PURPOSEFULLY DESIGNED SHELTER

In *The Forgotten Face of Homelessness*, October 2016, Win called on the City to develop a comprehensive plan to end the costly and inappropriate use of commercial hotels and "cluster" apartments by expanding the shelter supply with

shelters designed and built to meet the needs of families with children. Four months later, Mayor de Blasio released *Turning the Tide on Homelessness*, putting forth the administration's approach to the homelessness crisis, including the creation of 90 new shelters in five years. Numerous new shelters are in progress, and the City has announced more than 40, including 15 shelters for families with children.

Win is working closely with its development partners and with the Department of Homeless Services to do its part to create the shelter capacity that will end the City's reliance on hotels and clusters. Win works with partners to identify appropriate locations for family shelters, and to design them with the needs of families in mind. This means shelters with units of appropriate size for families of different sizes that include kitchenettes, as well as with needed social service spaces that are commonly left out, including rooms for on-site child care and youth recreation, case manager and counseling meetings, community meetings, front door and security personnel, and laundry rooms.

III.

HOMELESSNESS AND HOUSING INSTABILITY: COSTS, CAUSES, & SOLUTIONS

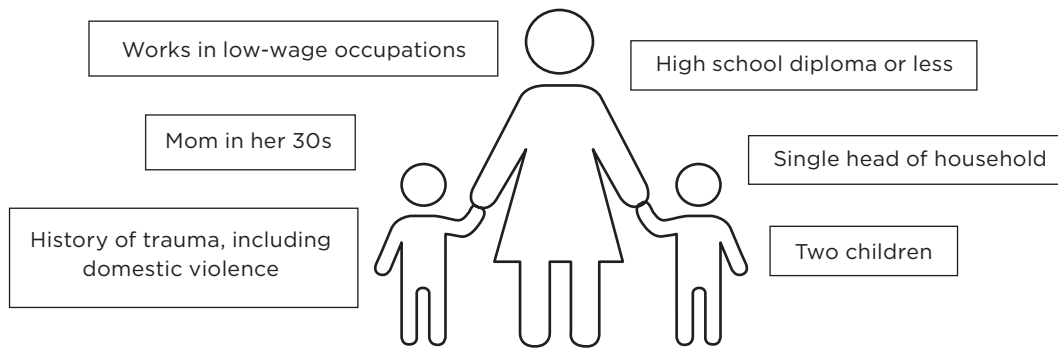
This year, Win's advocacy agenda includes various interventions aimed at reducing housing instability—both by improving service provision to allow families to gain the employment and other supports needed to find and maintain stable housing and by addressing the wage and rent challenges that result in the housing affordability gap. We describe these policy proposals in detail at the end of this section. To provide context and background for our proposals, we explore the connection between homelessness and housing instability in depth. First, we explain the connection for Win families, and then we turn to the costs and causes of housing instability more broadly.

FAMILIES IN WIN SHELTER

Last year, Win shelters served close to 3,000 homeless families, including nearly 5,000 children. More than half of clients in Win shelter are children, and over a third of children are under the age of five. The average Win family includes two children and is led by a single mother in her mid-thirties with a high school diploma or less. About 54 percent of work-eligible Win families are employed. Average family income

for all Win clients is about \$1,670 per month, which is less than 30 percent of the area median income for a family of three in New York City, putting Win families in the extremely low-income category. Based on income standards for New York, a family of three is considered extremely low income if they have an income of \$28,170/year (\$2,347/month) or less.⁹

THE TYPICAL WIN FAMILY



For most families, their stay in Win shelter was preceded by precarious living arrangements. Fewer than one in four families came to Win from their own home last year; and **nearly 60 percent came from sharing a home with family or friends**. Commonly referred to as “doubled-up,” this arrangement is prone to discord and overcrowding that makes it unsustainable. Last year, 17.6 percent of Win families were found eligible for shelter due to overcrowding, and about five percent were found eligible for shelter due to discord and unlivable conditions. As such, living doubled-up is widely considered a type of housing instability.¹⁵

For extremely low-income families, living in a home of one’s own can be as precarious as living doubled-up. Nearly 27 percent of all Win families were found eligible for shelter due to eviction. Non-payment of rent is the most frequent reason for eviction,¹⁰ and is symptomatic of the moderate to severe rent burden more than 85 percent of extremely low-income renters in New York City attempt to carry.¹¹ Last year, hundreds of families

came to Win after struggling to stay in a home they could barely afford. In total, nearly 60 percent of families in Win shelter last year (a total of more than 1,200 families with about 2,250 children) were found eligible for shelter because they were already experiencing housing instability, such as living somewhere other than their own homes (e.g., doubled-up).

Housing instability results in numerous residential moves for most families. That reality is evident in the housing histories common among families entering Win shelters. Last year, for about 1,060 families with over 1,900 children, coming to a Win shelter was at least their second move in less than a year. Among Win families, 64 percent had lived in their previous residence for less than a year, and 38 percent had lived at their previous address for three months or less. Immediate returns, meaning a family returned to shelter less than 30 days after leaving one, accounted for eligibility for nearly 14 percent of families (almost 300 families) at Win. Given that, on average, less than 12 percent of Americans move within a year,¹² homeless families

experience an extraordinarily high rate of residential mobility.

For some, housing precariousness and mobility does not end with applying for shelter with the Department of Homeless Services (DHS).

Families must undergo an eligibility determination process to access shelter, which begins with applying in person at the PATH assessment center. Families may be found eligible for shelter on the day they apply, or they may be placed in a shelter on

a conditional basis while DHS investigates their application. Of families who came to Win on a conditional basis last year, approximately 300 were found ineligible. This represents a clear increase in the number and proportion of children found ineligible; about 17 percent of children who

came to Win shelter in 2017 were found ineligible, and 23.5 percent were found ineligible in 2018. Families are found ineligible if they cannot prove they are homeless, most commonly because of inadequate proof of past addresses, inability to produce required paperwork, or missing a meeting with a PATH worker. On average, the stay with Win for families ultimately found ineligible for shelter lasted 20 days.

In total, nearly **60 percent** of families in Win shelter last year (a total of more than **1,200 families** with about **2,250 children**) were found eligible for shelter because they were already experiencing housing instability, such as living somewhere other than their own homes (e.g., doubled-up).

Unfortunately, families in need are too often found ineligible, forcing them to pack their belongings, leave shelter, and return to PATH to begin the application process again. Among eligible families in Win shelter, **about one in five was found ineligible at least once before being deemed eligible**. Last year, about 520 families (over 30 percent of all families) entered Win shelter at least twice in the year, 67 percent of whom had left because their conditional placement ended with an ineligibility determination.

This itself is a form of housing instability, whereby families are forced to pack and move, without knowing where they will go next or how long they will be able to stay. Additional moves create additional disruption in school, routines, and relationships.

Instead of offering respite from the toxic stress and disruption of housing uncertainty, New York City's shelter application and determination process subjects far too many families to continued, unnecessary moves and instability.

Each application not only presents all the practical challenges of yet another move, it also repeats the stress and anxiety that comes with this type of move. Further, the treatment and process families undergo at PATH

exacerbates the toxicity of the housing instability experience. Families describe their visits to PATH as grueling, dehumanizing all-day ordeals that usually cause children and youth to miss school. Win families who applied at PATH and entered shelter multiple times in the year were less likely than their peers to have positive outcomes.

Even once a family has a stable shelter placement, long-term housing stability is not certain. In New York City, more than eight percent of families who left shelter for permanent housing returned within the year, representing about 740 families last year.² The return-to-shelter rate is driven by families who leave shelter to share an apartment with family or friends and, to a lesser degree, by families who leave for an apartment of their own without rental assistance. These two types of shelter exits resemble the precarious housing families often experience before entering shelter, **and result in a return to shelter in less than a year for nearly 21 percent of families exiting these ways. By contrast, in 2018, only 1.5 percent of families who left for permanent housing with a rental subsidy returned to shelter within the year.**²

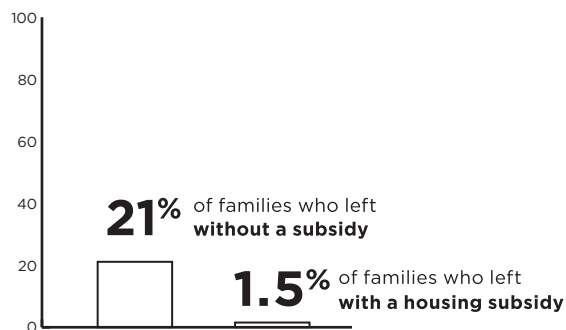
Although return to shelter is frequently measured as returning within twelve months, limiting return to one year does not capture most homeless

families' full experience of housing instability. Nearly 80 percent of families (nearly 1,900 families) in a Win shelter last year had been in a DHS shelter at some point before. Families with a previous stay first entered shelter an average of 6.6 years ago, suggesting that housing instability can last longer than high school.

Housing instability exerts a tremendous toll on the well-being of families and children. For families and children, a permanent home is the foundation for growing, learning, bonding, and participating in society. Lacking a permanent home not only deprives families of these critical processes, it also creates potentially traumatic circumstances and levels of stress that exacerbate the risks for poor health, social, and financial outcomes that are present when living in poverty. Housing instability also carries a financial cost for families and for the public.

The clear link between homelessness and longer-lasting housing instability is evident in the experiences of the families Win serves. As a result, Win's policy agenda addresses not only important aspects of shelter and service provision, but also critical issues related to fostering housing stability for the families we serve. Below we explore the costs and causes of housing instability before delving into our policy recommendations.

RETURN TO SHELTER RATE (within 12 months) for families who left shelter for permanent housing



THE COST OF HOUSING INSTABILITY

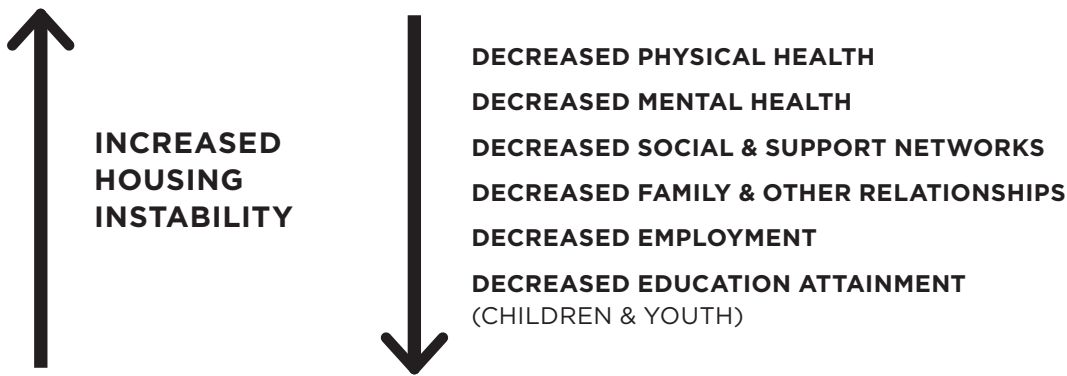
Housing instability exerts a tremendous personal and social toll. Precarious and inappropriate housing arrangements have a detrimental impact on multiple domains of health and well-being, including physical and mental health, support networks, relationships, education, and employment. The effects can be pervasive and last beyond the period of housing instability, negatively impacting the future outcomes of families and children. Housing instability also carries a financial cost paid by both families and the public.

HEALTH

Housing is directly linked to health. Families who experience housing instability have worse health outcomes than families in stable, affordable housing.^{13,14,15} Unstably housed children suffer from a number of conditions at higher rates than their peers, including asthma, anemia, and ear and respiratory infections,^{13,14,15} and are half as likely to be up to date with their immunizations.^{14,15} They also are hospitalized for illness at twice the rate of other children.¹⁴ Mothers also show poorer health, and suffer from disproportionately high rates of acute illnesses, chronic conditions, and health emergencies.¹⁴ Studies have also found higher rates of disability among unstably housed mothers and children.¹⁵ The disparity in health

outcomes has been attributed to housing instability, with effects above and beyond the effects of poverty.^{13,14,16}

Numerous factors contribute to the poorer health outcomes experienced by unstably housed families. The physical environment, such as exposure to lead or other ambient characteristics that are out of a family's control by virtue of not living in their own home, can play a role in causing illnesses and exacerbating existing and chronic conditions. Much research has also found that without stable housing, families face increased obstacles, such as relocating far from their doctor, to managing chronic conditions,^{13,15} leading to poorer health and more frequent health emergencies. Material hardship is also a factor, as families



experiencing a severe rent burden and other aspects of housing instability have more limited financial resources to pay for healthcare than do stably housed families.^{16,17}

The personal and social implications of poor health are many fold. For children and youth, poor health can interfere with cognitive and physical development, and cause missed days of school and other educational disruption.¹³ As a result of poor health and improperly managed chronic conditions, unstably housed children and moms receive healthcare on an emergency basis at a higher than average rate,¹⁵ increasing the public cost for healthcare.

Housing instability also has substantial effects on the mental health of mothers and children.¹⁸ It is estimated that homeless mothers suffer from diagnosable mental illness at two to six times the rate of the general population.¹⁴ Most commonly, unstably housed mothers experience a higher incidence of major depressive and posttraumatic disorders,¹⁵ as well as of general anxiety disorder.¹⁸ Housing instability itself has been shown to impact mental health, even when

controlling for economic hardship and history of trauma,¹⁸ with some studies finding that rates of psychiatric inpatient treatment among heads of family increase after experiencing housing instability.¹⁷ Moreover, unstably housed children are at greater risk of learning disabilities, behavioral disorders,^{14,17} and mental health issues, including depression.¹⁶ Adolescents experiencing frequent moves are more likely to engage in risky behaviors, such as illicit drug use, sex, and violence.²¹

Housing instability also damages relationships that are critical to fulfilling socio-emotional needs and for lending a hand in times of hardship. Many homeless mothers report having few friends or reliable relatives to which they can turn,¹⁴ and report feelings of isolation.¹³ Research has found that housing instability disrupts or severs family, social, and institutional networks,²² with housing moves triggering important shifts in social networks and relationships.²³ Housing instability can uproot children from their networks of care and support, including loss of friendships and relationships with teachers and other adults. This erosion of social capital reduces access to employment and

housing opportunities. It also deprives families of guidance and knowledge that can be gained through social and institutional networks. Equally significant, families are left with less emotional support.

FAMILY RELATIONSHIPS

Housing instability not only impacts social capital, it has also been shown to disrupt the most fundamental of relationships. Family separations are more common among unstably housed families.¹⁵ Separations may be informal, such as sending a child to stay with a family member instead of going to a housing arrangement deemed unfit or unwelcoming.²⁴ Or it may result from involvement with the foster care system.¹⁵ Not only are unstably housed children removed from their families and placed in foster care at disproportionately high rates, the rate of foster care placements increases after instability has ended.¹⁷ These separations are tragic for mothers, who often speak of their children as a source of strength and describe motherhood as one of very few sources of pride.¹⁴ For children and youth, family structure and reliability are crucial for healthy growth and development.²⁵ The removal of a child not only impacts the child and mother, it can also have a negative effect on siblings.

EDUCATION

For children and youth, one of the most potentially life altering effects of housing instability is on educational outcomes. The New York City Independent Budget Office found that students in temporary housing transfer from one school to another at a rate more than double the New York City average.²⁶ School transfers

not only mean loss of consistency in curriculum and academic content, but they also mean disconnection from school programs and activities and loss of relationships with peers, teachers, and other school staff that support academic engagement and socio-emotional well-being. Also, homelessness often means long commutes and disrupted transportation routines for students. Last year, with less than half of families in the shelter closest to their youngest child's school,¹ thousands of families had to make new arrangements for at least one of their children to get to school in the midst of their housing crisis. And, New York City's shelter intake and eligibility process results in missed days of school as families navigate the appointments, paperwork, and other requirements of ensuring a place to stay.

In light of these challenges, it is not surprising that homeless and temporarily housed students suffer academically. The share of homeless students in third through eighth grade that met grade-level standards in English in New York City was less than half the rate for all children in the 2014–2015 school year (14% of homeless students performed at grade level in English compared to 31% of students overall).²⁷ Homeless students progress through grades more slowly, and are more likely to drop out.²⁸ They are also far more likely than their non-homeless peers to be chronically absent.²⁹ In New York City, only about 56 percent of homeless students graduate from high school, compared to an overall citywide graduation rate of 74 percent.³⁰ Given the link between limited educational attainment and disadvantage in adulthood, the impact

on schooling is one of the ways that housing instability can have long-term, intergenerational implications.

EMPLOYMENT

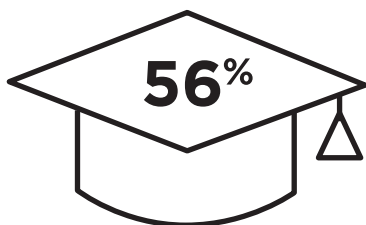
The loss of housing also directly increases the probability of job loss.³¹ Research on eviction has shown similar conclusions, while also finding that families evicted in the past year report higher material hardship in the form of hunger or sickness because food or healthcare were financially out of reach. In addition to being linked to job loss, eviction can also damage credit and housing history, making it even harder for a homeless family to find a new home.

LONG-TERM STABILITY

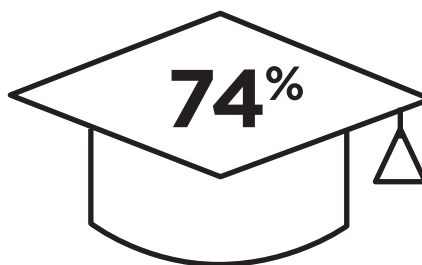
Finally, once a family has regained stable housing, the trauma of past housing instability can make it harder to maintain long-term housing permanence. The lack of permanence and of regular routines, the anxiety and insecurity of precarious housing, the situational depression reported by many mothers, and the loss of privacy and autonomy imposed by

shared and temporary housing can be traumatic for adults and children. Life shocks commonly experienced during housing instability, such as being forced to leave your home and being separated from family members or losing other important relationships, can also be traumatic. Trauma reshapes how one sees, understands, reacts to, and navigates the world.³² Trauma can impede an individual's ability to learn, maintain employment, fulfill obligations, and connect with others. Because trauma can go unrecognized, trauma symptoms and responses can be interpreted as problematic behaviors or as personal shortcomings, leaving families isolated and struggling without the support needed to heal from extraordinary, overwhelming circumstances such as losing a home, losing a child, or losing a sibling. Taken together, unstably housed families face formidable obstacles to establishing and maintaining a permanent home. These obstacles are rooted in structural economic conditions that cause and perpetuate housing instability, discussed next.

CITYWIDE HIGH SCHOOL GRADUATION RATE



In New York City, only about **56 percent** of homeless students graduate from high school.



The overall citywide graduation rate is **74 percent.**

CAUSES OF HOUSING INSTABILITY AMONG NYC FAMILIES

Housing instability among homeless families is largely driven by economic forces. A preponderance of research has shown a link between high housing costs and high rates of homelessness.³³ In New York City, a lack of housing that is affordable to families working in low wage industries has made maintaining and finding permanent housing increasingly difficult.

The federal and commonly applied standard for housing affordability is that a family should pay no more than 30 percent of their gross income on housing costs. Households paying more than 30 percent of their income are categorized as moderately rent burdened, and those paying 50 percent or more are considered severely rent burdened.³⁴ High rent burden is considered a form of housing instability because it places families at risk of homelessness.³⁴ Further, high rent burden impacts health and well-being, as families carrying extraordinary rent cost burdens have less to spend on other basic needs, such as food and healthcare.³⁵ Those with annual incomes below \$35,000 are most likely to be moderately to severely rent burdened in New York City,³⁶ and extremely low-income renters make up

about 55 percent of all severely rent burdened New Yorkers.³⁷

For the average Win family with a monthly income of about \$1,670, an apartment would be affordable at a monthly rent of about \$500 or less. With a monthly income of approximately \$2,026, Win families with employment income earned slightly more than average, but could still only afford an apartment renting for about \$600 or less. In 2018, median monthly contract rent was about \$1,337 in New York City,³⁶ and an extremely low-income family earned about \$2,300 or less a month.¹¹

Not only are median rents beyond the financial reach of extremely low-income families, the lower cost segment of the housing market is

shrinking. Between 2006 and 2016, the share of New York City's housing stock affordable to extremely low-income renters decreased.¹¹ Apartments renting for \$900 or less are disappearing—425,000 were lost between 2005 and 2017.³⁷ Not only are there fewer low-cost apartments in New York City, apartments renting for the least had the lowest vacancy rates,³⁶ making it nearly impossible for low-income families who are unstably housed to find an affordable, permanent home.

Rents, however, are only half of the housing affordability (and housing instability) equation. In New York City, rent is increasing at a faster rate than income. Inflation-adjusted wages of New Yorkers remained stagnant from 2015 to 2017;³⁶ meanwhile, contract rents (what housed New Yorkers are paying) and asking rents (what New Yorkers looking for a home can expect to pay) both increased over the period.^{11,36} This is part of a ten-year trend, whereby increases in rent from 2006 to 2016 have outpaced increases in renter incomes.¹¹ In order to afford the 2016 median asking rent of \$2,695 in New York City,⁸ a family would need to work about four jobs at the current \$15 minimum wage.

It comes as no surprise to Win families that employment does not protect a family from housing instability. Over 1,500 Win families were employed

when they became homeless. The average hourly wage of employed mothers in Win shelter was just above \$13 in 2017, approximately the minimum wage in New York State that year. Win families were employed in a variety of low wage industries, mostly frequently: home health care (24.1 percent); cleaning and maintenance (12.4 percent); food services (11.9 percent); customer service (10.6 percent); and, retail (9.9 percent). Monthly income among employed Win families was

higher than average Win family income (\$1,670 per month compared to \$2,026 a month in 2018), but not enough to maintain stable housing in New York City. Nowhere has the disproportionate increase in rent, shrinking affordable housing stock, and stagnant wages been felt more acutely than among families in shelter.

Win families were employed in a variety of low wage industries, mostly frequently: home health care (**24.1%**); cleaning and maintenance (**12.4%**); food services (**11.9%**); customer service (**10.6%**); and, retail (**9.9%**).

These increases in housing instability and homelessness are taking place in tandem with decreases in Federal investment in programs that help families in need.³⁵ Nationally, it is estimated that three out of four families in need of housing assistance do not receive it.³⁹ Localities such as New York City have made considerable investment to compensate for the loss of federal support,³⁷ but the nature and causes of the problem require concerted efforts from all stakeholders

and levels of government.

Win is proposing a series of policy solutions that address the effects and causes of housing instability. These solutions require the commitment and efforts of federal, state, and city governments, and collaboration with all stakeholders. The solutions we propose hold the promise of dramatically reducing the rate and severity of housing instability among families with children. Given the long-term ramifications of housing instability on individuals, families, and the New York as a whole, solutions are urgently needed.

In order to afford the 2016 median asking rent of **\$2,695** in New York City, a family would need to work about **four jobs** at the current minimum wage.



POLICY SOLUTIONS 2019: MINIMIZING HOUSING INSTABILITY

New York City has a stake in and responsibility to address the housing instability that is harming the life chances of thousands of families and children. The problem must be acknowledged as resulting from structural forces that create inequality and tackled with compassion and resolve. To be effective, solutions must target the causes of housing instability and address its effects on families and children. The de Blasio Administration has promised to turn the tide on homelessness, which requires policy solutions to reform ineffective systems and programs and to expand and build upon successful interventions.

New York City cannot and should not tackle the problem of housing instability alone. The state and federal governments have critical roles to play. Housing instability has increased as federal investment in needed programs has decreased. All levels of government must work together to usher in an era in which employment affords a family stability and opportunity, and the social safety net fully protects the most vulnerable. Here we outline several policy reforms—at the city, state, and federal level—that are necessary to address housing instability and its consequences in New York City.

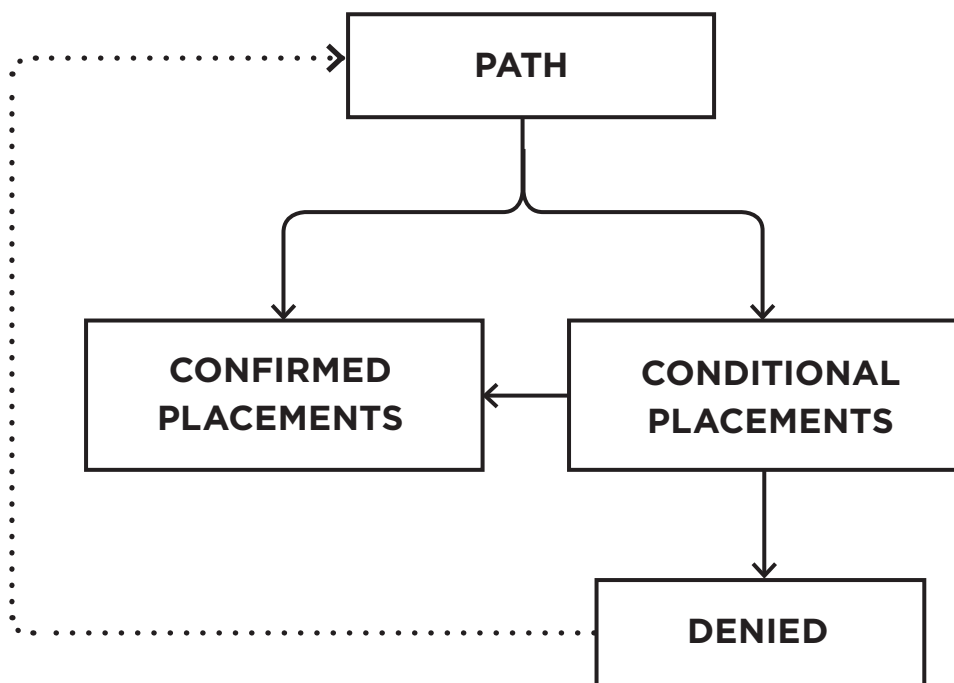
ENSURE THAT FAMILIES IN NEED CAN ACCESS APPROPRIATE SHELTER SERVICES

Reform New York City's shelter application and eligibility determination processes: Changes to PATH.

To appropriately serve families, the process for entering and accessing services, as well as the services themselves, must recognize and promote healing from trauma, while providing services that build the financial strength and socio-emotional well-being of adults and children

THE PATH PROCESS

45%
of confirmed
placements have
been previously
denied



alike. Far too many families undergo potentially traumatic treatment when applying for shelter at PATH, followed by a prolonged period in shelter limbo while DHS determines eligibility. A family's shelter placement and the services they receive are often the luck of the draw. Additionally, the slow pace of construction of new shelters means that many families are still being sheltered in sites that are unfit for children—4,400 families in 2018 were placed in cluster sites and commercial hotels⁵ that are often unsafe, unequipped, and lack social services.

Win families describe their experience at the PATH intake center as a full-day, fourteen-hour ordeal that is stressful, dehumanizing, and punitive, and especially difficult for children. During focus groups conducted by Win's Research and Evaluation team,

Win mothers who underwent the application and eligibility process multiple times before being found eligible shared alarming experiences:

"They make you feel unwelcome. Because sometimes you go there and they talk to you like - they make you feel how you are: homeless. That's how they really make you feel; like they're better than you. Like, even a worker told me there one time, "Well this isn't my issue. I have somewhere to sleep at night."

This ordeal often results in needless denials by DHS, forcing families to undergo the PATH application process repeatedly, all the while living in shelter limbo that resembles the housing instability they experienced before turning to DHS for help. In any given month in the last half of 2018, DHS

found about 41 percent of families who applied for shelter eligible.⁴ Among families found eligible, nearly 45 percent (740 families) had applied at least once before.⁴ This flawed and inefficient process hurts families, and unnecessarily increases the public cost of providing services. Based on the feedback and experiences of Win families, Win recommends the following action to improve family shelter placements.

Conduct a municipal audit of the PATH shelter intake and eligibility determination process to identify the systemic reasons families are being turned away and to identify ways to incorporate trauma-informed practices. Win calls on New York City's Comptroller to conduct an audit of the shelter intake and eligibility determination process to identify the systemic reasons homeless families are being turned away and to identify improvements to reduce unnecessary denials and improve service, so that families receive humane assistance for their housing crisis. While the audit is underway, a number of immediate reforms are needed to make PATH customer-service oriented and trauma-informed.

Provide Client Navigators at PATH.

Client Navigators would provide families with information on what to expect during the intake and eligibility determination process, including what will be asked of them, by whom, and where they will need to go to complete their application and paperwork. Navigators will also inform clients of services available to them at PATH, including child care, storage for personal belongings, and Department

of Education liaisons. They would also be equipped to direct families looking for specific resources, such as transportation assistance, and to answer questions regarding wait times and documentation requirements. A Win mother shared her strategy for navigating the application process:

"You just keep on bringing the same papers over until you figure out, you know, maybe I need some more of this."

Establish time windows for meetings at PATH.

Win mothers frequently cite all-day waits at PATH as one of the greatest hardships for themselves and their children. Children are expected to spend the day sitting in office-style waiting rooms while their parents wait to speak to one PATH worker after another, as patience runs low and tensions high. Time windows for appointments would allow families to leave PATH for meals and snacks, as well as to get outside and alleviate the tedium and tension of waiting.

"...The kids getting antsy and overwhelmed...because a kid can only sit so long in a chair, you know. They want to run around. They're children, they don't understand the process of sitting there and waiting. They're just like okay, I'm here with mommy but I'm getting restless. I want to run. I want to play. And you're getting frustrated because [PATH workers are] telling you 'tell your child to sit down.'"

Train all workers who interact with families in trauma-informed practices.

Families report feeling shamed by the comments and treatment they received at PATH in response to their experiences and circumstances. It is unacceptable for a security guard, case manager, or other personnel to make judgmental comments about past experiences of domestic violence survivors, or about the tattered appearance of someone's clothing, yet Win families report witnessing and being subjected to such treatment. Training in trauma-informed principles is a first step toward ensuring that staff recognize the prevalence of trauma, the effects of trauma, and the appropriate way to interact with families contending with a housing crisis. This is necessary for protecting families from further trauma and for improving the PATH environment.

"Personally, I wanted to cry and I cried there because I get anxious and, like, everybody's different, and sometimes they don't have a professional person to deal with different types of people."

Issue a moratorium on closing cases until completion of audit by comptroller.

Win families who had to undergo the application process multiple times point to a number of unreasonable and unnecessary criteria for denials. Before being found eligible for shelter, families were commonly turned away due to: an inability to gather all required documentation within the required timeframe; the DHS investigator's inability to corroborate parts of the family's history due to unresponsive or uncooperative past

landlords or hosts; and, being found to have other living options deemed unhealthy or inappropriate by the head of household. Instead of closing cases to meet deadlines, the conditional period must be extended while the Comptroller conducts an audit to identify ways in which these pitfalls can be corrected. During a Win focus group, a mother said:

"They try to tell you if you're really homeless or not, that's the funny thing."

And another shared why she was previously found ineligible:

"They say, 'Okay, there's enough room, you can stay here.' But they don't know exactly what's going on in that place. Because sometimes when the investigator goes to that place everything is quiet, because they go in the morning. If there's stuff happening in the night [late parties involving loud music and drug use], they never going to find out."

Reforms to PATH intake and eligibility are needed to reduce the unnecessary public and personal costs created by the inefficiency and approach of the current system.

Expedite and Facilitate the Creation of New, Purpose-Built Shelters.

New York City must expand its shelter capacity with appropriately designed facilities to end the use of cluster sites and commercial hotels for homeless families with children. Indeed, the City acknowledged this need in its 2017 Turning the Tide on Homelessness report, where it committed to opening 90 new shelters over five years. The

current practice for expanding shelter capacity relies on private, for-profit developers who rent their new or converted facilities to the City at market price for use as shelters. This process is slow in the short-term and expensive in the long-term. And it does not result in shelters that have spaces appropriate for providing the social services homeless families need. The City should pursue the following reforms in order to expedite and improve shelter development.

Create a shelter development fund for proven non-profit developers to facilitate shelter construction.

Currently, for-profit developers build new homeless shelters, using private financing sources. But, the City ultimately pays the price for development after the fact—through the rental agreements it enters into with the property owner/developer. Typically, non-profits are not part of the shelter development process because, by nature of being non-profits, they do not have the funds or the capacity to take on debt available to for-profit developers. Yet a number of New York City’s mission-driven non-profits have the housing development experience and expertise needed to develop shelters, along with a unique understanding of the physical space required to address the needs of homeless families and a commitment to meeting those needs. With access to financial tools, non-profits have the capacity to develop better quality shelters. By opening the shelter development field to additional, capable organizations, more shelters can be built simultaneously to more quickly end the use of cluster sites and hotels. Moreover, the price tag for

shelters would ultimately be reduced because non-profits will not seek the return required by for-profit developers for undertaking these projects.

New York City can more quickly, and likely more affordably, fulfill the need for quality shelter by creating a shelter development fund for non-profits. Similar to the programs the City’s Department of Housing Preservation and Development provides for permanent housing, this fund would be available to support the construction and rehabilitation of buildings to create new shelters. And, access to this fund would be limited to non-profit organizations. To support non-profit construction for a third of the City’s 90-shelter goal (assuming two-thirds of the shelters are created by rehabilitating existing buildings, and one third by new construction), we estimate the fund would need to provide approximately \$150,000,000 per year for five years. Win calls for the establishment of a shelter development fund to facilitate development by non-profits, resulting in purpose-built, more affordable shelters.

In addition to providing non-profits with needed capital, New York City should further support non-profit involvement in shelter development by providing preferential access to City-owned properties that are appropriate for shelter development.

Prioritize permits and inspections for shelters and create Shelter Construction Project Managers.

In order to expedite shelter development, shelter-related applications for City permits and inspections must be prioritized and not simply put in line for agency

review. In addition to prioritizing shelter applications, the City should create a Shelter Construction Project Manager at DHS, who would have a detailed understanding of each project to troubleshoot issues with permits and applications and oversee progress. The Project Manager would also coordinate across the various City agencies responsible for permits, approvals, and inspections of buildings so that required pieces are in place for timely completion.

HELP FAMILIES OBTAIN STABLE HOUSING

Affordable housing opportunities continue to be elusive for homeless families. While New York City's housing market is daunting, the City can restore access and open up new opportunities so that homeless families can find stable homes.

Increase the CityFHEPS payment amount.

Rental assistance vouchers are one of the most effective tools for promoting housing stability, as evidenced by the low rate of return to New York City shelter (less than two percent) by families with a voucher. Not only are they a proven tool for reducing return to shelter, rental vouchers are often the only way a family can leave shelter in a city with a serious dearth of apartments affordable to extremely low-income families.

New York City's rental assistance voucher program, CityFHEPS, helps eligible families afford an apartment by paying landlords a portion of the rent. Currently, the maximum monthly rent allowed by CityFHEPS for a family of three or four is \$1,552.

Appropriate apartments at this rent are extremely scarce in New York City, where the median asking rent was \$2,695 in 2017. This unreasonably low rent amount unnecessarily prolongs stays in shelter and makes the apartment-search process extremely difficult. In order to help families with vouchers move out of shelter more quickly, and to allow them to move to well-resourced neighborhoods, **the CityFHEPS rent amount should be raised to \$2100/month, coming closer to reflecting the real cost of housing in New York City.** Based on our analysis of neighborhood median asking rents, this amount would open access to two-bedroom apartments in 16 different neighborhoods located across Brooklyn, Queens, and the Bronx. If families in shelter last year had a voucher that allowed them to rent apartments for up to \$2,100, we estimate that there would have been nearly six times as many apartments affordable and available to them.

Invest in better enforcement to prevent source of income discrimination.

Once a family has access to a rental voucher, they face the next challenge of finding a landlord willing to accept it. Homeless families regularly encounter landlords who reject vouchers, prolonging the journey out of shelter. The practice of not accepting vouchers—called source of income discrimination—is illegal in New York City, and as a result of recently passed legislation, in all of New York State. Landlords found guilty of source of income discrimination can be subject to hundreds of thousands of dollars in fines and damages. Yet the practice remains common in New

York City. While the City has increased resources for enforcement in recent years, the threat of enforcement remains insufficient to adequately deter this illegal behavior. After the long and difficult journey that most homeless families go through to find an apartment they can afford, to then be turned away because they will be using a voucher to pay a portion of their rent is a cruel and illegal result; it also has the effect of undermining the massive efforts of the New York City to help families find permanent homes. The City, and now the State, must devote additional resources to strategic efforts to curb source of income discrimination in New York.

Win also supports legislation that would make source of income discrimination illegal across the nation. By passing the Landlord Accountability Act of 2019, Washington has the opportunity to affirm the right of all Americans, including those receiving financial assistance, to access appropriate, permanent housing for their families. By prohibiting discrimination based on receipt of a Section 8 voucher in the federal Fair Housing Act, this legislation would provide a mechanism to protect equal access for Americans and would send a clear message to landlords in New York and beyond.

Permit families with SOTA assistance to apply for CityFHEPS without re-entering shelter.

New York City has attempted to make vouchers more appealing to landlords with the Special One Time Assistance (SOTA) program, whereby DHS pays a landlord an entire year of rent at the beginning of a lease, instead of paying

on a monthly basis. The program is proving problematic, as families have come forth with evidence that some landlords are providing substandard apartments and turning their backs on families who lack the traditional financial recourse of withholding rent to demand improvements. The City must enforce landlord responsibility to maintain habitable housing conditions; and, these circumstances may require extra vigilance.

In addition, the 12-month limit on SOTA assistance poses a major risk of return to shelter. Once the one-year, rent-assisted period ends, families would have to pay half of their income in rent to stay in their homes. And, under current rules, before families can apply for CityFHEPS, they would need to enter shelter. To prevent a return to homelessness, the City must provide a mechanism for extending rent assistance in place for SOTA families. Families who are in an appropriate apartment with the help of SOTA must be exempt from the CityFHEPS homelessness eligibility requirement, so that they can apply for continued rental assistance without being required to first lose their home and enter shelter.

Close the loophole that allows non-profit operated supportive housing to exit rent stabilization.

Legislative loopholes that allow apartments to be permanently removed from rent regulation when rented by a non-profit are allowing the erosion of the affordable stock. Each year, non-profits rent thousands of apartments to provide service-enriched, permanent supportive housing for families. Allowing these

apartments to be removed from rent stabilization can increase the rent amount, inflating the price of providing housing for families in need, and removes limits on future rent increases. By closing the loophole in the State's rent stabilization legislation, the affordability of thousands of units would be preserved.

Set aside 15 percent of units in City-subsidized affordable housing for homeless households.

New York City must renew its commitment to ensuring that housing is affordable and accessible for people of all incomes with deeper investment in affordable housing. The City provides various subsidies and incentives to property owners to provide below-market rents affordable to households at various moderate and low income levels. While Mayor de Blasio's housing plan is the most ambitious of its kind, the current target will not create enough affordable housing at deeply affordable levels to meet the need. Under the plan, too few apartments are subsidized deeply enough to be affordable for extremely low-income families. New York City has the opportunity to correct the imbalance by passing legislation currently in the City Council that would require developers receiving government subsidies to set aside 15 percent of newly created apartments for homeless families.

PROVIDE FAMILIES WITH TOOLS TO MAINTAIN A PERMANENT HOME

The homeless services system provides an opportunity to intervene in the

cycles of housing instability with services that address its damaging effects and help families build protection against future instability. Social services that promote healing from trauma and from the effects of housing instability are essential to ensuring the socio-emotional well-being needed for securing and maintaining permanent housing. Shelter is also an opportunity to build the financial strength of families to protect them from the economic forces that can cause future housing instability. Families in shelter benefit from access to on-site child care, youth recreation and out-of-school time activities, income building services for gaining or improving employment, housing specialist services for finding and applying to apartments, and offices and private spaces for counseling and other sensitive discussions with social workers and shelter staff.

Policy solutions that address the economic drivers of homelessness and housing stability are also critically important. Rising rents and stagnant wages, as we have shown, are both to blame for the growing homelessness crisis in New York City, and other cities around the country. Policies that address employment opportunity and affordable housing—in other words, that close the housing affordability gap—must be central to any successful attempt to reduce homelessness. The City should support the following interventions because they are critical to helping families find and maintain permanent housing and bridge the housing affordability gap.

Support children and youth with social workers in shelter and in schools.

Housing instability poses high stakes risks during the formative childhood and adolescent years. Eighteen percent of all mothers in Win shelter had been in shelter as children. Social workers equipped to connect children and youth to resources and networks of support that may have been disrupted by housing instability, as well as to identify developmental, academic, and/or behavioral challenges and needed services, are critical to supporting resiliency and helping homeless children look forward to a brighter future.

Currently, the Bridging the Gap program funds a limited number of social workers for some of the schools with high proportions of homeless students. The program is only able to fulfill a portion of the need, with 69 social workers serving the more than 114,000 students who are homeless for at least a portion of the school year. Further, these social workers are in danger of being completely defunded each year. In order to meet the needs of homeless students, in collaboration with child and student advocates, Win is calling on the Mayor to increase the number of Bridging the Gap social workers to at least 100 and baseline the funding in the City budget to ensure services are available in coming years.

Win also believes in the importance of providing shelter-based specialized services to children and youth. Dovetailing on the Thrive initiative, which brought much needed social workers to shelter to conduct

assessments and work with families with complex needs, Win applied the concept to create Youth Client Care Coordinators. Whereas Thrive social workers focus on the whole family, Youth Client Care Coordinators are licensed social workers with additional, specialized training in children and youth. At Win shelter, these social workers conduct developmental, behavioral, and social assessment of children and youth who may be experiencing heightened academic and/or socio-emotional challenges, and help parents support their children's needs and ensure access and follow-up on needed services.

Youth Client Care Coordinators have been possible at Win shelters thanks to flexibility in funding, but they are not available across the shelter system. For the future or today's homeless children and youth, DHS should fund and require specialized social workers for children and youth across all family shelters.

Provide income building services for families in shelter.

Win's Income Building program model has shown that, with support, extremely low-income families can improve their financial strength, a critical component of securing and maintaining stable housing. Among the more than 2,000 work eligible adults participating in Win's Income Building program while in shelter last year, 66.5 percent made at least one financial gain. On average, each participant made 2.6 gains, with the number of gains increasing with an increase in program participation. Most commonly, participants gained employment

(about 51 percent) and gained wages (25 percent). Additional gains included maintaining employment, gaining employer sponsored benefits, and moving from off the books to on the books employment. Further, the Income Building program is linked to housing stability. Win families who returned to shelter had engaged in fewer income building services before they left and were less likely to have made income gains while in shelter.

Recognition of the value of income building services, DHS now expects all non-profits to make them available to clients in shelter. However, DHS is not fully funding the staff needed to make these services possible. Win is able to provide income building services thanks to eleven private, philanthropic funders: Assurant Foundation, BlackRock, Google, J.Jill Compassion Fund, The Francine A. LeFrak Foundation, John A. Reisenbach Foundation, PepsiCo Foundation, State Farm, Stavros Niarchos Foundation, UNFCU Foundation Inc., Wells Fargo, and an anonymous donor.

To ensure sustainability and access for all families, DHS must fully fund income building services.

Provide transition supports and preventative aftercare for families leaving shelter without a subsidized housing placement.

The transition out of shelter and into a permanent home can be a precarious time for families. Supports that help families navigate changes in school and transportation, and that connect families to community-based services such as child care, reduce the likelihood that families will be destabilized and need to return to shelter.

Once families have moved into their new homes, preventative aftercare services should be provided by a case manager for a year and half. Based on successful models, services would include monthly check-ins with a case manager to ensure families continue receiving all benefits, to support families in updating and maintaining a household budget, and to follow-up on the continuation of needed services, including ensuring access to child care and afterschool activities. In addition to monthly check-ins, case managers would be available to help families respond to emerging needs or challenges and would serve to mediate issues with landlords.

Currently, the Homebase homelessness prevention program provides services to families facing a housing emergency, including case management for families who have been in shelter. However, the Homebase intervention is only in place once a family is already experiencing a housing crisis and has sought out assistance. Further, the caseload of Homebase case managers does not allow for the person-centered case management that ensures stability.

Create pathways to quality employment.

More than half of Win families are homeless despite being employed. The low-wage employment available to many families does not meet the costs of living in New York City, and often fails to provide the benefits or flexibility that a single head of family needs. New York State can create pathways to employment that pays a living wage and provides the benefits a family needs to stay healthy by creating tax incentives that train and employ homeless and formerly

homeless parents to work on in-demand and non-traditional industries with opportunity for advancement. By providing both training and employment, the workforce benefits from increased productivity and from an expanded skill pool, and formerly low-wage workers and their children can look forward to a brighter future.

Increase Federal investment in programs proven to end homelessness.

While the dynamics of housing and family homelessness are unique to their community, they are universally driven by economic forces. Across the United States, homelessness increases as the real estate market heats up and the labor market holds or depresses earnings in low-wage occupations. For some of the last century, the Federal government recognized its responsibility for ensuring that these economic forces did not deprive some Americans of opportunity for advancement. Yet recent administrations have retracted from this responsibility, gradually reducing the federal budget for housing programs that localities and low-income families depend on to combat poverty and ensure health, safety, and opportunity for children and youth. Officials in Washington must embrace the values of equal opportunity and of an effective safety net for those in need by unapologetically investing in proven tools to alleviate the homelessness crisis.

The Ending Homelessness Act of 2019, introduced by Representative Maxine Waters, is one such tool.

This legislation would increase the federal government's investment in homelessness housing programs, namely, permanent supportive housing. Permanent supportive housing moves homeless families with complex histories of trauma, disability, and special needs into permanent homes, while providing on-going supportive services to prevent a return to homelessness. Passage of A Path to End Homelessness should be a key congressional priority. And, as homelessness has risen across the country in recent years, it should also be a priority for everyone in Congress.

CONCLUSION

The challenges of reducing family homelessness and helping mothers and children break the cycle of housing instability are daunting. But, by targeting the root causes of housing instability as well as making common-sense improvements to how families with children are treated and supported as they move through homeless services systems, progress is possible. Win and other service providers will continue to work with the City of New York to ensure that families experiencing homelessness receive the services and support they need to leave shelter for permanent, stable housing, never to return. This requires taking a hard look and concrete steps to improve how services and shelter are provided and also considering how to address the larger economic forces that make housing affordability so elusive in New York City today. We are excited to move forward in advocating for the solutions we propose here to ensure that families and children experiencing homelessness today are well-prepared to move forward, out of shelter, without looking back.

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