



Testimony of

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Regarding

*Navigating the Shelter System as a Family with Children*

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Good afternoon. Thank you to Chair Levin, and all the members of the General Welfare Committee. It is a pleasure to be with you this morning. My name is Raysa Rodriguez and I'm the Vice President of Policy and Planning at Win.

Win is the largest provider of shelter and supportive housing for homeless families in New York City. For more than 33 years, Win has provided safe housing, critical services, and ground-breaking programs to help homeless women and their children rebuild their lives and break the cycle of homelessness. In the past year, Win served nearly 10,000 homeless people—including more than 6,000 children—and helped nearly 800 families transition out of shelter into homes of their own.

When we talk about homelessness, the image that pops into most people's head is what we see on the street. But although the chronically street homeless are certainly the most visible segment of the homeless population, they make up only a tiny fraction of the nearly 60,000 New Yorkers who have no place to call home.

In fact, over 70% of homeless New Yorkers are families with children. Most of our families are headed by women. These are the forgotten faces of homelessness—the mothers, grandmothers, aunts, and sisters who struggle to keep their families together and safe.

The average homeless family in a Win shelter is a single mom in her thirties with two small kids. You don't see her panhandling on the subway or on the sidewalk, because she's probably working. More than half of the moms in Win shelters are currently employed, and 91% have a work history. But no matter how hard she tries, she never seems to earn enough to make ends meet. She might work as a home health aide or a security guard, or in an extremely low-wage industry like retail, food service, cleaning, or administration where real wages have decreased by an estimated 4.5% since 2007.<sup>1</sup> She might be trying desperately to advance her career, but without a Bachelor's or Associate's degree, she finds that it's nearly impossible. Nearly 86% of Win mothers are raising a family with a high school diploma or less.

Even as wages for low-income workers stagnate and decline in New York City, the rents have continued to rise: median gross rent rose 18.3% from 2005 to 2015.<sup>2</sup> The current median rent in New York City is \$3,185 a month. The National Low Income Housing Coalition estimates that there were only 35 affordable apartments for every 100 extremely low-income renters in the New York Metropolitan Area in 2016. Amidst such ruthless competition for affordable housing, 80% of extremely low income families in New York end up carrying a severe housing burden, renting apartments that cost more than half of

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<sup>1</sup> New York City Independent Budget Office. (2016). *Analysis of the Mayor's Preliminary Budget for 2017. IBO's Re-estimate of the Mayor's Preliminary Budget for 2014 and Financial Plan through 2020*. New York, NY: Belkin, D. et. Al. Retrieved: <http://www.ibo.nyc.ny.us/iboreports/analysis-of-the-mayors-2017-preliminary-budget-and-financial-plan-through-2020.pdf>.

<sup>2</sup> NYU Furman Center (June 2017) *2016 Focus: Poverty in New York City*

their income.<sup>3</sup> The average homeless mom at Win may have been renting an apartment she could barely afford, or been living in overcrowded room with friends or family. Like so many New Yorkers, she was only one bad week away from eviction and homelessness.

Advocates agree that the economic roots of homelessness are pernicious, but it is worth pausing to note that women who enter the shelter system are at particular risk for the trauma of domestic violence. Advocates estimate that one-third of families in a New York City shelter are homeless as a result of domestic violence. Nationally, 80% of homeless mothers have experience domestic violence as adults,<sup>4</sup> and homeless mothers are much more likely than housed, low-income women to have experienced trauma as children, including violence, abuse, and involvement in systems such as foster care.<sup>5</sup> DHS data indicate that in early 2016, for the first time, domestic violence surpassed evictions as the primary reason that people enter the shelter system.<sup>6</sup> Domestic violence is not only physical violence, it can also manifest as economic violence, which might entail preventing a victim from attending work, pursuing educational opportunities, or denying her access to shared financial resources.

Whatever the precipitating event that leads to each individual family's crisis, in New York City they make the journey to the Prevention Assistance and Temporary Housing (PATH) Office in the Bronx for a way forward. On this journey with her children, this homeless mom might be remembering her own first experience going into a shelter, as a child with her own mother. One in five mothers in Win shelters first entered the shelter system as children themselves. Like any mother, she wants a better life for her children. Tonight, more than 23,600 children will go to sleep in a homeless shelter. In Win shelters alone, there were nearly 1,500 children under the age of five—a critical period for brain development—who were homeless in 2015.

We know the impact of homelessness and other trauma can also be toxic for school-aged children and can severely impair academic achievement.

After intake at PATH, mom is assigned to one of the family shelters scattered throughout the five boroughs. If sent to one of Win's facilities, after another protracted subway ride she'll meet staff trained in trauma-informed, strengths-based care. She will complete a comprehensive assessment of needs and strengths, which will be used to develop a service plan to help her move forward and to permanent housing. But for now she is focused on settling into this temporary room. After a long night, she finally

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<sup>3</sup> National Low Income Housing Coalition. (2016). *The Gap: The Affordable Housing Gap Analysis 2016*. Washington, D.C.: Aurand, Andrew, et. al. Retrieved: [http://nlihc.org/sites/default/files/Gap-Report\\_print.pdf](http://nlihc.org/sites/default/files/Gap-Report_print.pdf).

<sup>4</sup> US Interagency Council on Homelessness. (2015). *Opening Doors: Federal Strategic Plan to Prevent and End Homelessness*. Washington, D.C.: no author. Retrieved: [https://www.usich.gov/resources/uploads/asset\\_library/USICH\\_OpeningDoors\\_Amendment2015\\_FINAL.pdf](https://www.usich.gov/resources/uploads/asset_library/USICH_OpeningDoors_Amendment2015_FINAL.pdf).

<sup>5</sup> Bassuk, E.L., Buskner, J.C., Weinreb, L.F. et. al. (1997). Homelessness in Female-Headed Families: Childhood and Adult Risk and Protective Factors. *American Journal of Public Health*. 87 (2), 241–249.

<sup>6</sup> Goldensohn, R. and Schiffman, G. (26 October 2016) Domestic violence emerges as economic scourge and primary drive of homelessness. *Crain's*. Retrieved: <http://www.crainsnewyork.com/article/20161026/BLOGS04/161029881/domestic-violence-emerges-as-primary-driver-of-homelessness-in-new-york-city>

tucks her children into bed. She has to figure out how to get her kids to school in the morning, how to get herself to work, and how to rebuild her life.

In addition to connecting families to any benefits they may be entitled to, at Win we work hard to grow our clients' incomes through work. These individualized programs begin with vocational guidance and coaching, offering such practical services as job search and resume writing help. Beyond that, we are also pursuing income-building strategies that create pathways to employment in high-opportunity, non-traditional jobs for women like construction, culinary arts, and technology. Among work-eligible participants in fiscal year 2016, more than half made at least one income gain.

And yet, these income gains are simply not enough to allow the average homeless family to compete in New York City's cutthroat housing market. The typical Win family earns \$1,300 per month, and the median monthly rent in New York City is \$3,185. Our average family would need to increase their income eightfold in order to afford the average New York City apartment.

Fortunately, we know that there is a proven strategy for providing homeless families with a permanent path out of shelter: housing subsidies. In 2016, Win was able to help move 800 families from shelter into permanent housing. Nearly 450 of those families- about 55% of the families who left shelter for their own home- had the help of a rental subsidy. Among the 140 or so families that have unfortunately cycled back into the shelter system since leaving Win's shelters, the vast majority—93%—were families that did *not* have a housing voucher or subsidy in place when they left Win. This suggests that without continued support, families quickly become vulnerable to the destabilizing effect of New York City's high housing costs and overcrowding.

We also know that at one point, 80% of granted LINC vouchers weren't being used. That was over 10,000 families living in shelter despite having a LINC voucher in hand.<sup>7</sup> We hear from many families that landlords don't want to accept LINC vouchers. This may be because of the amount of the voucher: LINC provides only \$1,515 per month for a family of three, compared to the \$1,768 of monthly Section 8 assistance for a two-bedroom apartment. At Win, we believe that the formula for calculating the LINC voucher amount must be adjusted to reflect the reality of the housing market and family means in New York City.

Landlords may also be reluctant to accept a voucher that they know will eventually expire, leaving them with a tenant who is unable to afford the rent. Landlords need assurance that the LINC voucher program is a permanent fixture in the landscape of homelessness prevention and alleviation. It is urgent that vulnerable New Yorkers be allowed to continue to receive vital housing subsidies provided by LINC rather than being cut off after some arbitrary length of time, only to be thrown back into the trauma of the shelter system.

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<sup>7</sup> Goldensohn, R. (9 November 2015) 80 Percent of LINC Homeless Rent Vouchers Aren't Being Used, City Says. *dna info*. Retrieved: <https://www.dnainfo.com/new-york/20151109/fort-greene/80-percent-of-homeless-rent-vouchers-arent-being-used-city-says>

Int. No. 1642 would aim to tackle both of these problems, by linking the maximum rent to which LINC vouchers can be applied to the fair market rent set by the United States Department of Housing Preservation and Development, and allowing that amount to increase annually as the cost of living increases. Finally, it would remove arbitrary time limits on eligible families continuing to receive rental assistance vouchers.

We must also do more to protect some of the most vulnerable New Yorkers from homelessness. We know that 18-26% of youth aging out of foster care in NYC end up in homeless shelters,<sup>8</sup> compared to just 4% of youth not involved in the foster care system nationally.<sup>9</sup> Int. No. 1597 would amend the administrative code so that for youth under the age of 25, DHS recognizes time spent in foster care as “homelessness” for the purpose of meeting rental voucher eligibility requirements, rather than mandating a minimum of 90 days in shelter to qualify. When one in four youth will survive the foster care system only to end up without a home, it seems cruel to force these young people to spend three months in the shelter system before they become eligible for the assistance they so vitally need to achieve housing stability.

Until New York’s affordability crisis can be solved, we must do more than help struggling families get on their feet, we have to help them stay on their feet. A long-term problem like NYC’s affordability crisis requires a lasting solution. The two bills I’ve mentioned here today are a great start. When we remember the real face of homelessness—the young mother lost in thought sitting next to you on the subway, the co-worker who you share your coffee break with, or your child’s playmate on the monkey bars—we can design solutions that help our most vulnerable neighbors, and break the cycle of homelessness for good. Thank you again for your time and attention to this urgent problem.

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<sup>8</sup> NYC Public Advocate (September 2014) Policy Report: Foster Care Part I. Improving the outcomes for youth aging out of foster care in NYC.

<sup>9</sup> Dworsky, A., Napolitano, L., and Courtney, M. (2013 Dec). Homelessness During the Transition from Foster Care to Adulthood. *American Journal of Public Health*. 103(Suppl 2), S318–S323.