



Breaking the Cycle of Homelessness
for Women and their Children

**Testimony of Women In Need (WIN) on Int. No. 1794
Before the General Welfare Committee of the New York City Council
September 15, 2021**

Good Afternoon Chair Levin and Members of the General Welfare Committee. My name is Josefa Silva, and I'm the Director of Policy and Advocacy at Win. Thank you for the opportunity to testify today. I am here to express our support and speak about Intro No 1794, the bill requiring training in trauma-informed care, de-escalation, and professionalism for DHS and contractor staff who interface directly with clients.

I would like to begin by thanking Council Member Ampry-Samuel for introducing this bill. It recognizes that DHS needs to improve how it interacts with and treats the New Yorkers who look to the agency for services, and creates a training mandate to begin making the shift that needs to happen. We are particularly troubled by the experiences that the families in our shelters have had when interacting with DHS staff, beginning at PATH, the intake center for families with children seeking shelter. Families in our Win shelters have described their experiences at PATH as a highly tense and grueling ordeal, and have described the treatment they received from staff as punitive and even dehumanizing. In the words of a mom at a Win shelter:

"They make you feel unwelcome... 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 is unacceptable, and Intro No 1794 can help change this. This bill will help ensure that families have support in healing from trauma, and are not retraumatized, in intake or in shelter.

At Win, we know that it takes special knowledge and skills to truly support and serve families who are in the midst of the terrible experience of homelessness, and who are dealing with the circumstances and experiences that have led up to it. These experiences and circumstances are often overwhelming and traumatic, and can negatively impact a person's physical, mental, and behavioral health. In order to overcome homelessness and achieve housing stability, families need to heal from trauma. Families experiencing homelessness need trauma informed care throughout their time working with DHS—from intake through aftercare.

At Win, we launched an in-house training and professional development initiative to equip our staff of over 500 with the knowledge, skills, and supports they need to provide trauma informed care for the approximately 2,000 families with children we serve each year in our shelters and supportive housing. From this initiative, we've seen real gains in knowledge and skills, and an evolution in the quality of staff-client interactions and in the client experience. We've seen that training in trauma informed care provides more than a set of skills; it's a shift in the entire approach to clients and services, one that supports families in healing and in building a brighter future.

Win's efforts have been possible thanks to funding from the City Council Children and Families in NYC Shelter Initiative. Thank you Chair Levin for establishing and leading that initiative.

This initiative has taught us important lessons in what makes training effective. First, concepts and skills need to be reinforced in order for a person to fully integrate them, which is best done by providing professional development throughout the year. Second, staff need support in applying what they learn to their day-to-day work and interactions. At Win, we provide a multi-part workshop series twice a year. And we've seen that the most effective way to support using and perfecting new skills is through hands-on coaching and support in real life scenarios. Our trainers provide staff with coaching once a month, and supervisors are trained and coached in providing coaching themselves. Lastly, staff also benefit from being able to deepen knowledge and skills in the specific areas that they see as most relevant to their work. So for example, at Win, we provide a multi-part series in motivational interviewing.

We believe that Intro No 1794 can be strengthened by incorporating these lessons. We recommend expanding the training requirement to mandate training not just once, but twice a year. We recommend requiring DHS to offer staff one additional professional development opportunity in evidence-based practices. And, we believe that supervisors of staff interacting with clients should also receive training.

Lastly, we ask that Intro No 1794 be amended to require DHS to provide non-profit contractors with the resources they will need to offer quality training for staff. Human service contracts underinvest in professional development for the workforce, and DHS contracts are no exception. At Win, we were fortunate to have the support of the City Council initiative, but this bill would burden service providers with an unfunded mandate if resources are not added.

Thank you for your time and attention. Mostly importantly, thank you for this bill to ensure that families and children experiencing homelessness are protected from further trauma and are supported with quality services in their journey of healing.