



Breaking the Cycle of Homelessness
for Women and their Children

Testimony of Women In Need in Support of Intro 1829-2019
Make Permanent the Current Exemption of Children from PATH
Before the General Welfare Committee on October 25, 2021

Good Morning 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 speak in support of Intro 1829-2019, which would preclude the Department of Homeless Services (DHS) from requiring parents to bring their minor children to the intake center, known as PATH, when they apply for homeless shelter. This bill would make permanent DHS's current exemption of children from the center, which DHS put in place in March of 2020 to protect New Yorkers from COVID-19.

Win is New York City's largest provider of shelter and supportive housing for families with children. I am testifying today because the heart wrenching accounts that we hear from Win families about their experiences at the intake center compel us to advocate for reforms. We would like to thank Council Member Ayala for listening to families who have experienced homelessness and for responding with action and intention to alleviate some of the hardship they face.

I'm going to begin by saying something that many already know, but that I think bears repeating in a city where a right to shelter is presumed. It's also context for understanding the experience of PATH. In order to access shelter, families must *apply* to DHS and *prove* that they have nowhere safe and habitable to stay. So families have to show that they are truly experiencing homelessness in order to be placed in shelter in New York City.

The very intrusive and high stakes process of applying for shelter begins by going to the corresponding intake center; for families with minor children that's PATH, short for Prevention Assistance and Temporary Housing assessment center, located in the Bronx. At PATH, parents and children spend an entire day in waiting rooms and meetings, and do not leave the facility for fear of missing their turn and having to restart the process. Waiting rooms are crowded with tense, anxious adults who are in the midst of the terrible crisis of homelessness and needing to seek shelter. They are going from PATH worker to worker to undergo assessments, fill out forms, provide documentation, and tell and retell their history, aspects of which they may want to shield their children from. Families in Win shelters have described going through PATH as grueling and harsh, at best, and most often as punitive, dehumanizing, and retraumatizing.

Before COVID-19, DHS required parents to bring their minor children with them to PATH when they applied for shelter. As we understand it, this requirement was in place to allow DHS to certify the family composition, and to assess children for unmet needs or threats to their well-being.

We do not believe that these reasons justify requiring children to be present at PATH, as both of these functions are done at shelter when a family arrives. Arguably, assessing the well-being of children and of the family cannot be done effectively at PATH under the anxious, high stakes circumstances.

In 2021, these reasons are even less justified. As part of the COVID- prompted exemption of children from PATH, DHS moved to conducting assessments, including for domestic violence, remotely. And during this time, the needs of children and families have been met effectively and safely.

Forcing children to sit in waiting rooms and through the very adult meetings at PATH for an entire day does not benefit them. Children are best served by being in school, at child care, in their afterschool activities, or engaged in any enriching activity or relationship that is part of their daily life. Especially after the academic and social distancing that has further disadvantaged children experiencing homelessness, we cannot revert to pre-pandemic practices that disrupt relationships and routines, and force children to miss school.

The current exemption is temporary. The administration has not indicated any intention of returning to pre-pandemic practices, but they have not agreed to our request to codify them to make them permanent. This administration's inaction with regard to a temporary measure is not a guarantee that children will be protected from PATH the future.

That is why we ask you to support Intro. 1829 and allow it to pass. Intro 1829 would make the current practice permanent, which will protect children who experience homelessness in the future from a harmful and archaic administrative requirement, and protect the rights of parents to manage family life and do what's best for their children.

In addition, Win strongly supports Intro. 2405 so that youth can access CityFHEPS rental assistance without being required to enter an adult DHS shelter. Time spent in a DYCD shelter should count toward the requirement that a person spend 90 days in shelter in order to be eligible for a CityFHEPS voucher. We also thank Chair Levin for his leadership in ensuring that the understanding we had years ago – that access to CityFHEPS would be fair and streamlined, regardless of which city agency or system a person experienced homelessness in – is actualized.