

Win's 2022 City Legislative Priorities

SUMMARY

Win, formerly Women in Need, has been serving families with children experiencing homelessness in New York City for nearly 40 years. We understand the causes of homelessness and the supports that families need in order to break the cycle of homelessness. Unfortunately, we have seen leaders base decisions on managing the homelessness crisis instead of ending it. New York City has a fresh opportunity to focus on what matters: investing in the supports and interventions that help families build the financial and psychosocial resilience they need to achieve housing stability. A reduction in homelessness will follow. Below are six key steps that the City Council can take to put the tools to a brighter future in the hands of vulnerable families.

REQUIRE WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT IN FAMILY SHELTER

Estimated Annual Cost: \$41 million

The family homelessness crisis is fueled in large part by the lack of affordable housing and livable wages for vulnerable New Yorkers. Shelter services, as dictated by government funding, focus almost exclusively on moving out and identifying housing, despite a state requirement to provide employment services in shelter. This focus is short-sighted because it neglects the fact that stable housing depends on a family's ability to earn income and pay rent. NYC must look beyond move outs and invest in families and their future stability by meaningfully helping with employment during the time they spend in shelter, which on average is one year. The City Council can help end family homelessness by passing legislation to ensure that workforce development and job training programs are required, implemented, and fully funded at the following levels in every family shelter:

- At least 1 Income Building Specialist for every 50 people in shelter age 14 and older;
- At least 1 Supervisor for every 7 Income Building Specialists;
- At least 1 Job Development Specialist for every 10 Income Building Specialists; and
- Support for Other Program Expenses at a rate of \$10,000/Income Building Specialist (e.g., fees, transportation, attire, supplies, technology).

STRENGTHEN MENTAL HEALTH IN FAMILY SHELTER

Estimated Annual Cost: \$25 million

Unrecognized and untreated trauma and mental health challenges are contributing factors to housing instability, homelessness, and returning to shelter. Families experiencing homelessness must overcome a range of mental health challenges as they work toward permanent housing, from unhealthy coping behaviors and substance use borne of trauma, post-traumatic stress disorders, mild situational depression, to severe anxiety disorders. Yet family shelters do not have the dedicated, clinical resources needed to identify and respond to these needs. The City Council can rectify this with legislation directing the Department of Homeless Services to fund clinical mental health services to be provided by Psychiatric Nurse Practitioners in all family shelters. DHS should fund at least one clinician per 50 families in shelter to provide:

- Psychotherapy, prescription refills, and treatment oversight for clients receiving medical care for a diagnosed mental illness.
- Walk-in counseling and therapy for clients who are exploring, learning about, and taking the first steps toward receiving regular mental health care.
- Support to existing social workers in diagnosing mental illnesses and in intervening and de-escalating crises.

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MAKE CITYFHEPS A SUCCESS

Estimated Annual Cost: Cost estimate pending

CityFHEPS, the city's flagship housing voucher for homeless families, is significantly more usable thanks to last year's City Council action increasing its value. But the improvements expected from that change (faster moveout times and more people using the voucher) are being undermined by other persistent problems with the program. The voucher needs a number of enhancements to meet family needs. Currently, CityFHEPS is virtually unavailable to vulnerable families who need it to stay in their housing and avoid shelter. Families seeking to leave shelter using the voucher still face rampant discrimination from landlords refusing to accept CityFHEPS. And, the application process is plagued by unpredictable and lengthy delays and administrative missteps that discourage families, alienate landlords, and extends shelter stays. We urge the Council to address these aspects of the program that undermine its efficacy:

- Expand access to CityFHEPS so families can use it to stay in their homes and avoid homelessness.
- Use oversight powers to push the Department of Social Services to address the administrative problems and delays of the program.
- Increase funding for the Commission on Human Rights' enforcement of source of income protections with an additional \$1 million annually.

MAKE SHELTER INTAKE LESS TRAUMATIC

Estimated Annual Cost: Nominal/Cost Savings

New York City's most vulnerable families seeking shelter must apply at PATH, the city's family intake center. Too often, their experiences at PATH contribute to the trauma and hardship they are experiencing. Families report that workers are often insensitive and, at times, abusive and that the high stakes intake and application process is opaque and grueling—at a time when families are already emotionally exhausted and unstable. Many families in need are not found eligible the first time they apply for shelter, forcing them to undergo the experience multiple times. This is inhumane and prolongs instability and homelessness. And it is wasteful for families—going to PATH means missed days at work and school, and for the city, which must invest in processing the same application multiple times. Unreasonable eligibility criteria, inadequate training for PATH workers, and a deficient application process all contribute to these problems. We hope to have the Council's support in addressing the complex and state-controlled issue of eligibility. But immediately, the Council can help improve the PATH experience by requiring the following steps through legislation:

- Mandate trauma informed care training for intake center workers (including security).
- Establish appointment times and PATH Navigators, to make the process more efficient, predictable, and supported for families.
- Make permanent the current exemption of children from being present at PATH and the rule that families can stay in the same shelter as they reapply.

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INVEST IN THE HUMAN SERVICES WORKFORCE

Estimated Annual Cost: \$108 million (COLA); \$640 million (base pay bump)

Homeless service providers, and other members of the human services workforce, are dramatically underpaid. This workforce is made up predominantly of women of color and the stark disparity between what the city asks of them and their compensation has only grown during the COVID-19 pandemic. In fact, there are many human services workers living in homeless shelters. Win is a proud member of the #JustPay Campaign, and we urge the city to invest in the human services workforce so that New Yorkers receive consistently high quality and effective social services. Specifically, we join the call for the city to:

- Establish, fund, and enforce an automatic cost-of-living adjustment (COLA) on all human services contracts of 5.4% (matching the state's investment).
- Set a living wage floor of no less than \$21/hour for all city and state funded human services workers.
- Create, fund, and incorporate a comprehensive wage and benefit schedule for government contracted human services workers comparable to the salaries made by city employees in the same field.

ENSURE ADEQUATE FUNDING FOR PERMANENT HOUSING AND OTHER SOLUTIONS TO END FAMILY HOMELESSNESS

Mayor Adams recently released his Preliminary Budget, which does not embrace the reforms needed to truly tackle our homelessness crisis. For example, the Preliminary Budget includes cuts to personnel at DSS and HPD, which will only further delay services for New Yorkers in need and non-profits like Win at a time when the city should be preparing to respond to the coming surge in homelessness now that the eviction moratorium has ended. The budget also continues to fund HPD and NYCHA at existing levels, falling far short of what's needed to make a dent in New York City's affordability crisis. We urge the Council to negotiate for the policies and investments we need to move the needle on family homelessness. The City Council should include the following issues in its budget response:

- Oppose any headcount reduction proposed for DHS and HPD given the immense need to respond to the city's homelessness crisis.
- Push the Mayor keep his promise of increasing funding for affordable housing to \$4 billion annually, which would provide \$2.5 billion for HPD and \$1.5 billion for NYCHA.
- Advocate for the City to invest in ending family homelessness by paying our human service workforce fair wages and funding the critically needed services and programs outlined in Win's legislative agenda.

The City Council has the opportunity to make a meaningful difference in the lives of tens of thousands of New Yorkers, including children, who struggle with housing instability and experience the disruptive, traumatic effects of homelessness. With the legislative and budgetary steps above, Members of the City Council will ensure that time spent in shelter can address the financial and mental health needs of families and that city systems for helping families are not hurting them (as shelter intake currently does), by reforming CityFHEPS to make usable a key tool for addressing housing affordability, and by meeting the needs of a human services workforce that is so unjustly paid that they are on the threshold of homelessness themselves.

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