



Breaking the Cycle of Homelessness
for Women and their Children

Improving the Experience of Homeless Families at PATH

While all New Yorkers experiencing homelessness have a legal right to shelter, accessing shelter is an onerous process at best. For families experiencing homelessness, this process starts at the Prevention Assistance and Temporary Housing (PATH) assessment center — one location in the Bronx that all families must travel to. At PATH, parents and children spend an entire day in waiting rooms, filling out forms, providing documentation, and meeting with multiple workers — called “fraud investigators” — to tell and retell their story and prove they have no other housing options.

Win families report the process is opaque and grueling, and that workers are insensitive and dehumanizing at a time where they already feel emotionally exhausted and unstable. The long and arduous process means parents miss days of work and children who are already at an academic disadvantage miss days of school.

Worse, far too many families found ineligible for shelter the first time they apply, forcing them to undergo the traumatic experience multiple times. In 2018, 520 families entered a Win shelter at least twice in the year, representing 30% of all families Win served that year. And this trend has only worsened, with city data showing that in November 2021, 62% of families had to apply more than once before being found eligible.ⁱ According to the comptroller’s audit report, one family had to reapply 38 times before eventually being found eligible for shelter.ⁱⁱ

The City Council can improve homeless families’ experience at PATH by focusing on the following policies:

- **Mandate trauma informed care training for PATH workers.**

Before stepping foot into PATH, most families have already experienced trauma — often because of long-term housing instability, domestic violence, and/or poverty. Yet PATH, the very center designed to help vulnerable families, can be retraumatizing, with Win families describing their treatment at PATH as punitive and dehumanizing. Every worker at PATH, including DHS contracted security firms, must receive training in trauma informed care and services to protect families and children from retraumatization.

- **Make the pandemic-related exemption that allows children to stay in school and avoid PATH permanent.**

Requiring children be present at PATH places them in a stressful environment where they may overhear information that parents wish to shield them from — like an explanation of their family’s financial insecurity or history of domestic violence. This requirement also takes children who are already at an academic disadvantage out of school, widening the gap between them and their housed peers. According to DHS, families were required to bring their children to PATH when applying for shelter so the agency could certify the family’s composition and to conduct a health and well-being screening. During the pandemic, however, DHS has made children exempt from PATH and has still successfully met the needs of children and families. Despite this, the city has not agreed to make this change permanent and allow children to stay in school instead of appear in-person at PATH.



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- **Make permanent the pandemic-era rule that allows families to stay in shelter when they must reapply to PATH.**

After a family applies at PATH, they are “conditionally” placed in a shelter while DHS continues to investigate their eligibility for up to 10 days. If a family is found ineligible because their application was missing information, they can immediately re-apply — but they must pack up their belongings and return to PATH. This policy further destabilizes families, prolongs their housing insecurity, and can retraumatize parents and children alike. During the pandemic, DHS has allowed families to remain in their current conditional placement when they reapply for shelter. This practice must be made permanent, allowing families to continue receiving the supports that shelter provides while they reapply.

- **Provide appointment times for meetings at PATH.**

Win families have reported spending up to 14 hours at PATH when applying for shelter, with most of that time spent waiting to speak with a DHS staffer. However, because leaving PATH means jeopardizing the progress made in their application, parents miss work and children miss school just to spend the whole day waiting at PATH. The City must create a system that allows families to pre-schedule appointments or be assigned an appointment time upon arrival. This would reduce disruption, allowing families to tend to their other responsibilities rather than needlessly wait at PATH and make the process more efficient for DHS staff.

- **Create “PATH Navigators” to support families applying for shelter.**

Families facing homelessness arrive at PATH amid an overwhelming crisis that led them to seek shelter, and they are greeted with a hard-to-navigate and complex government bureaucracy. Win families report that they have received incomplete or unclear information and processes are not explained, leaving them unsure about who they will be speaking with or what documents they will be asked to provide. The City must create a team of PATH Navigators, who would serve a customer-service role at PATH and provide every family with standardized, clear information about the steps, meetings, and documentation necessary to apply for shelter.

ⁱ Bhat, S., & Velasquez, J. (2022, January 30). *Three in four family shelter applications rejected in 2021, setting record*. The City. Available at: <https://www.thecity.nyc/2022/1/30/22909663/family-shelter-applications-rejected>

ⁱⁱ New York City Office of the Comptroller. (2022, February 9). *Audit report on the department of homeless services' determination of temporary housing benefits for families with children*. Available at: https://comptroller.nyc.gov/wp-content/uploads/documents/DHS_MG20_070A.pdf