



Breaking the Cycle of Homelessness
for Women and their Children

**Testimony of Win (formerly Women In Need, Inc.)
for the New York City Council Committee on General Welfare
on Long-standing NYC Shelter Intake Issues and the Recent Increase in Asylum Seekers**

Thank you to Chair Ayala and to the esteemed members of the General Welfare Committee for the opportunity to offer testimony.

I'm speaking today on behalf of Win, New York City's largest provider of shelter and services to families with children experiencing homelessness. Win operates 14 family shelters and nearly 400 supportive housing units across the five boroughs. More than 4,800 people call Win 'home' every night, including 2,700 children. Every one of the families in Win shelters, had to first go through the Prevention Assistance and Transitional Housing Center (PATH).

Since January 2022, Win has seen a 14 percent increase in the number of homeless families with children, driven primarily by the expiration of pandemic-era rental protections and skyrocketing rents. As the number of homeless families continues to spike, more and more are being subjected to PATH's grueling intake process. PATH is the city's front door to the homeless shelter system, but for the families who experience it, it is not a welcoming environment. Rather than being met with safety and support, families undergo experiences that can cause fear and retraumatization. To be blunt, the current intake process is shameful. But with the implementation of common-sense reforms such as establishing PATH navigators, creating appointment times, making COVID exceptions permanent, and training all PATH workers in trauma informed care, DHS could significantly improve the experience of families.

I'd like to spend some time outlining the current process.

First, families must travel to PATH. After enduring the trauma of losing their home and with nowhere else to turn, families must make the trek to the central intake center in the Bronx. For families coming from Staten Island, East New York, and other neighborhoods far from the Bronx, just getting to PATH can mean hours on public transit with their most precious belongings and small children in tow.

Second, 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. Some may be suffering from untreated mental illness. It's a chaotic environment made worse by the lack of customer service and support.

Third, all families must move from PATH worker to PATH worker to undergo assessments, fill out forms, provide documentation, and tell and retell their history. The intake process is supposed to determine eligibility for shelter and services. But there's a blanket assumption that families seeking help may be trying to criminally deceive DHS. PATH workers called "Fraud Investigators" scrutinize a family's history as they tell and re-tell it, attempting to prove that they are not in fact homeless. This assumption of fraud creates an adversarial environment that exacerbates an already traumatic experience. One Win parent who went through PATH put it bluntly "it's like you're in Jail, like they're a police officer and you're a criminal."



Breaking the Cycle of Homelessness
for Women and their Children

Finally, families are given conditional shelter placements while DHS determines if a family is, in fact, homeless. Families may need to provide additional information and attend follow-up appointments at PATH during the ten days that DHS has to determine eligibility. If the investigation ultimately results in an ineligible finding, families normally must pack up and leave the shelter placement they were provided on a conditional basis while an investigation was being conducted. Although this requirement is currently waived due to COVID, DHS has not committed to permanently allowing families to reapply from their conditional placement. If DHS lifts the waiver, families found ineligible after 10 days will have to leave their conditional shelter and go directly back to PATH, where they begin the application process again and are provided another conditional placement.

As bad as the process is to go through once, the reality is that most families are forced to repeat it. DHS frequently forces families to go through the process multiple times – before eventually finding families eligible for shelter. City data shows that in November 2021, a shocking 62 percent of families had to apply more than once before being found eligible and 31 percent had to apply more than 3 times.ⁱ According to the comptroller's audit report released earlier this year, one family had to reapply 38 times before eventually being found eligible for shelter.ⁱⁱ

The city has both a moral and legal obligation to provide homeless families with shelter. Yet, the current intake system at PATH is failing families by creating an unwelcoming environment riddled with unnecessary barriers. The city needs to reduce the barrier of entry into shelter and help families successfully complete applications the first time.

There's a number of reforms that could produce fixes.

First, 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.

Second, 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.

Third, the City should reduce the amount of documentation families are required to provide to help reduce the burden on families. One big change would be to reduce the housing history requirement from two years to one.

Fourth, the changes DHS made in response to the pandemic to reduce interactions at PATH should be made permanent. Families — especially those with minor children — need stability, which cannot be obtained when they must pack up and move their belongings every 10-days, or worse, are forced to sleep outside because the city denies their application. Children should be in school, with childcare, or at age-appropriate activities – spared from the stress of the intake process. Exempting minor children from going to PATH with their parents and permitting families to reapply for shelter from their conditional placements allow families to manage the process more easily.



Breaking the Cycle of Homelessness
for Women and their Children

Fifth, DHS needs to improve staff training to ensure that staff understand the impact of trauma on the population they are serving, and how to better assist families coming to them for help. 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.

Homelessness in New York City has been at crisis levels for decades, and although there was a slight dip during the pandemic, the expiration of pandemic-related rental protections and skyrocketing rents indicate that the trend is heading quickly in the wrong direction. The city must be prepared for additional families coming through PATH and must reduce the barriers to entry for families so they can spend less time applying for shelter and start the incredibly challenging process of finding a way out into a permanent home.

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