



Breaking the Cycle of Homelessness
for Women and their Children

**Testimony from Win (formerly Women In Need, Inc.)
For The Committee on General Welfare FY24 Budget Hearing**

Thank you, Chair Ayala and members of the General Welfare Committee, for the opportunity to offer testimony. Win is the largest provider of shelter and services to families with children experiencing homelessness in New York City. Win operates 14 shelters and nearly 500 supportive housing units throughout the city. Currently, more than 6,200 people call Win “home” every night, including 3,490 children — in total, we house over 14 percent of homeless families with children in New York City.

The homelessness crisis in New York City is worse than it has ever been, with the average shelter census exceeding 70,000 people each night. In large part, the influx of asylum seekers over the last year created this unprecedented rise in homelessness. The homeless shelter system, which was already under strain resulting from the expiration of pandemic related funding and protections for renters, has been pushed beyond its limits. With a shelter capacity of less than one percent citywide, the city must step up critical investments to change the trajectory of the homelessness crisis. In particular, the city must invest in and expand access to programs and services that aim to solve rather than just manage the crisis. It is imperative that the City adequately compensate contractors, staff agencies, and fund positions with competitive salaries to meet the surging demand for services. To address the growing mental health need, the City must allocate \$12 million to fully fund the first phase of Intro 522, which will provide needed clinical mental health services to families in shelter, to help them address trauma, mental illness, and move out of shelter. Additionally, the City must focus on cost effective and long-term solutions including tier two shelters over hotels, and more critically, vouchers to move people out of shelters.

As migrants have come to New York City in record numbers, Win has been at the forefront of efforts to ensure that these vulnerable families have a safe place to rest, heal, and recover from what was an extremely traumatic journey for most. Win is currently providing shelter for approximately 1000 asylum seekers, including more than 700 children, from the most recent wave of migrants that began arriving in August. But immigrant families are not new to Win. In fact, many of the families that have been in our shelters the longest are undocumented immigrants. In our deeply unaffordable city, immigration and homelessness are inextricably linked. For Win and other social services providers to be able to serve these families, and for migrant families to have a chance to overcome homelessness, we need more support. Although we recognize that support is needed from all levels of government, the City must step up and provide additional resources so that providers like Win can meet the growing needs of our most vulnerable families. To begin, the City must allocate resources for the additional costs incurred by providing basic necessities not covered in existing contracts. Migrant families also urgently need access to affordable legal aid services, and the City can and should make more funds available for immigration legal assistance.

Regardless of immigration status, the experience of homelessness is traumatic for families, and both parents and children in New York City shelters have historically been forced to cope with that trauma with extremely limited access to mental health resources. With the passage of Intro 522, families in shelter will now be able to access mental health services when and where they need them most, directly in shelter. But those services require funding. With the first phase of Intro 522 required to roll out in the



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30 largest families with children shelters by July 31st, 2024, it is critical that the City allocate the \$12 million dollars required to ensure that the necessary resources are in place. Research indicates that providing mental health care in shelter can have a tremendous positive effect on the wellbeing of both children and adults. For instance, a recent quantitative study of mental health services provided in Florida homeless shelters found significant reductions in trauma related symptomology in children.ⁱ In addition, research indicates that those services can have other lasting effects. Several studies that evaluated the benefits of services offered to families in shelter, which included mental health care, found they remained stably housed longer than families that did not.ⁱⁱ

The City must also prioritize moving families out of shelter to free up capacity and change the current trajectory of the homelessness crisis. Even before the recent influx of migrants, the New York City shelter system had limited resources to spare. Unfortunately, the thousands of families entering the system have totally overwhelmed the limited capacity that existed, forcing the City to rapidly open hotels and HERRC's to accommodate the new arrivals. Despite being faced with this massive capacity crisis, the City has maintained the archaic and cruel 90-Day Rule, which senselessly requires families to remain in shelter for an arbitrary 90 days before they can even apply for rental assistance. This criterion forces families to stay in shelter months longer than they need to, unnecessarily costing the City thousands of dollars per family per month, while prolonging an already traumatic experience. As migrants continue to arrive, many of whom are wrongly ineligible for any form of rental assistance, it is even more critical to prioritize moving families who are eligible for vouchers out of the system. By repealing the 90-Day Rule, the City can immediately help increase shelter capacity. Additionally, the City can and should expand CityFHEPS eligibility to people regardless of immigration status. For migrant families who lack citizenship and a social security number, there are almost no options to move out of shelter.

We know that vouchers cost the City less money than keeping families in shelter. The average daily cost to house a family in New York City Shelter is \$188, while CityFHEPS vouchers cost just \$72 daily, a savings of \$116 per day or nearly 62 percent.ⁱⁱⁱ For every week that a CityFHEPS eligible family remains in shelter as opposed to moving into an apartment, it costs the city \$814. Yet, the number of families moving out of shelter with CityFHEPS is far lower than it should be because of under investment in the program. The City must significantly increase funding for DSS staff responsible for processing CityFHEPS applications to ensure that families are able to move out of shelter as quickly as possible. The City must reject the Mayor's plan put forward in his preliminary budget, which would cut vacant lines at agencies responsible for processing housing applications. Instead, the City should be increasing staffing to ensure CityFHEPS applications are expedited, which will actually save the City money in offset shelter costs. Additionally, retention in both City agencies and providers contracted through the City are suffering from retention issues. These issues with retention are deeply exacerbated by low wages. The past year has seen the highest rates of inflation in decades, and salaries of human services workers, the majority of which are women of color, are not sufficient to cover basic expenses. The City must include a 6.5 percent COLA for human services workers in this year's budget. Investing in this critical workforce will help ensure retention of trained talent and continuity of essential services.

As the City continues to face a variety of unprecedented challenges, it is critical that the FY24 budget invests in essential services. The only way to combat the extreme costs of the homelessness crisis is to



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invest in the solutions that will solve it. That includes contracts that pay enough for providers to do their essential work while paying dignified wages to their staff to ensure retention of a competent workforce. It also means, investing in mental health services and vouchers for both citizens and non-citizens, which are central to getting families out of shelter and ending the cycles of homelessness.

ⁱ Spiegel, Graziano, P. A., Arcia, E., Cox, S. K., Ayala, M., Carnero, N. A., & O'Mara, N. L. (2022). Addressing Mental Health and Trauma-Related Needs of Sheltered Children and Families with Trauma-Focused Cognitive-Behavioral Therapy (TF-CBT). *Administration and Policy in Mental Health and Mental Health Services Research*, 49(5), 881–898. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10488-022-01207-0>

ⁱⁱ Bassuk, & Geller, S. (2006). The role of housing and services in ending family homelessness. *Housing Policy Debate*, 17(4), 781–806. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10511482.2006.9521590>

ⁱⁱⁱ Ceron, Ella. (2022) NYC Mayor Urged to Abolish 90-Day Shelter Rule Amid Migrant Influx. *Bloomberg* <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2022-09-20/new-york-mayor-eric-adams-is-pressured-to-abolish-homeless-shelter-rule?leadSource=verify%20wall>