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DEFEND, DELIVER, DREAM

Win's Action Plan to End Family Homelessness

*Recommendations for the
Next Mayor of New York City*

By Win's Policy & Advocacy Team,
Maya Jasinska, Chris Mann, Dr. Henry Love,
and Jade Vasquez

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Introduction

New York City is in the throes of an invisible crisis: family and childhood homelessness. Each night, roughly 34,000 children call a shelter home—enough to fill the seats of Madison Square Garden nearly two times over.

As the largest provider of shelter and supportive housing for families with children in New York City—housing nearly 7,000 people each night—Win has a deep understanding of both the harm caused by housing instability and the transformative impact of safe, affordable, and permanent housing. With courageous and smart leadership, the next mayor can use the power of Executive Order and the coordinating power of City Hall to drive policy that prevents homelessness, shortens shelter stays, and ensures that every family has a safe, permanent place to call home. To make those choices, the next mayor must trust that families directly affected by homelessness are best positioned to voice change and identify real solutions.

Win’s “Recommendations for the Next Mayor” are grounded in our clients’ insights and priorities. Each year more than 3,000 families reside in Win’s 15 shelters for families with children. Those families, approximately 14% of the households with children in shelter across the five boroughs, give us a representative and statistically significant view of the experience of families in shelter. In 2024, more than 200 Win families participated in a survey to rank a slate of policy priorities, building on years of prior data gathered in focus groups with Win clients and staff. The recommendations below reflect what families experiencing homelessness have told us they need most: homes they can afford, vouchers they can actually use, services that meet their needs, and a shelter system that protects them in times of crisis. The right to shelter is a foundational safety net in NYC and must be affirmed and protected, but it is the floor, not the ceiling of services the City should provide; housing is the only true solution to homelessness. Some of these recommendations will require new resources, more staffing, or regulatory changes. All require a strong leader, committed to truly *ending*—rather than managing—the family homelessness crisis.

Solve Homelessness with Housing



At Win, we believe that access to quality affordable housing is the solution to homelessness. Therefore, we are committed to advancing policies that both prevent families from ever experiencing the trauma of homelessness and improve housing opportunities for those in shelter.

➤ **Expand CityFHEPS eligibility**

New York City cannot end family homelessness without a functional and equitable housing voucher system. Although eligibility for the City Fighting Homelessness and Eviction Prevention Supplement (CityFHEPS) voucher has been expanded over the last several years, strict eligibility rules and the Mayor Eric Adams' Administration's lawsuit continue to block thousands of households in need from utilizing it.

- **Drop Mayor Adams' legal challenge to the CityFHEPS expansion mandated by the New York City Council in 2023**

Thousands of New Yorkers living in shelter and at risk of eviction are currently ineligible for CityFHEPS. The next mayor must drop the legal challenge to the 2023 CityFHEPS package, which the City Council passed by overriding a mayoral veto. Unfortunately, the Adams Administration has refused to implement the laws and has opposed the legislation in court. This package of bills dismantles barriers to accessing CityFHEPS by removing shelter entry and work requirements and raising the income eligibility threshold. Together, Win estimates that these changes will prevent homelessness for over 38,000 families, help thousands more leave shelter permanently, and yield more than \$730 million in annual savings by reducing costs in shelter, healthcare, education, and child welfare systems.ⁱ

- **Expand CityFHEPS eligibility to all low-income households regardless of immigration status**

Strict eligibility requirements currently block many immigrants, including undocumented immigrants, from utilizing CityFHEPS, leaving those experiencing homelessness with few options for exiting shelter. The next mayor should expand CityFHEPS eligibility to all New Yorkers regardless of immigration status, so long as they meet the other eligibility requirements. According to analysis from Win and the New York Immigration Coalition (NYIC), New York City could save over \$3 billion annually by using vouchers to help tens of thousands of immigrant New Yorkers move out of shelter and into their own homes.ⁱⁱ

➦ **Fix CityFHEPS administrative delays**

In New York City, where the average rent is nearly \$4,000 a month, CityFHEPS is the most viable path out of shelter for families experiencing homelessness. Sadly, administrative problems majorly impede Win families' successful use of the vouchers. At almost every step in the CityFHEPS process, administrative issues and delays prevent families from moving out, sometimes for days or even weeks at a time. As the shelter census continues to balloon, fixing CityFHEPS administrative issues to ensure that families can move out of shelter quickly must be a top priority for the next mayor.

- **Update the CityFHEPS application processing infrastructure**

Rather than automate CityFHEPS application processing, the Department of Social Services (DSS) depends on outdated, labor-intensive systems that require manual review by staff. CurRent, the system used to process applications, lacks basic functionality such as the ability to search for clients by name or a dashboard to quickly view an employee's full roster of housing clients. Furthermore, completed applications often sit for weeks pending review by DSS staff, only to be rejected for minor clerical errors. The next mayor should fast track capital technology projects to improve internal and client-facing rental assistance platforms that can automate labor intensive processes. Since capital improvements can take months or years, in the meantime, the next mayor should direct the DSS Commissioner to increase the number of CityFHEPS application processing staff to ensure that processing takes no more than 15 days.

- **Mandate concrete timelines for CityFHEPS administrative processes**

Unnecessary delays in the CityFHEPS process after an apartment has been identified can trap families in shelter for weeks and sometimes months. Currently, the Department of Social Services (DSS) does not have standard timelines for application processing that staff are required to meet. These delays leave families in Department of Homeless Services (DHS) shelters in the lurch, sometimes losing apartments and having to start the arduous search from the beginning. For families in Domestic Violence (DV) shelters, these delays often mean that rather than leaving their DV shelter placement for housing, the majority transfer to another shelter when they hit the 180-day time limit for DV shelters. In 2023, of 2,284 survivor-led families exiting DV shelter, only 9%, a mere 208 households, left the DV shelter for permanent housing.ⁱⁱⁱ The next mayor should direct DSS to establish, fulfill, and track a timeline of 15 days for staff to review CityFHEPS applications, a timeline of seven days to complete inspections, and a timeline of five days to make rental payments to landlords. These metrics should also be added to the Mayor's Management Report to easily track progress.

- **Streamline the CityFHEPS inspection process**

Apartment quality inspections are essential to ensure that all apartments rented with CityFHEPS meet safety and habitability standards. However, the current process is cumbersome and fails to differentiate between serious safety violations like a lack of a fire escape and minor issues like a dirty stove, with both triggering a full reinspection. The next mayor should direct DSS to update inspection protocols that create a hierarchy of inspection issues so minor problems can be remedied without requiring a full reinspection. Additionally, the new protocols should mandate that inspectors carry materials to facilitate low-cost fixes (e.g., lightbulbs, outlet plates), when possible, during inspection walkthroughs.

Reverse Adams Administration policies that have undermined CityFHEPS

Despite the success of the CityFHEPS program, the Adams administration has pursued a number of policies that directly undermine the program. The next mayor should immediately reverse these harmful Adams Administration's policies: the 33% rent hike for longtime CityFHEPS voucher holders, the elimination of the Unit Hold Incentive, and the underfunding of the Source of Income (SOI) discrimination unit at the Human Rights Commission.

- **Reverse the CityFHEPS rent hike**

The Adams Administration's policy change that increases rent contributions for long-term voucher holders from 30% to 40% of income, a 33% rent hike for those voucher holders, directly undermines housing stability. Research shows that forcing families to pay more than 30% of income on rent increases the risk of homelessness. For instance, a 2020 study by the U.S. Government Accountability Office (GAO) found that a \$100 increase in median rent was associated with a 9% increase in the estimated homelessness rate.^{iv} Recent analysis by Win found that the new rule will push hundreds of families back into shelter and cost the City at least an additional \$2 million annually, even before accounting for long-term costs like school disruption, healthcare, and child welfare involvement.^v The next mayor should reverse the policy and maintain a rent cap of 30% of income.

- **Restore the CityFHEPS Unit Hold Incentive**

The elimination of the Unit Hold incentive, a one-month rent payment used to secure apartments while voucher paperwork is processed, has already resulted in families losing access to affordable housing they otherwise would have obtained. Due to a lengthy and error-prone administrative process, the Unit Hold is often the only tool that keeps landlords from walking away during delays.

Without it, families face significant barriers to leasing up even when they find a willing landlord. Although the Unit Hold Incentive has been temporarily reinstated by court order, the next mayor must commit to permanently maintaining the incentive.

- **Increase funding for source of income discrimination enforcement so that voucher holders can utilize vouchers without risk of refusal.**

The Source of Income (SOI) discrimination unit in the Commission on Human Rights has been consistently underfunded since its inception. SOI discrimination, the practice of discriminating based on how someone is going to be paying for an apartment, is a major barrier for voucher holders looking for apartments. Although the City has outlawed SOI discrimination since 2008, lack of funding for enforcement has allowed the practice to continue with impunity. In order to effectively prevent SOI discrimination, the next mayor must increase funding for the New York City Commission on Human Rights Source of Income unit within the Law Enforcement Bureau to enforce legal protections against SOI discrimination and to hold those breaking the law accountable.

Increase access to and stability in affordable housing for low-income New Yorkers

New York City has a housing vacancy rate of just 1.4% and approximately 110,000 individuals sleeping in shelter each night.^{vi, vii} In our 2024 survey, Win clients ranked increasing access to affordable housing as their top policy priority. Although some progress has been made through the recent passage of City of Yes, the next mayor must do more to address both access to and the supply of deeply affordable housing. Furthermore, the mayor should prioritize homelessness prevention to ensure renters already in affordable housing are able to remain there.

- **Ensure that at least 12,000 units of housing for extremely low income families is built per year**

Shortages of deeply affordable housing are driving New York’s homelessness crisis, yet past mayoral administrations have measured success by the number of units built or preserved, not affordability. For instance, Mayor De Blasio’s 2014 “Housing New York” plan sought to create and preserve 200,000 units. These flashy metrics make for good headlines, but often fail to focus on building the type of housing that is needed most. In 2024, just 2,060 units of housing affordable to extremely low income households—defined as making less than 30% of area median income (AMI)—were completed: far below the need.^{viii} The next mayor should financially subsidize the development of a minimum of 12,000 units of housing affordable to households making less than 30% AMI per year for the duration of their term.

- **Consolidate Housing and Homelessness under one Deputy Mayor**

Historically, housing and homelessness have been treated as separate and distinct issues by the City government, with DSS and Housing Preservation and Development (HPD) reporting to different Deputy Mayors. In recognition that the only real solution to homelessness is housing, the City must change its approach, ensuring that the City's housing and social service agencies are working in tandem to end the homelessness crisis. The next mayor should ensure that housing and homeless services agencies including DSS, HPD, the Department of City Planning (DCP), and the Economic Development Corporation (EDC) all report to the same Deputy Mayor.

- **Allow shelters to directly refer clients to vacant affordable and supportive housing.**

The current referral process from shelter to homeless set aside units in affordable and supportive housing faces major bottlenecks, leading to thousands of units sitting vacant, while the shelter census surges. All referrals are currently required to go through an intermediary: the City's Housing Connect for homeless set aside units in affordable housing, and the Coordinated Assessment Placement System (CAPS) for supportive housing. These intermediaries are slow to refer and/or often send ineligible referrals that waste valuable time and resources. Win highlighted these issues in our report co-authored with REBNY, "Housing More New Yorkers" in 2024, yet little has been done to address the issue.^{ix} The next mayor should allow direct referrals from shelter into affordable and supportive housing to bypass the bottleneck and ensure vacant units are filled immediately.

- **Expand the supply of deeply affordable housing by unpausing the Human Resources Administration's (HRA) Master Lease Program**

Master leasing, which has been paused by the current administration, allows the City to utilize CityFHEPS as an operating subsidy to create project-based, subsidized housing for families experiencing homelessness. The next mayor should unpause the Master Lease program in order to build more accessible, affordable housing. This program can eliminate discrimination barriers, such as denying housing based on source of income, and can significantly increase access to affordable housing to low-income families.^x

- **Fully fund the Right to Counsel program and increase the income eligibility cap to 80% AMI**

NYC's Right to Counsel program for low-income tenants facing eviction proceedings is an invaluable tool in decreasing rates of eviction and combatting the homelessness crisis. According to the NYC Office of Civil Justice, in 2024, 89% of tenants who received full legal representation in an eviction proceeding were able to remain stably housed.^{xi} However, moderate-income New Yorkers are increasingly being priced out of their homes and facing eviction. Although they make up nearly 40% of tenants in housing court, moderate-income households (e.g. those making up to 80% of AMI) have no legal representation.^{xii} To keep more New Yorkers in their homes, the next

mayor should increase access to eviction defense by ensuring that the existing program is fully funded and raising income restrictions from 200 percent of the Federal Poverty Line (FPL) to 80 percent AMI.

Improve access to supportive housing

Supportive housing is a critical tool in the effort to end family homelessness. While not all families experiencing homelessness require supportive housing to stabilize, for those who do—such as families with complex medical, behavioral health, or trauma-related needs—supportive housing provides the stability and care necessary to break the cycle of homelessness. Despite decades of research and experience that prove that supportive housing works, it remains out of reach for many families. To truly meet the needs of families who require this resource, we must improve access, reduce delays, and ensure that the supportive housing system is responsive and equitable.

- **Broaden eligibility requirements for supportive housing programs**

Most supportive housing projects are limited to very narrow populations, making it difficult for families to access units. For example, if a family or individual qualifies for supportive housing but does not meet the extremely specific criteria (e.g. being an individual aging out of foster care) tied to that particular apartment, they are unable to be linked to that unit. The mismatch between population specific housing and the individuals who need support lead to high vacancy rates in supportive housing. Eligibility requirements should be broadened so that all supportive housing units can accept multiple programs, rather than linking each unit to one specific program. This way, vacant units can be filled quickly by those in need and the shelter population can begin to decrease.

- **Eliminate the chronic homelessness eligibility requirement for supportive housing.**

Although it is important that supportive housing be targeted to those who need it, forcing someone to go through the trauma of chronic homelessness, defined as 12 months of homelessness over the last 3 years, should not be a requirement. The city should drop the chronic homelessness requirement, allowing anyone who is homeless and meets all other eligibility criteria to apply for supportive housing right away.

- **Deliver on the City's commitment to create 15,000 units of supportive housing by 2030**

Under Mayor De Blasio, the City committed to developing 15,000 units of supportive housing with NY 15/15. Unfortunately, the City is far behind pace to reach that goal, having created just 3,853 units by the end of FY24.^{xiii} With federally funded supportive housing facing existential attacks from Washington, it is critical that the City prioritize building more supportive housing under its direct control. The next mayor should commit to getting NY 15/15 production back on track to meet the 15,000 unit goal by 2030.

Specifically, the City should focus its resources on production of congregate rather than scatter site units.

Strengthen Supports for Families Experiencing Homelessness



At Win, we recognize that holes in our City’s social safety net are driving the present family homelessness crisis and impeding families’ ability to move out of shelter and into stable housing. Every day that families are unable to access childcare, are left waiting for a bus that was supposed to bring their child to school or are stuck at PATH trying to prove they are homeless is another day they are unable to look for work or permanent housing and are subject to the trauma of homelessness. City budgets and shelter contracts are moral documents where the harms of homelessness on children have never, but ought to be, acknowledged. Funding and outcomes—like length of stay or lease ups—are usually targeted at heads of households, contributing to a shelter system that is often developmentally inappropriate for children. The next mayor should use the City budget and contracts with providers to make the shelter system not only more person-centered, but more *child*-centered. Our suggestions below outline how to do so.

Increase shelter resources

Homelessness is a traumatic experience that takes a profound toll on both adults and children. While permanent housing must remain the ultimate goal for all families experiencing homelessness, shelters can play an important role in their journey to stability. To truly support the whole family, shelters must be equipped with the resources necessary to meet their immediate needs including safe spaces to rest, access to mental and physical health supports, educational and recreational opportunities for children, and services that promote healing and stability. It is critical that shelters are well resourced to ensure that families can stabilize and rebuild their lives.

- **Defend New York’s right to shelter**

The Adams administration has made numerous attempts to undermine New York City’s right to shelter. The next mayor must defend the right to shelter in New York City, so that every New Yorker and child experiencing homelessness is guaranteed a safe place to sleep every night, as is legally mandated through consent decree in *Callahan v. Carey*, *Eldredge v. Koch*, and *McCain v. Koch*. The

next mayor must recognize that the right to shelter is the floor, not the ceiling of necessary services; officially end the City's 30- and 60-day shelter limit for new arrivals; and reintegrate all Health and Hospitals migrant shelters into the traditional shelter system, so that they are overseen by the Department of Homeless Services (DHS) and comply with New York State's shelter regulations.

- **Expand the shelter acquisition fund**

Nonprofit homeless services providers know what it takes to provide families experiencing homelessness with stability. However, most shelters are built by for-profit developers, who are more focused on profits than ensuring shelters are built for the needs of families. Their profit motive often leads to shelters with less common space, smaller offices for staff and client meetings, and fewer amenities such as playgrounds and childcare spaces that should be central to shelter design. The shelter acquisition fund was created to support nonprofit homeless services providers in building more high-quality shelters. Unfortunately, the amount in the fund, capped at \$3.5 million per project, is far too low to assist with large scale, purpose-built, and trauma-informed shelter spaces. The next mayor should significantly increase the cap in the shelter acquisition fund to at least \$60 million per project.

- **Fully fund and implement Local Law 35 requiring mental health professionals in family shelters**

Homelessness is a trauma in and of itself, yet most families in shelter have experienced additional trauma aside from homelessness. Local Law 35, which Win was instrumental in passing, requires low-barrier and lifesaving mental healthcare in-person and/or virtually be provided in shelter by mandating one mental health professional for up to every 50 families with children. These services are necessary to meet the complex trauma needs of the whole family. Unfortunately, the Adams Administration's current cost neutral approach to implementation leaves many families without the services they need. The next mayor must fully fund implementation of the program at \$40 million.

- **Establish aftercare services for all families leaving shelter**

Without continued support during the transition to permanent housing, families leaving shelter face a high risk of returning to homelessness. Past models like Home to Stay and Housing Retention and Stabilization Services, although not fully adequate, demonstrated that proactive case management, beginning before move-out and continuing after, helps families stay stably housed. Current Homebase services are often too limited and reactive, due to understaffing and underfunding. To break the cycle of homelessness and reduce costly returns to shelter, the next mayor should establish aftercare services for all families leaving shelter, ensuring proactive outreach, manageable caseloads, and comprehensive supports that promote lasting stability.

- **Mandate that all DHS employees and contractors providing services to the public receive training in trauma-informed care, conflict de-escalation, and cultural sensitivity.**

DHS employees—especially those at the Prevention Assistance and Temporary Housing Office (PATH) intake center—are greeting and working with families during the lowest moments of their lives. Consequently, Win has established a training curriculum, Win Academy, to equip staff with trauma-informed care and trauma-informed crisis prevention techniques. These are treatment frameworks that involve understanding, recognizing, and responding to the effects of all types of trauma that our Win families have experienced. All staff at Win—from case managers to security guards to program directors—undertake these trainings to ensure that we are providing the highest quality care to our clients. The next mayor should set this high standard for care for all DHS employees and mandate training in trauma-informed care, conflict de-escalation, and cultural sensitivity.

Support students experiencing homelessness

For school-aged children, homelessness is traumatic, harmful, and disruptive to their schooling. Children experiencing homelessness have lower attendance and graduation rates and higher school transfer rates than their stably housed peers. These each translate to tremendous losses in learning, with each school transfer setting a student back as much as six months.^{xiv} Educational instability ultimately outlasts housing instability: Students with previous experiences of homelessness continue to have lower attendance rates and scores on state exams than their continuously housed peers.^{xv} The next mayor must put the resources in place in schools and in shelters to support children and youth experiencing homelessness in accessing the education that is their right.

- **Double the number of shelter-based community coordinators**

Children in temporary housing have significantly higher chronic absenteeism rates than their housed peers. The next mayor should allocate an additional \$17 million to the budget of NYC Department of Education (DOE) Students in Temporary Housing Office, to double the number of shelter-based community coordinators. These coordinators help students in shelter enroll in school, set up transportation, and request additional resources (such as individualized education plans and comparable service plans). While community coordinators play a critical role in combating chronic absenteeism among students experiencing homelessness, their efficacy is stymied by their challenging caseloads. Currently, each coordinator can work with up to 300 children.

- **Increase funding for DOE Bridging the Gap Social Workers**

These school-based social workers provide mental health and wellness support and counselling to students experiencing homelessness. First implemented by the City Council in 2017, the program has been shown to positively impact attendance rates for students in shelter.^{xvi} As the number of homeless children served by the NYC DOE continues to grow (the 2023–2024 school year was the 9th year in a row with over 100,000 students in temporary housing), this program will need to expand to meet this growing need. While students in temporary housing attended every school district, there were notable concentrations of students in temporary housing in the school districts of upper Manhattan, the southwest Bronx, Bushwick, and Brownsville. These school districts should be resourced first with more Bridging the Gap Social Workers.^{xvii}

- **Implement the Transportation of Students in Temporary Housing Task Force’s 2024 recommendations**

The City has a legal obligation to provide busing or comparable non-public transportation for elementary school children experiencing homelessness. In the 2023–2024 school year, 23,800 students residing in shelter were assigned busing. However, delays in providing bus service, long bus routes, buses that arrive at school late or require students to leave early, and inconsistent service create unnecessary barriers to accessing education for students in temporary housing and contribute to the high rates of chronic absenteeism and school transfers among these students. The next mayor should direct the DOE to create a single policy guide outlining district and school responsibility regarding all transportation supports and options for students in temporary housing along with implementing the taskforce’s full slate of recommendations.

- **Appoint a Deputy Chancellor for Students in Temporary Housing**

146,000—approximately one in eight—children in NYC Public schools experienced homelessness during the 2023–2024 school year. The next mayor should appoint a Deputy Chancellor to serve this significant population, which has unique needs and educational rights that will take multi-agency coordination to successfully implement. The Deputy Chancellor should work on improving educational experiences and outcomes for students in temporary housing, including addressing chronic absenteeism, simplifying transportation access, and supporting students with disabilities.

- **Follow through on the Adams Administration’s proposal to add 20,000 additional afterschool seats**

The Adams Administration proposed a plan to expand 20,000 afterschool seats by FY28 but contributed only \$20 million of the necessary \$331 million in the FY26 budget. This is an important step forward: Studies show that every

\$1 invested in afterschool programs saves taxpayers at least \$3 by reducing crime, improving school outcomes, and increasing future earnings.^{xviii} In particular, the next mayor should prioritize expanding School's Out New York City (SONYC) seats, a program that serves middle schoolers in DHS shelters and in detention centers. SONYC has enabled Win to offer STEAM camps, robotics lessons, and field trips to the middle school students living in our shelters.

- **Amend Department of Youth and Community Development (DYCD) grant criteria so that they exempt shelter providers from community engagement requirements**

The DYCD funds many critical afterschool, adult literacy, and family support programs by contracting with local service providers. However, despite proven records of providing quality childcare and recreation services to our clients, providers like Win often cannot apply for DYCD funding to support our recreation and income-building programs. This is because many requests for proposal (RFPs) require organizations to serve the community surrounding the nonprofit. However, shelter security guidelines preclude community members from entering our buildings. This is important for keeping clients who have experienced domestic violence safe. The next mayor should amend RFPs to include an exemption from broader community engagement requirements for family shelter providers.

Ensure universal childcare is accessible to families experiencing homelessness

New York City is experiencing an early childhood homelessness crisis. Research shows that children born and raised in shelter experience more developmental delays and worse academic and social outcomes than their housed, low-income peers. One critical policy, early childhood education and care (ECEC), supports the wellbeing of children *and* their parents. However, ECEC in NYC is expensive, difficult to access, and inconvenient for families with young children, especially for those living in shelter. The next mayoral administration should continue to invest in and expand the capacity of the City's ECEC system and work towards a universal program that fits the needs of families living in shelter. At the same time, the next mayor should ensure that universal childcare includes investing in on-site childcare in families with children shelters.

- **Mandate that all future families with children shelters be built with childcare classrooms and playgrounds**

With the rising cost of childcare and the post pandemic declines in childcare supply, offering free, whole family services in shelter is more critical than ever. Shelter-based ECEC programs help serve populations that are dramatically under-served by the current childcare market: particularly infants and toddlers and undocumented children. Furthermore, these programs help reduce the traumatic impacts of homelessness on children: play is a key therapy to improving self-esteem and self-image and buffering against internalizing traumatic incidents.^{xix} Like other childcare programs in NYC, Win's onsite programs are licensed by the Department of Health and Mental Health (DOHMH) and even engage in the New York State Quality Rating and Improvement System (QRIS): Quality Stars. New families with children shelter construction should always include a childcare classroom and playground, so that children can start being served by a provider their families trust as soon as they move in.

- **Consolidate Early Childhood Education and Care Governance**

Currently, early childhood governance in NYC is as fragmented as the number of funding streams supporting it, spread across many different agencies as well as City Hall. Creating a single City agency—The Department of Early Childhood—would allow the contracting, curricular decisions, workforce issues, early intervention and pre-school special education, infant and maternal health, home-visiting, affordability, licensing and facility development, and quality improvement work to be brought under one roof, ensuring aligned priorities across programs.

- **Appoint a Deputy Mayor for Early Childhood**

As a first step to establishing a Department of Early Childhood, the next mayor should appoint a Deputy Mayor for Early Childhood to map out where different services are located and how they are managed and take steps to streamline management and coordination across different programs.^{xx}

- **Simplify the childcare subsidy application, reduce administrative delays, and fund thousands of additional vouchers**

Childcare subsidies administered through the Administration for Children's Services (ACS) and the Human Resources Administration (HRA) are vital for families in shelter to be able to afford early childhood education when they leave shelter. Though families in temporary housing in NYC are designated a priority population for these vouchers, many struggle to access and retain them. First, significantly more funding needs to be added to ensure that every eligible family on the ACS waitlist receives a voucher. Second, administrative barriers to applying for the program need to be alleviated. The next mayor should

develop a combined application process for ACS and HRA vouchers; simplify the recertification process and improve how families are notified that it is time to recertify; and actively support families during the transition between Early Intervention and preschool special education programs to ensure children do not lose access to services.

- **Fund shelter providers to retrofit shelter spaces to create childcare classrooms and simplify and expedite the permitting process**

The permitting process for opening classrooms in existing shelters is long and overly complicated. Requiring permits and documentation from many city agencies, opening childcare classrooms at our sites can take up to two years before we can start serving any children in the space. The next mayor should work with DOHMH, Department of Buildings, and the Fire Department to identify and implement ways to expedite the permitting process for shelter-based childcare providers. The next mayor should also fund shelter providers to convert units or meeting rooms into classrooms, including hiring registered architects or engineers to update floorplans for childcare classrooms.

- **Adjust Article 47 to increase access to shelter-based childcare, including eliminating the 20 hour per week rule**

While Article 47 of the DOHMH health code includes some important components for ensuring the safety and quality of shelter-based childcare programs, it also limits how much care families who have been in shelter for more than 90 days can access: just 20 hours per week. This in turn limits the accessibility of a program intended to have no restrictions. Providers must choose between offering full-days of care to parents a couple times a week or daily half-days of care. Neither option helps families secure and maintain full-time employment. Instead, this policy limits parents to pursuing part-time employment, potentially delaying the length of time they will stay in shelter. The next mayor should amend the administrative code to lift this restriction on weekly hours of care that families can access at shelter-based childcare.

Expand direct cash programs

As federal social welfare programs suffer unprecedented cuts under the Trump Administration, New York City must not only bolster supports for low-income New Yorkers, but also use this moment to create a more dignity-based, person-centered public benefits system. This means making applications for public assistance less burdensome, waiving work requirements, and smoothing benefits cliffs. There is overwhelming evidence from guaranteed income demonstrations across the

U.S., including New York, showing that unconditional cash helps people advance economically, find better employment, and plan for the future. Direct cash also improves physical and mental health, food security and nutrition, educational attainment, and housing stability.

- **Establish a guaranteed income program to prevent and end early childhood homelessness by providing cash payments to families below the Federal Poverty Line for the first five years of the child's life**

About 14,400 children under the age of five slept in a DHS shelter each night of September 2025 and about 1 in 4 children in NYC live below the FPL. To reduce the number of babies and young children experiencing homelessness, the next mayor should build on the City Council's historic guaranteed income program for pregnant moms experiencing homelessness and New York State's Baby Benefit for low-income parents. Programs like these can guarantee a baseline support for very low-income families with very young children across the City ensuring that fewer babies are born in shelter, doubled-up, or at risk of eviction. Research has continuously shown unconditional cash to be effective at improving birth and child health outcomes.^{xxi} Perinatal cash programs can shorten lengths of stay in shelter and help families access prenatal care, reducing both shelter and emergency room costs in the long-term.^{xxii}

- **Join the “Mayors for a Guaranteed Income” network**

Ensuring that all New Yorkers—not just the very young—have a floor below which they will not fall should be a key priority for our next mayor. That said, financially supporting a local Guaranteed Income program will take more investment than our City coffers can independently support. The next mayor should join “Mayors for a Guaranteed Income”—a movement of legislators advocating for a national Guaranteed Income program.

Streamline shelter intake

At present, the shelter intake process is grueling, burdensome, and often re-traumatizing for most clients. On average, it takes approximately 41 days for Win families applying at the Prevention Assistance and Temporary Housing Office (PATH) to be found eligible for shelter. With each shelter application denial, families are required to return to PATH, with all of their belongings, to seek a renewed temporary 10-day placement. Besides being a cruel and humiliating process, this also makes it harder for families to achieve actual stability, like maintaining a job, consistently attending school, or searching for an apartment. The next mayor should use the power of executive order to streamline the shelter application process for families and make it more client-centered and trauma-informed.

- **Allow families to self-attest to their housing history after one shelter eligibility denial at PATH and set strict parameters on housing history investigations**

A 2023 report by the City Comptroller’s Office found that 80% of families were denied shelter upon first application, but were then found eligible. Furthermore, although the two-year housing history requirement is supposedly in place to allow PATH workers to thoroughly research possible housing alternatives for a family, the 2022 Comptroller’s Audit of PATH found that PATH personnel denied 42% of family applications without adequately investigating their housing history. These denials often occurred when PATH workers could not reach a family’s previous landlord or host—something out of the control of the applicant for shelter. Each denial ultimately prolongs a family’s stay in shelter; Families stuck in conditional placements—despite living in shelter—are not eligible for CityFHEPS. Allowing families to self-attest to their housing history after one denial, or setting clear parameters on what constitutes a sufficient investigation of housing history, will keep families from getting stuck in a doom loop of denials. This will ultimately help families move out of shelter faster.

- **Simplify the shelter application process for clients by reducing the housing history requirement from two years to one year**

To prove their eligibility for shelter, families must demonstrate their last two years of housing history. However, paper documentation requirements can be insurmountable for families in housing crisis, who may be fleeing from domestic violence situations that included the intentional theft of their critical documents. Families also may have lost or not received documents because of lockouts, street homelessness, or other types of displacement. Difficulty with proving eligibility under the two-year housing history requirement means that many clients remain in the shelter system under “conditional” status for months at a time, reapplying and returning to PATH every 10 days. Reducing this burden to one year—consistent with the shelter application process for adult families—would ease pressure on families in a deeply traumatic moment in their lives.

- **Ensure that DHS complies with the policy requiring children be placed in shelter in the borough of the youngest child’s school**

Roughly 40% of families receive a shelter placement at PATH in a different borough from their youngest child’s school. When shelter placements are far from schools, families struggle with long commutes, increased absences, and unnecessary school transfers. The next mayor must ensure DHS upholds existing policy and places families in the borough of origin of their youngest child’s school, absent any safety concerns, to minimize the disruptiveness of homelessness on children’s education.

➤ **Expand Workforce Development Programming in Shelter**

Win's innovative Income-Building Program (IBP) provides clients with educational, financial literacy, and employment upskilling services. Additionally, IBP staff partner with community employers to create unique employment pipelines for Win clients. This tested program has proven results: A recent evaluation of our program found an average wage increase of \$1.53 per hour for our clients after they completed the program. Furthermore, for each dollar invested in the IBP, \$2.08 dollars were created in annualized income. Lastly, the wage growth for IBP participants is significantly higher than the wage growth for New York City as a whole. While workforce development programs in shelter receive some public funding, it is not nearly enough to provide the level of bespoke services and workshops we offer at Win. Presently, DHS's employment specialist positions work directly with clients, helping them apply for jobs, craft resumes, and prepare for interviews. However, these positions have little mentorship or support beyond Program Directors, and consequently little capacity to develop relationships with potential employers. The next mayor needs to invest in shelter workforce development programs and should look to Win's IBP as a model.

- **Create a Job Developer Position in Shelter**

Creating a holistic workforce development program in shelter requires both direct support to clients preparing for job or school applications *and* developing robust partnerships with local employers to identify job opportunities. Presently, DHS's employment specialist positions support only the client-facing side of this work. To institute a full workforce development program in shelter, the next mayor should begin by funding one "Job Developer" for every 10 employment specialists. This position would focus on the external pieces of job development work: building relationships with employers, hosting job fairs, and ultimately developing a job bank for clients in shelter.

- **Fund Youth Income-Building Specialists Positions**

The youth and young adult population experiencing homelessness is growing. To respond, Win has created a "Youth Income Building Specialist" (YIBS) position to serve young people ages 14–21. YIBS assist clients with school attendance, GED completion, applying for the Summer Youth Employment Program and other internship opportunities, and college readiness. However, Win receives no public funding for these youth-services despite their high success rates. The next Mayor should fund and mandate at least one YIBS per 100 families in a shelter.

Conclusion



The path to ending the family homelessness crisis is not a mystery. Families experiencing homelessness and leading experts have clearly outlined what's needed: safe and affordable homes and vouchers to access them, services that are trauma-informed, and a shelter system that protects people experiencing homelessness in moments of crisis. These recommendations are not abstract policy ideas; they are grounded in the lived experiences of vulnerable parents and children navigating the daily realities of homelessness.

The urgency is undeniable. Every day without action means another child losing stability, another parent forced to make impossible choices, another family enduring trauma. But with bold leadership, New York City can choose a different path, one that trusts the lived expertise of families, prevents homelessness before it begins, shortens shelter stays, and ensures every family has the safe, permanent home they deserve.

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About Win

Since its founding to provide emergency shelter to four homeless women and their children, Win has grown into the largest provider of family shelter and supportive housing in New York City and the country. Win offers transitional housing and permanent supportive housing that's coupled with programs and services developed to support long-term housing stability. All of Win's services are guided by its mission—to transform the lives of New York City homeless families with children by providing the safe housing, critical services, and the ground-breaking programs they need to succeed on their own—so families can regain their independence and children can look forward to a brighter future.



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