City Takes New Approaches to Solving Homeless Problem

by Rebecca Webber
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This winter has been especially cold and snowy, highlighting the plight of New York's homeless population. Almost 38,500 people are currently in the city's shelter system, including well over 16,500 children. These numbers mark an all-time high.

Recently, the Bloomberg administration has taken several steps to address the problem. It has increased the budget for homeless services, created a new way for homeless advocates to air their concerns about city policies without going to court and ordered a survey of street homeless, which is scheduled for later this month.

The Funds

At a time when the city is facing a $3 billion deficit and most agencies have had to slash their budgets, the Department of Homeless Services is getting more money for its mission. This fiscal year, the agency will spend $632 million according to figures released by the city comptroller. Next year, the agency's budget is set to rise to $667 million.

The new funds will go toward preventive services, rent subsidies and other measures, said Jim Anderson, spokesman for the Department of Homeless Services. Much of the money will come in the form of federal housing vouchers that can help homeless families pay rent.

The Panel

The administration has also made remarkable progress on a problem that has plagued the Department of Homeless Services for two decades: litigation.

Advocates for the homeless have regularly gone to court to protest city policies. The Legal Aid Society has battled for homeless families' rights, while the Coalition for the Homeless

has spearheaded the effort to protect homeless single adults. The court cases established every New Yorker's right to shelter in the early 1980s, and numerous other rights since then. But the litigation has created persistent problems for the Department of Homeless Services.

"The lawsuits brought almost two decades ago . . . deserve recognition for their role in helping to create today's strong shelter services system," reported the department's strategic plan, released in June 2002.

"However, the litigation that helped to generate the current system now pervades system operations. The department, constantly facing litigation or court intervention has become reticent about discussing the challenges it faces."

Some advocates disagree. "There's an exaggerated and cartoonish view of this litigation that there is an enormous amount of meddling by the court in [the Department of Homeless Services,]" said Patrick Markee, senior policy analyst for the Coalition for the Homeless. "We feel that historically the court has acted appropriately to address issues for homeless families and individuals."

Still, Mayor Bloomberg hoped to change the pattern, once remarking, "Every single thing we do, we seem to wind up in court. We're trying to find a way out of that conundrum."

Several months ago, the administration proposed that families that engaged in "gross misconduct" or refused placement in permanent housing be ejected from the shelter system. The policy would have divided families â€“ placing children into temporary foster care and sending adults out to fend for themselves. Advocates challenged the proposal, arguing it would violate people's right to shelter. The issue seemed destined for court, but the night before the scheduled court date, a surprise settlement was announced.

The two sides agreed that families who reject suitable permanent housing can be discharged from the shelter system. However, the family would still be able to move into an appropriate apartment selected by the city.

The agreement went beyond that to address the larger issue of ongoing litigation. The parties agreed to the formation of an independent panel that will review city policies for homeless families and mediate disputes between the advocates and the city. Both sides agreed to withdraw pending court motions, withhold new motions and allow the panel to attempt to resolve the issues over the next two years.

The three individuals on the panel were already quietly working to solve the conflict. They are John Feerick, professor of law and former dean of the Fordham School of Law; Daniel Kronenfeld, senior fellow for the Fund for the City of New York; and Gail Nayowith, executive director of the Citizens' Committee for Children.

"Today's agreement is the dawn of a new era for those working to serve New York City's homeless families," said Bloomberg . "The introduction of standards of client responsibility, a new commitment to avoid litigation, and a strong and thoughtful panel to advise [the Department of Homeless Services] will dramatically improve the delivery of services to those in need."

The new agreement only applies to homeless families and not to homeless individuals. The city has proposed a similar eviction policy for them, which the Coalition for the Homeless has appealed, but the group is heartened by the recent agreement.

"We're hopeful that this settlement sets the tone for a similar resolution," said Markee of the coalition.

Linda Gibbs, the commissioner of the Department of Homeless Services said of the settlement, "We look to this as a new beginning, one where we can move forward together to end family homelessness as we know it."

The Survey

In an effort to improve service to homeless single adults, the agency will conduct an overnight survey on the streets of Manhattan in late February.

Up to 1,000 volunteers will canvass sections of the borough and ask the people they encounter whether they are homeless. The data is intended to enable Department of Homeless Services to estimate the true number of homeless.

"No one has an accurate sense of how many individuals remain unsheltered or continue to choose the streets," said Anderson of the Department of Homeless Services. "What we want to do is establish an accurate estimate."

Some homeless advocates doubt the value of the endeavor.

"These sorts of surveys and street counts have proven to be enormously flawed in the past," said Markee of the Coalition for the Homeless. "The 1990 Census attempted to enumerate people on the streets, and an independent study by academics found that they missed as many as 40 percent of the people they meant to count. Our feeling is the time and resources would be much better spent improving the system and finding out what homeless people need and want."

But Anderson argues that the survey will enable the agency to do just that. "We stand to gain so much through this effort in terms of better understanding who is out there, where they are and how we can better meet their needs," he said.

Rebecca Webber is a journalist who has covered housing issues for Gotham Gazette since July 2000.