

New Rules for the Homeless

by Kristen Hinman

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Families sleeping on the floor of the Emergency Assistance Unit in the Bronx.

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(*Courtesy, Coalition for the Homeless*)

Like most people, Evelyn Hennings likes to sleep lying down. But she doesn't have this luxury every night. For four months last year, Hennings, 49, slept upright in a white plastic chair at [Grand Central Neighborhood](#), a midtown drop-in center where some 200 homeless adults, schlepping tattered bags of belongings, stop in daily for hot food and a place to sit.

In late September Grand Central found Hennings a rotating spot in a church bed, one of many that are swapped among the homeless individuals who use the city's drop-in centers.

Hennings gets the bed four nights a week. The other three evenings, she's back in her chair. And yet, Hennings says, "being here is much better than being in a shelter."

Hennings, whom a Grand Central employee says has an undiagnosed mental illness, is among the many homeless adults who avoid the city's temporary residences while they search for permanent housing and jobs. She abandoned her bed in a Brooklyn shelter last May when a caseworker wanted to transfer her to a site offering specialized care for the mentally impaired. She can't remember how long she lived at the Brooklyn shelter but knows she was tired of moving. "I'm not interested in bouncing from shelter to shelter," she says.

Long-term shelter residents like Hennings make up roughly 17 percent of single adults in shelters and use about half of the resources. They are one of the targets of a new city policy called [Client Responsibility Standards](#) that aims to curb dependence on the shelter system

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and spark a sea change in the culture of the homeless. (For an article on programs for homeless families in New York see Stephanie Carberry's [story](#) on the Emergency Assistance Unit in the Bronx.)

So far, the program, which was officially launched in November, has had little effect. The city says it could eventually spur single adults to take more control over their lives and, simultaneously, alleviate crowding in the 49 adult residences. But the policy has evoked outrage from advocates, who worry it will force thousands of people, particularly the mentally disabled, into the streets.

THE NEW RULES

The standards allow shelter operators to evict residents for a minimum of 30 days if they break general rules, like those requiring sobriety, or do not follow their personalized set of guidelines requiring them to search for employment and housing. Until now, unruly adults who start fights, for example, or refuse to stay clean in a drug-free program, have merely been transferred to another shelter.

Client Responsibility, long sought by the city, comes as the number of homeless in New York continues to rise. On January 20, the city counted 38,583 homeless individuals, including 8,896 single adults. (On February 23, the city will conduct a survey to determine the number of homeless people on the streets.)

As a result of a 1981 court ruling, New York is the only city in the nation where homeless people have enjoyed the "right to shelter" - and so could not be evicted from the [shelters](#). The Guiliani administration tried unsuccessfully to reverse the ruling. But last June an appellate court ruled that the city [Department of Homeless Services](#) could set rules and requirements for shelter residents to follow.

For a resident to be evicted, a caseworker must suggest it. Then, a social services director reviews the request and sends it on for endorsement by the department. There the assistant commissioner, the commissioner and a suspension committee examine the case. In the meantime, the resident can request a fair hearing and vow to change.

But despite these safeguards, some homeless advocates fear that Client Responsibility will discourage many who need shelter from seeking help.

The mere prospect of eviction after 30 days "will result in many individuals just saying, 'you know what, I'm just going to go to the streets,'" says Patrick Markee, a senior policy analyst at the [Coalition for the Homeless](#), which brought the 1981 case.

FEARS FOR THE MENTALLY ILL

"We're very concerned about the safety of people, particularly people with disabilities," says

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Lauren Bhola-Pareti, executive director of the Council for Homeless Policies and Services, a coalition of shelter providers.

She and other advocates are particularly concerned about the mentally ill. Homeless services has about a thousand beds for mentally ill homeless, according to its own reports, perhaps fewer than is needed. Many shelters do not employ staff psychiatrists, and most caseworkers have little training in mental-health issues, says Susan Neibacher, executive director of Care for the Homeless, which provides mental health service in homeless facilities. She worries that many mentally ill residents, particularly those who have not been diagnosed, could face eviction for breaking rules or failing to show an effort to find permanent housing.

But the city insists that the mentally ill will be spared. "The standards don't apply to those individuals who have a mental impairment that prevents compliance," says Jim Anderson, spokesperson for the Department of Homeless Services. "We can't and we wouldn't hold someone to a standard that they can't understand or aren't physically able to comply with. That certainly isn't the point. We're looking at individuals who are able but unwilling to comply. The standard is: Does the mental impairment in and of itself prevent compliance?"

Still, there are other ramifications, such as for those outside the shelter system, predicts Laurel Tumarkin, a policy analyst at [HELP USA](#), a shelter operator. "The public does not want to have people sleeping on the streets or park benches or in the subways," she says.

In the two months since Client Responsibility took effect, there has not been a single eviction. "It's business as usual for us," said Verona Middleton-Jeter, executive director of [Henry Street Settlement](#), a provider.

ENCOURAGING RESPONSIBILITY

[The Catholic Home Bureau](#), another shelter operator, is pleased with the policy so far. "It has supported us in terms of getting the clients to do something for themselves," said Dolores Ortiz, assistant executive director, who believes it has made them more accountable.

Many residents seem to agree. "If people don't comply with rules, places like this aren't going to be able to function at all," says Andre Smith, a 29-year-old resident of HELPUSA S.E.C., a substance-abuse shelter on Wards Island. "It creates structure for a person, giving him a basic idea of what's required in the real world. We shouldn't be around people that are constantly violent or using."

The policy "helps us," says shelter director Edwin Cruz. "It's a little negative incentive, negative reinforcement."

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Some shelter operators hope the policy will help adults who have used the shelter system at least 24 months over the past four years to move on. "I think it's going to motivate people to utilize the services available to get out of the system," says Jerry Heaney, social services director at the HELP USA shelter.

Some employees of shelters that offer therapeutic services have complained that, with homelessness at such a high level, the city has sometimes forced them to house adult residents who do not follow treatment regimens and are a bad influence on others who are trying to comply. Some shelter residents "just want a hot and a cot," says Cynthia Stuart, a spokesperson for [Project Renewal](#), where a "sizable number" of people got beds in the last year and a half but, she says, showed no interest in the program.

"I don't want this to sound cold, but every person that I'm continuing to allow to stay in for non-compliance is either going to end up dead, in jail, or severely damaged from their drug abuse," explains Anthony Benedetto, vice president of programs and services, at [Samaritan Village](#), which operates shelters that offer substance abuse programs. "I don't want to see anyone die. But I know that when people are spinning out of control, somebody has to stop them from spinning."

Melvin Alvarez remembers the day he lost control. "I was in the Bronx, on a street curb, my jacket was up the block, my Walkman was over there," he points, "and the cops were asking me who the president was. I answered everything to the fullest, but I must've had a deranged look on my face." It was January 7, 1999, the day Alvarez overdosed on heroin after 18 years of using drugs, and many years on the street. When he was placed in a shelter a couple of months later, he says, he was ready to demonstrate responsibility, follow rules, work with a street-cleaning detail and save money.

Alvarez, now 36, is earning an accounting degree at Hostos Community College. He has a studio on 142nd Street, a Honda Prelude, a 401(k) pension plan, bonds and a savings account. He has just been promoted to social services director at [Ready, Willing & Able](#), a shelter run by The Doe Fund.

Others at Ready, Willing & Able say they too are en route to finding apartments and holding steady jobs because they know they would be transferred otherwise. One, Robert Kennedy, 50, kicked a 20-year crack habit, and moved into Ready, Willing & Able seven months ago. He hopes to be hired by the shelter, after another round of training, as a dispatcher for the street maintenance crews.

"If you're not going to follow rules, I think you ought to be out on the street," says Kennedy. "Because they can't help you if you don't follow the rules."

Related Articles:

â€” [The Permanent Emergency For Homeless Families](#) by Stephanie Carberry
â€” In NYC Books: [Grand Central Winter: Stories From The Street](#)

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