The Permanent Emergency For Homeless Families

by Stephanie Carberry
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Families sleeping on the floor of the Emergency Assistance Unit in the Bronx. Although (*Courtesy, Coalition for the Homeless*)

What I remember most vividly about the city's center for the homeless, where my mother brought us after having run out of friends and family to take us in, was how important it was to stay in your seat, if you were lucky enough to have found an empty one. The place was so crowded that people sat all over the floor, and the walls were covered with people leaning against them.

As exhausting as it had been to walk the streets of Brooklyn, we were far more tired during the few days my family and I spent at what I later learned was called the Emergency Assistance Unit. That is because every moment we were there, we were hoping for help. Behind a large door, there were people who could provide us with a place to live. Instead, we had to wait. When they finally called my mother's name, she emerged an hour later and told us that we needed yet another piece of paperwork or another interview with another supervisor.

I was seven years old when my family turned to an Emergency Assistance Unit, then located in downtown Brooklyn.

Eighteen years later, the Emergency Assistance Unit remains the first place families with children must turn to get shelter. In the years since I was there, thousands of families have been forced to spend the night sleeping on the floors of the one remaining "intake unit" in the Bronx. That practice was brought to a halt a few months ago, the city finally complying with city

law. It is a change that the mayor cited this month in his State of the City address : "This past summer, for the first time in modern memory," the mayor announced, "no one slept on the floors of the Emergency Assistance Unit."

Patrick Markee of the Coalition for the Homeless is not impressed. "This is a bare minimum," he says, "not something to be having a party about." Critics like Markee say that continuing conditions at the facility, along with the strict requirements for emergency housing, discourage many desperate people from getting the shelter they need.

DICKENSIAN CONDITIONS

When my family was homeless, the city had several facilities where families with children could go. Only one remains, on the corner of 151st Street and Walton Avenue in the Bronx. Twenty-four hours a day, 365 days a year, crowds of people stand around its looming double gray doors, waiting to see if they pass muster with the Eligibility Investigation Unit and can be referred to a shelter for the night.

The number of homeless New Yorkers in city shelters every night has reached a record high of more than 38,000 homeless men, women, and children.

Thousands of other New Yorkers, most of them single adults, are homeless but not in shelters, sleeping instead on the streets, in parks or on the subways.

Families without children now go to the Adult Family Intake Center at 29th Street and 1st Avenue in Manhattan. Five centers - three for men and two for women - handle single adults. (See related story by Kristen Hinman on new rules for homeless adults in the shelter system.)

But the thousands of families with children must go to the Emergency Assistance Unit in the Bronx, a place with a history of crime and violence and a reputation for poor treatment -- abuse by the guards, a cafeteria so unsanitary that it has made many people sick.

Though the city does not allow reporters in, two years ago, journalist Jack Newfield snuck inside. "It was something straight out of Dickens or Jacob Riis," he wrote in The Nation .

The city says it is making efforts to improve conditions and to provide routine maintenance, including "deep cleanings." But it cautions against looking for instant solutions. The unit “is what it is because of years of Band Aid-style quick fixes and court orders,” says James Anderson, a spokesperson for the Department of Homeless Services. “While we’ve made a series of quality improvements around maintenance and safety, and will continue to do so, the thrust of our efforts is focused on deeper, more comprehensive reforms. We’re trying to get it right, rather than get it fast.”

ONE PLACE TO GO

To Ann Duggan, a homeless advocate, one remedy would involve opening more places where

families with children can apply for shelter. The Giuliani administration instituted the single entry point, arguing it would improve efficiency.

"Maybe it makes sense sitting in front of a computer screen having everybody go to the same spot to access services," said Duggan, "but from a frontline perspective or from the homeless family's perspective, it . . . actually makes access to the system much more difficult."

Confronted with crowding at the Bronx center, State Supreme Court Justice Helen Freedman in 2002 suggested the city consider reopening the Queens and Manhattan intake facilities. Linda Gibbs, commissioner of homeless services, rejected the proposal, saying she was "sticking to the long-term plan," which emphasizes efforts to put people in permanent housing.

And so the homeless must make the trek to the Bronx, no matter how inconvenient. Kim Berrios worked as a dental assistant in Staten Island, and her son Jonathan Garcia attended a school there that provided him with a special education program. But they had to go to the Bronx to get shelter. In a documentary made by the Coalition for the Homeless, Berrios explains how she had to take two trains, the ferry and a bus to get to Jonathan's school and then take another bus from the school to her job. At the end of the day, they had to reverse their steps to return to the Bronx. Such treks force children to miss school and adults to be away from work.

And the trip is not just a one-time thing. The city places many families in temporary housing night after night, requiring that they return to the Emergency Assistance Unit repeatedly before they are assigned something more permanent.

SLEEPING ON THE FLOOR

Though now the practice has stopped, for a long time, the emergency assistance unit, unable to accommodate all those seeking shelter, had reportedly allowed families to sleep on chairs, benches and floors in the Bronx office. This was in clear violation of the law, a fact the city acknowledged by reportedly agreeing to pay each of the estimated 12,500 families who slept at the unit since January 1995, at $150 for each night they were forced to stay at the facility. According to the New York Post, the payout could total as much as $10 million.

THE BUREAUCRACY

When a family turns to the assistance unit for help, they meet with a worker who begins processing the family's application. All family members must be present or the family must go through the process all over again.

The Department of Homeless Services suggests that families provide documentation to explain why they are homeless, such as eviction papers, letters from landlords or documents from doctors indicating that a former apartment may no longer be appropriate. They must also prove that they are indeed a family by showing documents such as birth certificates, legal custody papers, marriage licenses, or certification as partners. To be eligible for housing, families must receive or apply for public assistance, and workers are on hand to help with the application

process if necessary.

In 1995, the city narrowed its definition of homeless, according to the National Housing Law Project . As part of this, the assistance unit deems ineligible families that have been doubling up with friends or relatives. The city made this move to prevent families that already had a place to live from using the system to get new housing.

At the end of the process, the family should be told whether they have been found eligible for service. Attempts are then made to place them first in a shelter and finally into permanent housing. To stay in the system, families must apply for programs such as housing subsidies, actively seek permanent housing and accept suitable housing if and when it is offered.

Many families do not meet all the qualifications, at least in the view of the Department of Homeless Services. About half are denied shelter, according to Markee.

"The policy of restricting access to the shelter system, " said Duggan, "is based on the premise that people are accessing shelter who don't need shelter. And so you make it very, very difficult for people."

Anderson says the city is looking to ways to make lasting reforms that will “fundamentally improve . . . intake and eligibility process.” Key to this effort is the report of a Special Masters panel, appointed as a result of a settlement between the city and the Legal Aid Society . The panel, whose report is expected within a few months, will look at ways to prevent homelessness and to provide housing. It will also consider ways to improve the Emergency Assistance Unit â€“ and to correct problems that have existed for decades.

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