

The Homeless Pledge

by Joe Lamport

Monday, August 21, 2006 12:00 AM



When a single mother was given 10 days to come up with \$3,000 or face eviction, she began to cry, pleading with the judge in Housing Court for more time to come up with the money. The judge replied he didn't want to hear her "sob story." And so, [City Councilmember Annabel Palma](#) recalls, she and her son were forced from their apartment. "I was homeless," she says. "I couldn't believe it."

That was several years ago, but many New Yorkers still find it hard to believe how persistent the problem of homelessness is in the city. By many measures it is as bad as it has ever been.

Now, with record numbers of homeless people in city shelters and on the streets, the mayor has once again focused attention on the problem.

In June, Mayor Michael Bloomberg told an audience of housing advocates from around the

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country that New York City is [on track to reduce homelessness](#) by two-thirds by 2009, the year he leaves office. The mayor has brought in a new homeless services commissioner, Robert Hess, who is credited with reducing street homelessness by 60 percent in Philadelphia.

To help achieve their goal, the mayor and his commissioner say the city will

- * Spend more money on homeless prevention programs

- * Dismantle 73 encampments around the city where small groups of homeless people are living

- * Concentrate on the approach known as "Housing First" â€" making homeless people's need for housing the first priority, rather than secondary to such aggravating conditions as mental illness or drug abuse.

"We're confident that we'll continue to decrease the shelter population," said Angela Allen from the Department of Homeless Services.

But will the plans be enough to result in a two-thirds decrease of the homeless population? Many advocates wonder if this is possible.

A PERSISTENT PROBLEM

More than 32,000 people every night â€" families with children, single adults, domestic violence victims â€" crowd the city's shelters. On the streets, another 3,843, by the city's count (advocates believe the number is higher), sleep on the streets, under bridges, on subways, in parks and abandoned buildings.

The city's homeless policies have been the subject of several lawsuits by the Legal Aid Society. In 2003, City Hall and the homeless advocates called a truce of sorts, agreeing to a review by a panel of experts that would make recommendations on the city's homeless policies. This past spring, the city filed papers asking the judge to dismiss all of the cases based on progress it has

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made reforming its homeless policies. The judge will decide on that request sometime next year.

Forced to deal with problems he inherited from former Mayor Rudolph Giuliani, Bloomberg has developed policies that already have resulted in improved treatment of homeless people, some advocates say -- but they also say the solutions required are wide-reaching and long-term

Most people do not become homeless overnight, said Michael Stoops, acting executive director of the [National Coalition for the Homeless](#) .

“For every homeless person there’s a different cause, but there are some common themes.”

Illness, Addiction, Poverty

Mental illnesses and drug addictions are common themes in the lives of many people who end up homeless. But the overriding theme is poverty.

“The one (problem) that isn’t mentioned enough is the poverty one,” said Sam Tsemberis, executive director of [Pathways to Housing](#) . “That’s really the disability that leads to the homelessness.”

And so, advocates say, the city’s policies to help homeless people will have limited success as long as the federal government cuts programs to help the poor and does little to build affordable housing.

“It’s good that they’re talking about ending homelessness and 10 year plans, but at the same time they’re creating more of it by cutting food stamps, Medicare, housing, et cetera,” said Stoops.

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Real Estate Boom

In New York, the housing crunch has hit low income people particularly hard. Erin, a single mother, found a small studio apartment for \$125 a week on the Lower East Side about 10 years ago. But as the city's real estate market boomed, the landlord raised the rent. She was forced to leave and could not find an apartment for her and her young son. She went to a shelter first. Then, she squatted in an abandoned building in the neighborhood.

"I couldn't find anything else," said Erin, who asked that her last name not be used. "So, I went to the squats."

Erosion Of Affordable Housing

Eric, homeless man in his thirties, was reclined on a bench as Erin told her story. Like other homeless people his options in New York City in 2006 are more limited than they were just 10 years ago. The stock of affordable housing is being eroded on many fronts.

For example, the number of abandoned buildings available for ingenious and resourceful squatters has dropped precipitously. The number of rooms in single-room occupancy hotels has also decreased, advocates said. Rent stabilized apartments are disappearing at an increasing rate and landlords are opting out of programs to keep housing affordable across the city as the terms of the agreements to do that expire.

Simply put, affordable housing is fast disappearing across New York City — and the 165,000 affordable apartments the mayor has been cheered for committing to are years away from reality.

The erosion of affordable housing is exacerbated by the high price of housing to begin with. For example, while a Social Security benefit check of \$666 can pay for adequate housing in a city like Columbus, Ohio, in New York City it is just not enough.

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Some do not think building affordable housing is the answer. In a [New York Post commentary](#), Nicole Gelinas of the Manhattan Institute argues that rent regulations effectively prevent landlords from maintaining their buildings because they cannot charge enough money to do so. And rent regulation discourages developers from building more apartments, she wrote. Gelinas did not respond to a request for comment.

WHAT THE CITY IS DOING

Reforming Intake

After reviewing the city's homeless policies, a report by a special master panel in 2004 made a variety of recommendations. The mayor has initiated efforts that stem directly from the recommendations.

In July, the city closed the Emergency Assistance Unit, its intake center for families, one of the panel's key [recommendations](#). Its demolition should begin soon. A "state of the art" intake center for families seeking shelter will take its place.

For now families seeking emergency shelter are evaluated for eligibility at the city's PATH facility in the Bronx. But problems persist there, according to one worker there, who said staff attitude is a main obstacle. Indeed, the Legal Aid Society has sued the city for its treatment of people seeking help at intake centers in the past. They declined comment on the current climate due to pending litigation.

Prevention Efforts

Most of all, the city would like to prevent people from becoming homeless in the first place — and the mayor told the national audience of advocates in June that he would more than double spending on prevention efforts with a new "Aftercare" program.

"Aftercare" would join the city's "HomeBase" program, initiated in 2004 in the six neighborhoods that sent more people to homeless shelters proportionally than anywhere else in the city. HomeBase will be expanded under the mayor's new plan. The "Aftercare" program will target

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people who leave shelters for support.

HomeBase has largely achieved what it has set out to do, the city said.

“Ninety-six percent of families they’ve seen have not gone into shelter,” said Angela Allen of homeless services. “We are seeing that prevention does work. If you can step in before that happens, you’re saving money.”

The six organizations that the city subcontracted with to open HomeBase centers provide all sorts of help to people facing the loss of housing — from one-time and ongoing help paying rent to mediation services to referrals to job training to buying bunkbeds.

A HomeBase worker who spoke to me only on the condition I not name him — he did not want to jeopardize his employment — told me he thinks the program has been effective in reducing the number of people going to city shelters, but that its scarce resources make it difficult to decide whom to target: People facing homelessness who make efforts to improve their situations or people who depend on the state to help them out and who may be particularly vulnerable.

“Who do you leave empty handed?” the worker said. “The minimum wage worker who’s trying, or the single mom with two kids who won’t even try?”

More significantly, he said, HomeBase has helped people in crisis situations, but in the long-run the people it is helping could just return for more. .

The Aftercare program will target about a third of the people who leave homeless shelters for follow-up services. The city expects to contract the services to ten organizations in the city, spending about \$3,300 per client, compared to the annual shelter cost of \$34,000.

Getting Homeless People Off The Streets

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In June's address the mayor also announced plans to get homeless people out of 73 encampments around the city and into housing of some type. The city would not release a list of the sites where it says small groups of homeless men and women are living.

Homeless encampments are hardly a new symptom of housing problems in the city. In the late 1980s, people evicted from neighborhoods like Chelsea and the West Village set up camp in Thompkins Square Park in the East Village. Hundreds of people were living there and Mayor Rudolph Giuliani used the police to tear them down, sparking riots.

The encampments today are nowhere near that size. But advocates said clearing out the encampments is still a short-sighted plan to handle the homelessness problem.

"Mayor Bloomberg is supportive of building permanent housing and we are too, but at the same time he wants to tear down the homeless encampments," Stoops of the National Coalition for the Homeless said. "He should not tear down the tent boxes until there's a place for people to go."

For several days this summer, Chris, a young man from Detroit, slept with friends in an abandoned factory building near the corner of Third Avenue and Third Street in Brooklyn's Gowanus neighborhood. He said about 30 people used the place.

On a visit to this so-called Bat Cave on a recent evening, there were signs people were living there but none of the people themselves. It is a cavernous building up against the Gowanus Canal. Parking lots and factory buildings surround the old building, which has lost most of its windows and some of its roof. Although it is fenced in on all sides, I could jump from a bridge crossing the canal onto a small ledge running along the canal. A well-worn footpath led to some stepladders allowing access to the area behind the building. The back of the building was wide open.

The "Bat Cave" does not have electricity or running water and it's probably infested with vermin. The holes in its facade and roof probably make it uncomfortable when rain falls or cold winds blow, not to mention dangerously unstable. But for all its problems, it has an advantage over the

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apartments going up in this gentrifying area of the city: It's quite affordable.

Housing First

In his June address, the mayor also spoke about adopting a "housing first" strategy to helping people who are chronically homeless.

In New York and elsewhere, the typical approach to helping the homeless has been to use housing as a reward for good behavior. Even at city shelters, misbehavior can get a person kicked out. Under this approach, called "continuum of care," a homeless person must show some progress in other areas — getting treatment for substance abuse or taking medications for mental illness, for example — before he or she can move into transitional housing of some type.

But the mayor is joining a growing number of homeless advocates who argue for a housing first approach, which was pioneered by Pathways to Housing in 1992.

"Housing is a basic human need, it's what everybody needs to get their lives organized," Sam Tsemberis, who helped initiate the approach, explained. "How can anyone get their life organized without housing?"

Research has shown that the housing first approach works: One study [reported](#) that 87 percent of homeless people in a "housing first" program were still in their homes a year later compared to just 23 percent of "continuum of care" homeless clients.

"All we're demonstrating is that you can end homelessness for even the most difficult to serve people," Tsemberis said. "They're incredibly creative and resilient, able to survive on the streets. What that tells us is that they clearly have the skills to manage on their own."

In East Harlem, Keith McGee is the team leader at a Pathways to Housing office. At the

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organization's modest office, a team of workers combines their respective expert knowledge to help people who have been chronically homeless, often for years.

"We meet with the client at least six times per month," he said. "We have someone on staff to deal with just about every issue they could have."

A registered nurse dispenses medications for mental illness and treats other health issues, a psychiatrist provides therapy, a job specialist provides counsel on writing resumes and doing well in job interviews and a social worker offers support, too. The team meets every day to go over the cases staff is handling.

Above all, though, a housing department leases apartments and then subleases the apartment to the client.

A schizophrenic man who appeared to be in his 50s said the Pathways approach had saved him. (He didn't want to give his name out of embarrassment for having been homeless.)

"It was bad" living on the street, he said. "I didn't get enough rest and I didn't get enough food. For two or three days I wasn't eating. I was trying suicide in different ways. I acted different and I didn't have anybody to be there for me."

Now, he has been in an apartment for eight years.

"I'm used to it now," he said. "I like having my own food to cook. I have my own space. I have my own TV, I watch what I want. I have a warm place in winter time, I have a cool place in summer time."

"In the future, I want to go back to work, to have a better life," he continued. "I'm feeling right now that what I have is the normal thing. I'm not homeless now."

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“More people are using this approach now because it works,” said Diane Lanier, a psychiatrist at Pathways. “It’s very hard when you don’t have housing to take care of yourself to take medications, to find a job. To ask someone to do all this stuff when they don’t have housing it doesn’t make sense.”

She cautioned against getting people’s hopes up, though.

“You need a lot of time to work with people” who have been homeless, she said.

And the funding for housing first approaches is very, very low, said Stoops of the National Coalition for the Homeless.

“The problem with the housing first model, it’s a pilot project and there’s very few slots being given out around the country,” Stoops said. “The funding is not there on a massive scale.”

A SUBSIDY AND MORE AFFORDABLE HOUSING

If the city really wants to help resolve homelessness, it should attack the root causes the cost of housing, advocates said. To that end, the city introduced a housing subsidy in 2004 and in his re-election campaign in 2005, Bloomberg promised to build or preserve 165,000 new units of affordable housing over 10 years, the largest affordable housing program in the country.

But the subsidy program is a “mess” and City Council has [sought to change it](#) . Advocates have pointed to two critical flaws in the subsidy: 1. There is a 20 percent decline in the subsidy each year until it runs out. 2. It is being paid to rent apartments with serious violations of the Housing Maintenance Code.

HSP “is insane,” the HomeBase worker said. “These people have open public assistance cases meaning they can’t work. Where are they supposed to get that money?”

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A spokesperson for homeless services said the department was “working on” the step-down problem. “We recognize that something needs to be done,” said Angela Allen.

“We’re still negotiating (with the state) to get that work supplement.”

But despite the problem Allen said that since the subsidy program was introduced two years ago, the city has used it to move 7,500 families out of shelters and into permanent housing. But only about 5,000 were placed in such housing in fiscal year 2005 — far short of the 7,400 the city had set as a goal.

The affordable housing the city is committed to is years away. Meanwhile, the loss of rent stabilized apartments and other affordable housing, like Mitchell-Lama and Section 8 projects, shows no signs of abating.

Achieving the mayor’s goal of a two-thirds reduction by the time his second term ends is ambitious. Advocates are skeptical, citing cuts to federal programs that help the poor, the erosion of the stock of affordable housing and city responses that are simply not enough. Meanwhile, however, record numbers of New Yorkers face uncertainty, difficulty and often misery in shelters and on the streets. Â