

CalLEN-LORDE



ADVANCING Health Equity

HOUSING WORKS

25 July 2022

Dear Mayor Adams, Governor Hochul, Commissioner Jenkins,

As health workers we are dismayed by the mayor targeting New Yorkers experiencing homelessness through ongoing sweeps of street encampments, and are fervently opposed to the recently announced plan¹ for increased police presence in the New York subway system and the renewal of sweeps of street encampments. Under the guise of safety and public health, these plans build on a pattern of criminalizing poverty without addressing the root causes of homelessness, and put the city's most marginalized at increased risk. Coercion under police threat only temporarily moves people from one place to another. People experiencing homelessness will only permanently leave the subway system or street encampments when they are offered safe, accessible, and supportive housing.

We first resist the association between people experiencing homelessness and crime, as data has shown that people who are chronically unhoused are more likely to be victims of violent crime than perpetrators². That said, whether or not someone has had their behavior criminalized should have no bearing on their right to safe shelter. Increased enforcement of subway 'rules of conduct' and 'end of the line' policies are likely to lead to more police engagement with people experiencing homelessness, which has been shown both by advocates and in the literature to often have unintended harmful effects such as assaults on those experiencing homelessness and decreased trust of police and paramedics³.

Most importantly, forced removal of people from subways - which are often the only sources of acceptable shelter to people who are currently unhoused - does nothing to address the reasons

why people are unhoused in the first place, such as the ever increasing cost of housing, fragmented and under-resourced mental health and social services, and inadequate pathways into a limited supply of housing. It furthermore places people at increased risk of poor health outcomes through environmental exposures, increasing risk of respiratory illness, infection, malnutrition, and complicated wounds⁴.

We further resist the use of encampment sweeps as an effective means for engaging unhoused persons on the street. Such sweeps have been going on for years through multiple mayoral administrations^{4a}, and their continuation as the COVID19 pandemic sees another rise in infection rates stands in stark contrast to CDC recommendations^{4b}. Encampment destruction—particularly when encampment residents themselves are not present—can lead to poor health outcomes. Vital medications and original health documents are often thrown away increasing the risk of acute health crises and burdening the healthcare system. Public health has been cited by the mayor and his deputies as a rationale for these sweeps^{4c}. So we ask: public health for whom, and at the expense of whose personal health?

Among individuals experiencing homelessness, encampment sweeps are often considered no more than theater because many people return to these locations soon after city agencies move on. This is underlined by the fact that from March 18 to May 1st in the initial round of street sweeps, the city carried out 733 encampment sweeps across all five boroughs; however only 39 of the 264 people contacted accessed temporary housing⁵.

The result is a dehumanizing game of cat and mouse between city authorities and the most vulnerable members of our community. The fact is people who are forced out of one public space without being offered safe, affordable housing, end up in other public spaces. Finally, the end destination for individuals forcibly removed from public spaces are often emergency departments, where endless cycling not only impairs patient care and places an undue burden on a portion of the healthcare system not meant to be used as emergency shelter.

We call for clear data on getting people housed, not just sheltered temporarily, as a result of coercive actions like encampment sweeps and subway policing. We are interested in seeing these contrasted with the proven outcomes of these strategies. Case management and consistent outreach from social services teams do lead to positive outcomes and housing, but they have limited utility when there is no safe, affordable housing available for outreach workers and case managers to navigate people to. Put simply: there are not enough open safe haven beds and an inadequate supply of supportive housing; there are bottlenecks everywhere^{6a,6b}. Troublingly, the mayor's plan continues to rely heavily on police involvement in outreach, which is not conducive to building trusting relationships and perceived safety of people experiencing homelessness. The City has already implemented extensive outreach in the recent past under the prior administration, with the only outcomes being displacement of people experiencing homelessness, and limited accomplishments in terms of improving housing status. While the Mayor's housing plan that was recently announced points to positive developments such as expedited pathways into housing and mechanisms to increase housing supply⁷, specifics on how these interventions will be monitored and how success will be measured remain unclear⁸.

While more resources such as safe havens and stabilization beds are necessary, they should not be contingent on increased police presence and surveillance. While we are encouraged by the recent announcement of additional funding for safe haven bed⁹, it is uncertain if these services will be available in time to meet the thousands of individuals who currently need them, and whether there will be capacity to facilitate people accessing and using these services. The current Mayor needs to reverse the prior administration's failures to follow through on its safe haven commitments^{10a}. The City has grossly underperformed in implementing vouchers^{10b} and the prior administration opposed State HONDA legislation (converting hotels and office spaces to housing)^{10c} and instead moved people from hotels back to congregate shelters that people experiencing homelessness find to be unsafe and punitive in their rules. Rather than reinforcing outdated practices that center on policing and punishment, the mayor's plan should be focusing its efforts on adequately funding and implementing more robust mental health and supportive services as soon as possible, and allowing for effective pathways into safe, affordable housing, which is the only true way to end homelessness. Instead of policing, the mayor should focus on his commitment to implementing HONDA and other mechanisms for permanent, supportive housing.^{10d}

We support the voices of organizers and people directly impacted by homelessness in calling for:

- In addition to expansion of safe havens and Drop-In Centers, dedicated expansion of case management within the city's existing shelter system to facilitate pathways into housing
- Alternatives to congregate shelters to allow for safe isolation and quarantine in the setting of COVID-19 risk and exposure
- Transparent reporting on the impact of these new efforts, including shelter capacity, arrest rates, linkage to case work, and ED visits
- Full passage of the Housing Access Voucher Program and Good Cause Eviction by the state legislature to help those at risk of eviction stay in their homes, and to create a path back to housing
- City and State working closely together to expedite implementation of HONDA legislation
- Adequately funding services integral to supportive housing so that operators can expand the number of available units
- Increased funding, staffing, and tailored length of stay and services for inpatient psychiatric facilities to better serve people experiencing homelessness¹¹

Increased policing and outreach without a dedicated expansion of resources is not only a retread of familiar, unsuccessful practices but will also put increasing numbers of the City's vulnerable at risk. A true solution to homelessness requires dedicated expansion of services for supportive housing and legislation action to both keep people housed and create pathways into safe, affordable housing. We join with our partners across the city this Homeless Rights Month to urge both the city and state administrations to take such action if they are truly committed to the mission of ending homelessness.

Signed,

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