



THE COUNCIL OF
THE CITY OF NEW YORK

CITY HALL
NEW YORK, NY 10007

COREY JOHNSON
SPEAKER

TELEPHONE
(212) 788-7210

March 20, 2020

Hon. Bill de Blasio
Mayor of the City of New York
City Hall
New York, NY 10007

Hon. Steven Banks
Commissioner
NYC Department of Social Services
4 World Trade Center
150 Greenwich Street, 38th floor
New York, NY 10007

Re: City's response to homelessness and public benefits during COVID-19 pandemic

Dear Mayor de Blasio and Commissioner Banks:

This week we saw the first confirmed case of COVID-19 in shelter. Before this current crisis began, we were already in the midst of a homelessness crisis. As the number of positive cases increases significantly every day, we need to ensure that we are protecting the most vulnerable in our city. We know that the Mayor's office and Department of Social Services (DSS) staff have been working tirelessly to keep services open to clients while they are also balancing the enormous task of adjusting to the ever-changing threat of COVID-19. In an effort to keep those who are experiencing homelessness safe, as well as the staff who serve them, we are sharing the below considerations and recommendations.

Street Homeless Individuals

With the closure of restaurants, recreation centers, and other places where unsheltered homeless would use the restroom facilities and wash up, drop-in centers that serve the unsheltered homeless population need surge capacity immediately. At the same time, the New York City Police Department (NYPD) is continuing to implement the Department of Homeless Services' (DHS) subway diversion plan, putting people at risk of harassment and arrest. We are also hearing that sweeps of street homeless individuals are happening and that many are getting ticketed at the same rate, if not more, than they had been before the pandemic. At this time, being on the street may be safer than being in a dormitory-style shelter. The subway diversion program and encampment sweeps must cease immediately.

Some drop-in centers are also very crowded and may even see an increase in people coming in as the virus spreads. At current capacity, residents are not spaced six feet apart. DSS and the Office of Emergency Management (OEM) should identify additional sites for drop-in centers throughout New York City, including closed public spaces, such as school gymnasiums or community centers.

Hospitalizations

We are also hearing from advocates that DHS is not accepting people experiencing homelessness who are discharged from hospitals with COVID-19 symptoms if they are not already DHS clients. This may lead to people with the virus being discharged to the street or going to intake centers, exposing others to the virus.

Expanding Access to Isolation Beds

We know that the Administration is working hard at increasing the number of isolation beds available. We must dramatically increase this number across the City's shelter systems (including DHS, Department of Youth and Community Development (DYCD), and Human Resources (HRA) shelters. This means utilizing any options that are available, including hotel rooms, for the temporary purpose of meeting the immediate needs of homeless New Yorkers. These individuals should include those who do not need to be hospitalized, but need a private space because they are showing symptoms, those who have been identified as having contact with anyone who has tested positive for COVID-19 or has died from COVID-19, and those who are known to have been exposed to COVID-19.

The current number of people who have the virus in New York City is an extreme undercount, yet it has still been rising *exponentially*. In the coming days, the rate of hospitalizations will skyrocket and people living in shelters are particularly at risk of getting sick. With almost 70,000 people living in a NYC shelter, the potential for a rapid spread is high — we need thousands of units dedicated now for people living on the street or in shelter.

OEM should immediately provide a count of the City's entire isolation bed capacity, including hotels and other private spaces across New York City, and release a plan to fully meet the isolation need for homeless New Yorkers, including in youth shelters and those living on the street. Six people tested positive yesterday, each from a different shelter; an indication that the virus is spreading rapidly across shelters with little containment. Current Department of Health and Mental Hygiene (DOHMH) guidance recommends that if someone shows symptoms and tests positive, they should be self-isolated. This will require a lot of single units that are needed in a matter of days. The City Council would like an update on metrics for meeting all isolation bed needs (including in healthcare, DYCD, HRA, and DHS shelters, youth in care, etc.). We are calling on OEM to work in unity with DSS and DYCD to open emergency shelters immediately.

Hand-Washing Stations, Portable Toilets and Showers

Street homeless individuals, those in shelter who leave during the day for fear of getting infected, and the outreach workers engaging homeless New Yorkers, need places for basic hygiene now due to the closure of public bathrooms. Other cities have already begun providing alternatives in response to COVID-19. The City of Los Angeles has set up hand-washing stations and the City of Seattle has added portable toilets in hygiene trailers at key

locations with staff. These trailers also provide garbage and needle disposal. Seattle is additionally providing hygiene kits which include paper towels, soap and water.

New York City should set up hand-washing stations and portable toilets. We know that there are at least 15 hand-washing stations currently not in usage and placed in storage in Queens. These should immediately be placed in high-need areas across the City. Additionally, the Department of Environmental Protection (DEP) offers water on the go stations during summer months which could quickly be put to use as hand-washing stations. The City should also provide supplies, such as socks, and hygiene products that include hand sanitizer and wipes, to street homeless individuals, along with protective gear to outreach workers. Finally, according to advocates, the biggest demand street homeless New Yorkers have had during the pandemic is the need for showers, which the City should immediately set up in high-need areas. There are existing models the City could replicate, such as the mobile shower units provided in San Francisco, Los Angeles and Oakland using retrofitted retired city buses. In Fiscal Year 2018, together with Brooklyn Borough President Adams' office, the City Council allocated funds for a retrofitted bus with two individual shower units.

DHS Guidance and Contracting

Nonprofit shelter providers have reported that they need clear guidance from the City on what the safety net looks like during an emergency versus business as usual. This includes what services are essential (i.e. who would stay open during a shelter-in-place order) as well as guidance on staff capacity and social distancing for nonprofit providers that remain open.

Providers have also cited invoicing as their biggest challenge. While the City has made progress on paying invoices during the crisis, some providers are still owed millions of dollars and are incurring additional expenses related to the COVID-19 crisis, which are not yet in the contracts. Providers need liquidity to act quickly in this situation and it is important that the expedition of COVID contracts be implemented quickly so that providers are not operating at a deficit. In addition, the City should stop recouping advances to that any new cash-flow is not negated by recoupment.

Public Benefits

HRA needs to significantly expand the messaging that sanctions for public assistance cases are being halted. We know that anyone who needs to comply can just call in, however, HRA needs to proactively tell people not to visit centers to minimize people unnecessarily putting themselves or others at risk for fear of losing their benefits. Additionally, HRA should market the Access HRA app now more than ever before in new and creative ways to all underserved communities who face barriers to accessing information. This information also needs to reach such communities in different languages that have been appropriately vetted for any errors in translation.

Rental Assistance

Since there are eligibility work requirements for CityFHEPS, many New Yorkers who will lose their jobs as a result of the pandemic may not be able to get a voucher. We are calling

on the City to consider anyone who is in receipt of unemployment assistance to be eligible for CityFHEPS.

Shelter Procedures:

Following recent coverage, it has become apparent that DHS shelters are behind in following Center for Disease Control (CDC) guidance for social distancing. DHS should take immediate steps to enact measures in all common areas and dorm areas for social distancing. This is not happening to the degree that is needed. DHS should update its guidance to include increased cleaning schedules, staggered meal times and common area usage, and consider practices such as temperature checks and spacial marking. DHS should provide an update on supplies at every shelter and for staff at DHS central offices. We are additionally concerned that providers do not have access to personal protective equipment (PPE), which can be a deterrent in providers bidding on the RFP that the City released yesterday for additional emergency beds. Under that RFP, providers would be required to provide their own PPE. If DHS wishes to promote social distancing, then the agency should at minimum assist providers in securing PPE.

We also urge DHS to suspend current eligibility requirements for families applying for shelter at intake shelters. This barrier turns families away from housing and puts people's wellbeing at risk during a time of crisis.

Lastly, we urge DSS to coordinate with DYCD on emergency response measures. We have strong concerns about the guidance and preparation taking place at DYCD shelters, and in the interest of our city's youth, it is important that proactive measures be shared and coordinated for all agencies serving people experiencing homelessness.

We appreciate the commitment that your staff have demonstrated this past week in addressing many of the issues that have arisen as we try to keep New Yorkers safe and healthy. We hope that sharing the above issues and concerns will assist you in your efforts and we hope to continue working with you as we address this crisis together. If you have any questions or follow up, please reach out to Aminta Kilawan, Senior Legislative Counsel to the Committee on General Welfare at akilawan@council.nyc.gov.

Sincerely,



COREY JOHNSON
Speaker



STEPHEN T. LEVIN
Chair, General Welfare Committee

cc: Hon. Deanne Criswell, Commissioner, NYC Emergency Management Department
Hon. Dermot Shea, Commissioner, New York City Police Department
Hon. Bill Chong, Commissioner, NYC Dept. of Youth & Community Development