



## DEPARTMENT OF HOMELESS SERVICES

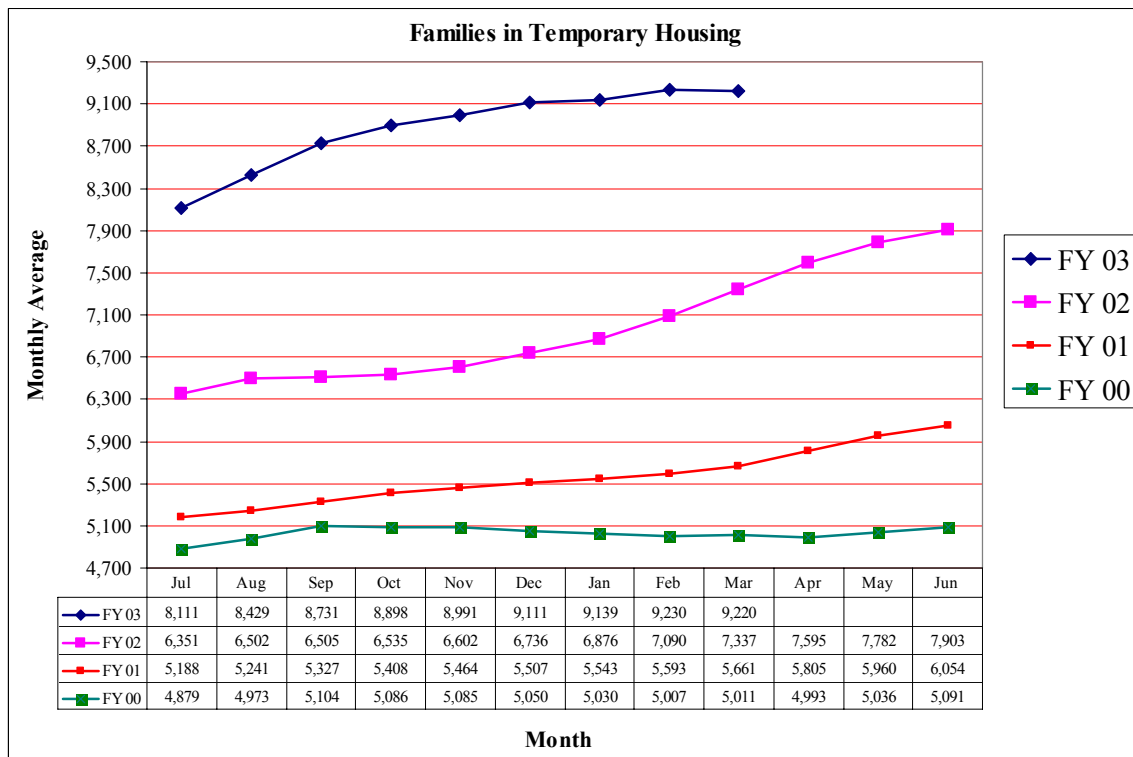
### Testimony of Homeless Services Commissioner Linda Gibbs Before the Committee on General Welfare

**May 3, 2003**

Good Morning. I am glad to be here this morning to share with you the current strategies that DHS is putting in place to end homelessness for the thousands of individuals and families who are experiencing the trauma of being without a home in our City.

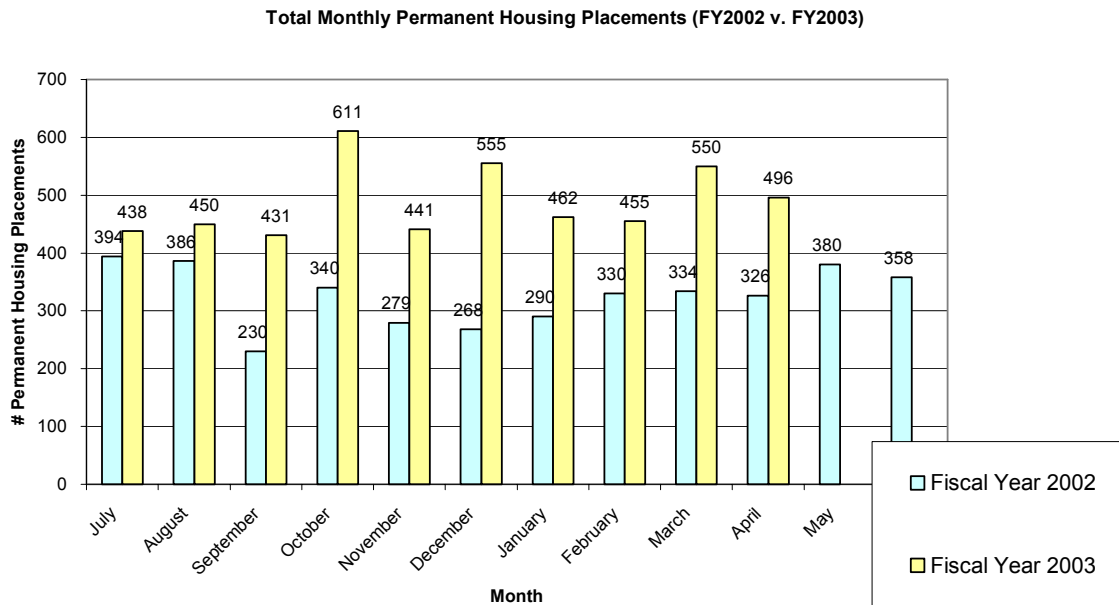
Before I start, I want to emphasize that the homeless shelter system is not just a passive partner in this phenomenon. Our policies have a great effect on whether people will become homeless and how long they stay homeless. Only by recognizing this and affirmatively obligating ourselves to ensure that we have done everything within our power to end homelessness can we say that our job has been faithfully executed.

The homeless population in New York continues to rise. We have 38,500 people in shelter today. This includes 9,250 families and almost 17,000 children. The growth continues a three year trend in a surge of new applicants for shelter services.



At the same time, the growth in need for more shelter beds has been slowed. This is the direct result of concerted efforts on the part of DHS, partner city agencies, shelter providers, and families to move with greater urgency to locate housing from shelter, ending their homelessness. There has been a 70% increase in the number of my clients who are leaving homelessness to move to permanent housing compared to this time last year. This represents about 1,000\* additional families now in permanent housing.

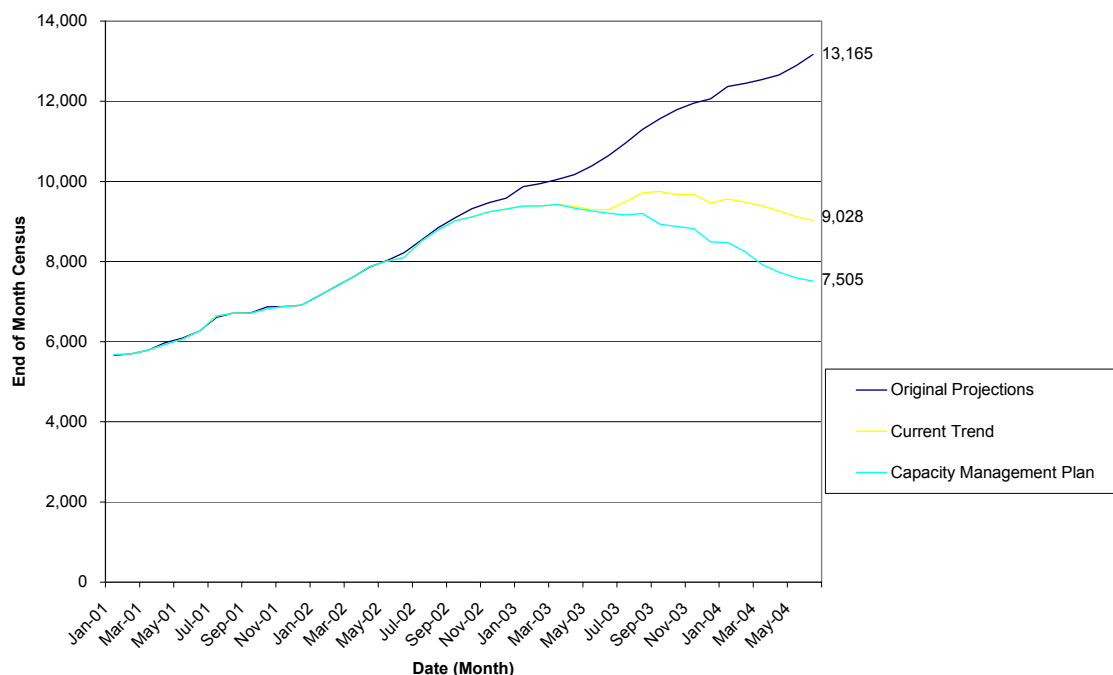
\* Corrected by Commissioner Gibbs to 1,700 during testimony.



This change didn't just happen. It required planning, resources, coordination, and perseverance to assist a complex social services system to move in an intended direction. It reflects the fact that the shelter provider system had lost sight of the mission to solve homelessness, as it served our clients in their need while they were homeless.

This resolve to recommit to solve homelessness was set out in the strategic plan released by DHS one year ago, which marked a change in the way that DHS serves our clients. The agency determined that we would not continue business as usual. Rather, we decided we would take affirmative steps to end homelessness, by focusing on aggressive prevention and permanency strategies. The work on permanency has already shown results and we expect further improvements. The following chart shows three scenarios - where we would be if DHS had not undertaken the planning to improve permanency, where we are now given improvements already in place, and where we hope to be with further improvements in the next year.

Monthly Family Census Projections



As a result of these efforts, we expect that by this time next year we will have about 3,250 fewer families in homeless shelter than would have otherwise been the case.

Our work on prevention is now just beginning. Right now the City spends over \$30 million in contracted preventive services, among four separate agencies with little coordination, evaluation, or outcome measurement. Our hope is to change that by bringing the same management focus to preventive services that we've brought to permanency, so we can better serve our clients by preventing their homelessness.

To that end, I am pleased to announce today that with the approval of the Council at budget adoption, funds will be transferred from HRA to DHS for homeless prevention services. Furthermore, HPD and the Criminal Justice Coordinator's office are equally in agreement to have programs they manage transferred to DHS if the Council concurs with the Administration that a central coordination by the homeless services agency offers promise for improving the effectiveness of preventive strategies. Whereas DHS has had no formal role in homelessness prevention in the past, this agency will serve to coordinate a new, one-city approach to homelessness prevention moving forward. This is a significant development, symbolically and programmatically.

I have every expectation that better planning and coordinating will help us to better serve our clients by meeting their needs before the crisis makes them homeless. The approach must be a community based approach. Just ten communities in NYC account for the majority of homelessness. They are communities with high incidences of poverty and a great shortage of affordable housing. They are also communities that disproportionately seek shelter in response to their need. We need to understand how we can intervene to prevent their homelessness and maintain safe, affordable housing.

This change will take time, but my desire is to see the same decline in the number of new applicants to shelter as we have seen in increases from shelter to permanent housing.

For the short term, I do expect to see further growth in the shelter system this summer. As you are familiar, the summer months are the months of greatest demand for family shelter. We will see 2,500

new applications each month over the summer, compared to 1,900 a month this spring. While the numbers of my clients who are leaving shelter for permanent housing are making room in shelter for new applicants, it is not enough to meet the demand. As a result we are planning to open 600 new units of family shelter in the next two months to be prepared to meet this summer surge.

I have expressed the following goals in opening new facilities: I prefer Tier II over hotel capacity, as well as buildings that are not in current residential use and that are close to communities in need of shelter services. I have also made it clear that a distribution among communities must be achieved, so no one community disproportionately bears the burden of new shelter facility openings.

The capacity we are bringing on will be Tier II family shelters with contracts with the City. They will be run by existing community-based providers familiar with the communities being served and the needs. It will be in buildings and units whose prior use was not for housing. And the renovation in preparation for shelter is bringing these vacant properties back into use.

The facilities are also in communities with great demand for shelter services. As we bring on capacity to meet demand, DHS reviews facilities brought to our attention by providers. We do not accept every facility suggested. But we are extremely limited in our ability to do this for the primary reason that we must satisfy the core mission of the agency: to ensure a bed to every person who requests one on the day of their request.

I understand the challenge presented in communities where new shelters are opening. There is a great deal of fear of the unknown that we routinely see. As a result, DHS works in advance of shelter openings, through our providers, to reach out to local elected officials and community boards, to prepare for shelter opening. We meet with communities whenever they request, and meet on an ongoing basis with community boards while shelters are in operation. Shelters have community advisory boards that meet frequently to inform communities of shelter activities and respond to any concerns that may arise. We will continue keeping these lines of communication open moving forward.

As has been the case every year for the past ten years, DHS will continue to meet the daily demand and ensure safe and appropriate shelter for every person in need. If we continue to do that and only that, however, the homeless population will continue to grow. We need to make time in our days and on our agendas to implement aggressive prevention and permanency strategies. We need to say that it is our job to solve homelessness, not just to serve it.