



# UNITING FOR SOLUTIONS BEYOND SHELTER: THE ACTION PLAN FOR NEW YORK CITY

## INTRODUCTION

The City of New York has created the most comprehensive and extensive shelter services system in the world.

In the last decade, approximately 4.6 billion dollars have been spent building and maintaining a network of emergency shelters and an astounding 416,720 individuals, including 163,438 children, have received shelter services during this time. New Yorkers can take pride in the compassion and generosity that has come to characterize the city's response to those in need.

But as vast resources and energy have been focused on creating and maintaining this extensive shelter network, the discussion around how best to address homelessness has become a discussion about the provision of shelter, rather than long-term solutions.

As a result of these factors and a persistent and significant affordable housing crisis, the number of people in shelter continues to exist at extremely high levels. The average daily census in the shelter system for the first nine months of fiscal year 2004 hovered around 38,200 individuals, including 16,100 children. Several thousand additional men and women remain on city streets.

Highlighting the need for a new response to homelessness are the following observations, made by public officials, homeless services providers, and business and nonprofit leaders.

- Street homelessness should not be accepted as a fact of city life. Today it is.
- Children should not grow up in homeless shelters. Today they do.
- Incentives should not encourage or needlessly prolong dependence on shelters. Today they do just that.
- Direct discharges of clients from other service systems into shelters represent failures of public agencies. Today, discharges to shelter occur frequently.
- Long-term shelter stays represent a failure of the system and a negative outcome for those in shelter. Today this is commonplace.
- Tax dollars earmarked for homelessness should support solutions like prevention, rental assistance, and supportive housing. Today they mainly support shelters.
- No single public agency – indeed, not even a single sector – can by itself overcome the complex issue of chronic homelessness.

Today, the city's first line of response to nearly any type of housing instability – i.e., potential eviction, household tension, medical emergency, or falling behind on rent – is shelter. Despite the fact that the shelter system was designed specifically to protect people from the streets, shelter has become the de facto, institutionalized response to wide-ranging needs – many of which could be better addressed with nuanced and more flexible interventions that help people stabilize housing, retain community ties, or transition successfully from institutional or custodial settings to community housing.

Ensuring access to shelter to those in need remains a core value. A “shelter first” response to any and every need or housing crisis, however, will continue to drive up costs and shelter usage, while diverting attention away from prevention, supportive housing, and other community-based interventions that solve homelessness.

## TAKING ACTION

In November 2003, Mayor Bloomberg convened an unprecedented group of public, private, and nonprofit leaders to develop a 10-year, multi-sector strategy to address these concerns and strengthen the city's response. A 41-member coordinating committee, as well as hundreds of task force participants and experts convened from November 2003 through April 2004 to produce a nine-point strategy. That strategy aims to:

1. Overcome street homelessness
2. Prevent homelessness
3. Coordinate discharge planning
4. Coordinate city services and benefits
5. Minimize disruptions to families whose homelessness cannot be prevented
6. Minimize duration of homelessness
7. Shift resources into preferred solutions
8. Provide resources for vulnerable populations to access and afford housing
9. Measure progress, evaluate success, and invest in continuous improvement

In ways large and small, these strategies will reshape the city's approach to assisting at-risk and homeless New Yorkers. Collectively they will:

- Create a roadmap that invests new money and redirects existing resources from shelters to expanded community-based prevention programs and other housing solutions.

- Raise the level of public awareness and community involvement to challenge a collective acceptance of homelessness both on the streets and in shelter.
- Bring public agencies together in a coordinated campaign to maximize available government assistance to those in need and to reduce institution-to-institution discharges that result in homelessness.
- Reverse the trend in which families and individuals who become homeless remain homeless for excessively long periods of time, with a particular emphasis on preventing chronic homelessness in shelters and on the streets.
- Ensure access to shelter for those in need, while affirming the responsibilities of those receiving services to move toward self-sufficiency.

Achieving reforms of this magnitude will require different spending priorities, policies, and programs. *Uniting for Solutions Beyond Shelter* includes the principles, concepts, and policy directions that will guide the city over the next decade.

## NEXT STEPS

Following the release of this plan, a full implementation strategy will be developed within 60 days. This will identify responsible authorities for each task, as well as a work plan with timeframes. The strategy will include targets and milestones, which will gauge progress in achieving the following key indicators:

- Decrease in the number of individuals living on the streets and in other public spaces
- Increase in the number of people leaving shelter to stable housing
- Increase in the supply of affordable, service-enriched and supportive housing
- Decrease in the number of applications for shelter
- Decrease in the length of stay in shelter
- Decrease in the total number of people in shelter

*Uniting for Solutions Beyond Shelter* represents the potential to deliver improved outcomes to those at risk of homelessness, as well as those already homeless in New York City. By incorporating the best thinking and contributions of the public, private, and nonprofit communities, the potential for a true citywide campaign to effectively reduce homelessness and better meet the needs of those at risk becomes possible.

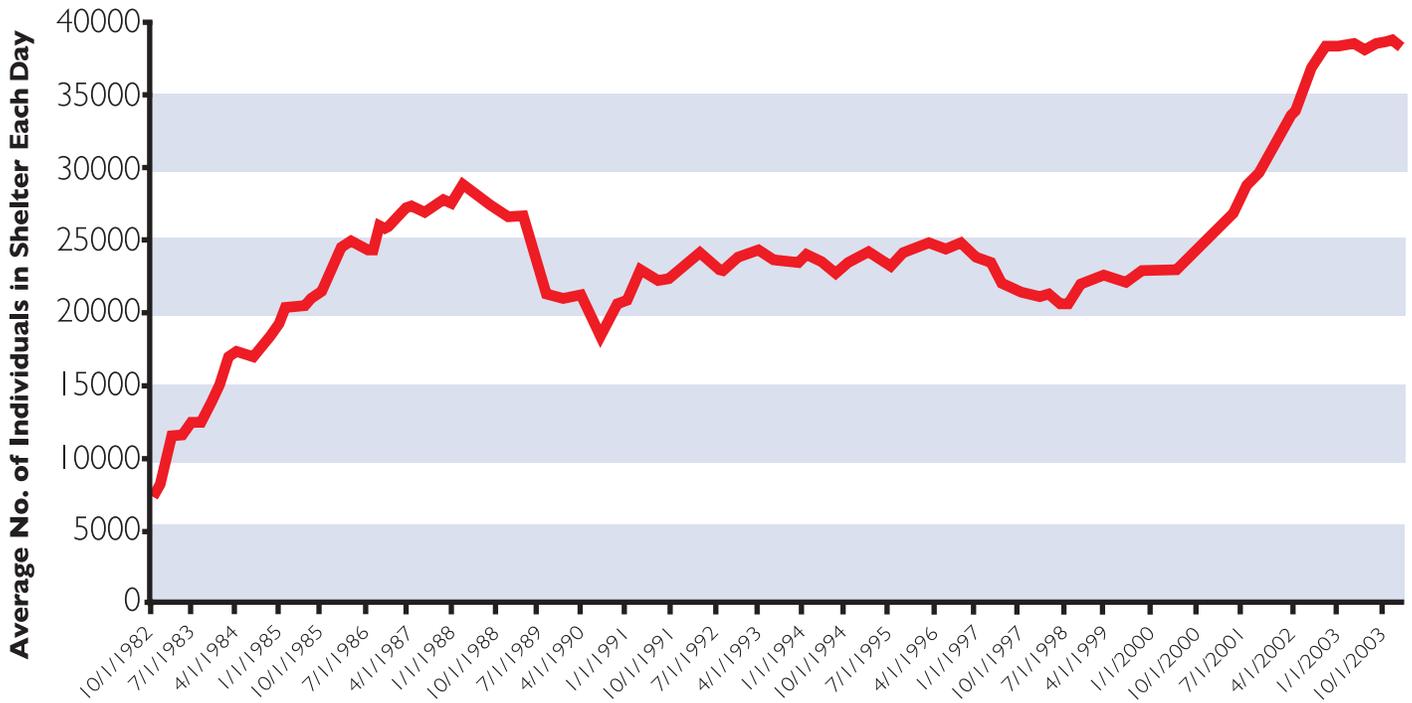
## ON ENDING CHRONIC HOMELESSNESS

The national conversation is shifting from “managing” to “ending” homelessness, especially chronic homelessness. New York City embraces the goal of ending chronic homelessness in 10 years. At the same time, the way in which New York City experiences homelessness is different from other jurisdictions. The scope of *Uniting for Solutions Beyond Shelter*, therefore, must also be different. Broader commitments to preventing and diverting homelessness and rapidly re-housing those who do become homeless will do much to overcome the mass urban homelessness now experienced in New York City.

For the purpose of measuring progress toward ending chronic homelessness, the following definition will be used:

- A chronically homeless individual is any currently homeless individual (including single adults and individuals in adult couples) who is disabled and has been homeless for at least 365 days of the last 2 years, not necessarily consecutive; or any currently homeless individual who has been homeless for 730 days of the last 4 years, not necessarily consecutive.
- A chronically homeless family is a currently homeless family that has been homeless for at least 365 days of the last 2 years, not necessarily consecutive.

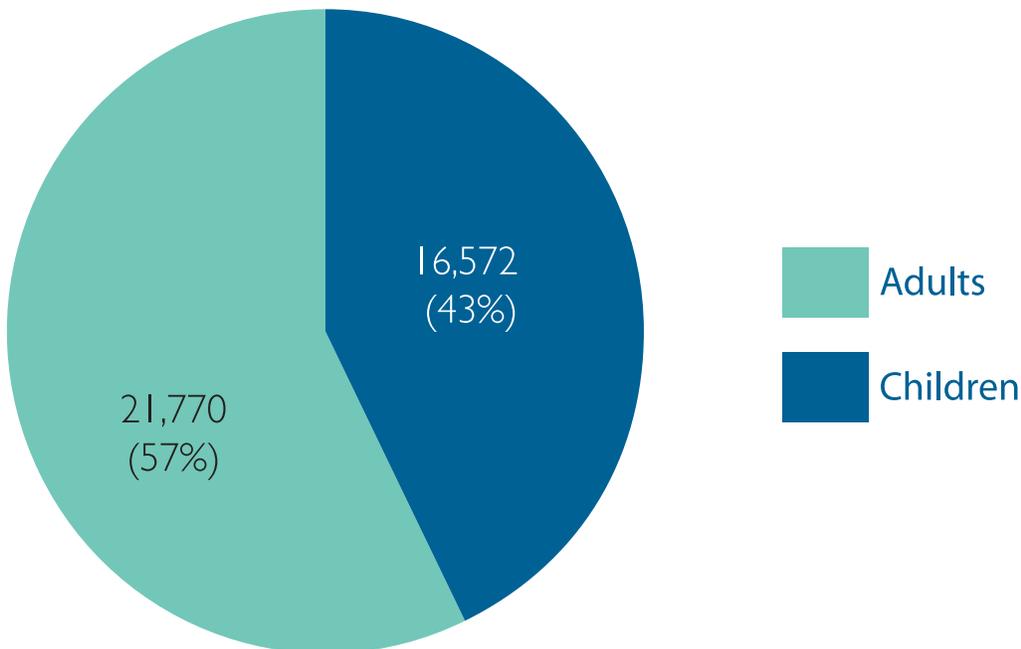
# Individuals in DHS Homeless Shelters



The average number of individuals in shelter has increased dramatically over the past 20 years.

Source: DHS Administrative Data

## Children in Homeless Shelters (7/2003 - 4/2004)



The percent of children as a portion of all individuals in shelter has grown over the years. Daily, an average of 43% of all individuals in shelter are children.

Source: DHS Administrative Data