

Accessibility Progress Report 2024-2025

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General

About the Department of Social Services

The Department of Social Services (DSS), which is comprised of the administrative units of the NYC Human Resources Administration (HRA) and the Department of Homeless Services (DHS), serves millions of New Yorkers annually through a broad range of services that aim to address poverty, income inequality, and prevent homelessness. Through integrated

management for HRA and DHS, client services can be provided more seamlessly and effectively. The city leverages shared service functions across agencies, which results in better day-to-day management and facilitates an integrated mission across agencies.

<https://www.nyc.gov/site/hra/about/about-hra.page>

About the Department of Homeless Services

The Department of Homeless Services oversees a broad network of shelters, services, and outreach programs dedicated to helping New Yorkers experiencing homelessness get back on their feet. DHS is comprised of nearly 2,000 employees, and with an annual operating budget of over \$3 billion and is the largest organization of its kind committed to preventing and addressing homelessness in New York City. As it engages in this mission, DHS uses a variety of innovative, trauma-informed and person-centered strategies to support families and individuals on their path toward stability and self-sufficiency.

Collaborating with other public agencies and nonprofit partners, DHS works to prevent homelessness before it occurs, reduce unsheltered homelessness, and assist New Yorkers in transitioning from shelter to permanent, sustainable housing. Furthermore, DHS remains committed to meeting its legal mandate to provide temporary housing assistance benefits and emergency shelter to those experiencing homelessness in a safe and respectful environment.

Within shelter, staff work alongside clients to identify goals, connect them to employment opportunities/work supports and other public benefits all while laying the groundwork for long-term stability and well-being.

Since the publication of our 5-Year Accessibility Plan at the beginning of 2024, DHS/DSS is proud to have taken significant steps towards achieving the goals of the plan and improving accessibility for our clients and staff.

These steps include:

- Opening 8 new fully accessible shelter sites;
- Initiating a U.S. Dept. of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) grant-funded program for complex care coordination;

- The development of a communication tool (“Communicard”) for shelter clients who use sign language to communicate.
- The hiring of a Director of Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities Complex Needs Initiatives through a generous two-year grant from The Taft Foundation in collaboration with AHRC NYC, who will support people with intellectual and developmental disabilities in HRA and DHS shelters.

The full list of our achievements is detailed in the progress update below.

Statement of Commitment

Local Law 12 of 2023 requires every New York City agency to develop and implement a five-year accessibility plan, in consultation with the Mayor’s Office for People with Disabilities (MOPD). The legislation mandates that the accessibility plans outline the steps agencies are taking to “ensure that the agency’s workplace, services, programs and activities are accessible to and accommodating and inclusive of persons with disabilities” by improving physical, digital, and programmatic access, and providing effective communications for persons with disabilities.

NYC DSS (HRA & DHS) is fully committed to an inclusive and equitable environment for people with disabilities, whether they be our clients or our workforce.

Disability Service Facilitator and Other Key Accessibility Information

Per Local Law 27 of 2016, each City Agency must designate a Disability Service Facilitator (DSF). The designated DSF for DSS/HRA/DHS is in the DSS Office of Disability Affairs as part of the Office of Advocacy. This Office is also responsible for preparing and updating this 5-Year Accessibility Plan. Information on filing grievances regarding claims of discrimination based on disability as well as the Agency’s website accessibility statement are located on the webpage indicated below. The DSF contact information is as follows:

Office of Disability Affairs (ODA)

Will Weatherly

Director of Disability Affairs for Homeless Services/
Disability Service Facilitator
Department of Homeless Services
150 Greenwich Street – 35th Floor
New York, NY 10007
Fax: 917-639-0442
Email: disabilityaffairs@dss.nyc.gov

Feedback Process

DSS Office of Disability Affairs welcomes feedback on the accessibility of its programs and services. If you wish to provide feedback, please email Will Weatherly, Disability Service Facilitator (DSF) at disabilityaffairs@dss.nyc.gov.

Progress Report

The below updates reflect steps DSS/DHS has taken from 1/1/24 – 5/1/25 to address action items that were identified in the Agency’s initial 5-year plan, as well as items we expect to accomplish from 5/1/25 – 5/1/26. For a comprehensive list of action items that the Agency identified for improving accessibility, the full 5-year accessibility plan may be viewed [here](#).

Physical Access

As of May 2025:

- 8 fully accessible shelter sites were opened. DHS is actively monitoring construction of 20 additional sites.
- Construction of a new accessible single adult women’s intake facility in Brooklyn is progressing, and DHS is conducting ongoing accessibility monitoring of the project.

By May 2026:

- Of the 20 sites for which DHS is actively conducting construction monitoring, DHS anticipates 12 new sites to be opened in the 5/1/25-5/1/26 timeframe.

- DHS currently anticipates the new accessible single adult women's intake facility in Brooklyn to open in late 2025 to early 2026.

Digital Access

As of May 2025:

- An inventory of webpages that need audio descriptions added to videos is underway; the recently onboarded Digital Communications Specialist in the DSS Office of Communications and Marketing (OCM) is leading this effort.
 - Concurrently, the Office of Technology and Innovation (OTI) has announced a planned web migration for nyc.gov scheduled for the summer. We are currently assessing the project scope of this migration to determine if the implementation of the inventory can be integrated into our workflow simultaneously.
- Preliminary vendor outreach is underway to assess the feasibility of integrating built-in audio descriptions and American Sign Language (ASL) into future video content, aligning with Agency-wide interest.

By May 2026:

- Following the completion of the nyc.gov web migration, OCM will be better positioned to assess the optimal structure for a plan, workflow, and timeline to address the development of a policy and guidelines for program areas on creating accessible digital content, including accessible documents and appropriate image alt text implementation. Subsequent training on this policy will be offered by OCM and the Office of Disability Affairs (ODA) as needed.

Programmatic Access

As of May 2025:

- DHS has drafted the procedure for scheduled and unscheduled visits conducted by the Director of Disability Affairs for Homeless Services, per the 2017 *Butler v. City of New York* Stipulation of Settlement.
- The DSS Health Services Office (HSO) initiated a HUD grant-funded program to provide complex care coordination to clients who are experiencing street homelessness or are in the DHS shelter system and who meet the HUD definition of homelessness. Recruitment and planning for the program began in 2024 and the program was launched in 2025. 21 clients were enrolled and served in the first quarter of 2025.
- DSS HSO also developed an Enhanced Services program, in which mobile health services are provided onsite at select shelters; additional shelters will be added on an ongoing basis.
- DSS HSO implemented a service for children's access to mental health care via telehealth. All children and families have access to telehealth for mental health services through H+H ExpressCare and TeenSpace.
- DSS HSO has made suicide prevention training available online on-demand, as well as live monthly sessions for all shelter staff through a partnership with the American Foundation for Suicide Prevention (AFSP). As of 5/1/25, 123 HSO, DHS Programs, and Families with Children staff took instructor-led virtual trainings, and 3,255 DHS and provider staff have completed the on-demand virtual training.
- The DHS Street Homeless Solutions (SHS) division has significantly increased the number of nurses in their division to help street homeless clients with significant clinical needs with their substance use, mental health, and medical needs.
- The Office of Supportive/Affordable Housing & Services (OSAHS) added filters to the Coordinated Assessment and Placement System (CAPS) so that if an applicant indicates that they have a vision or hearing disability on the 2010e, they can be identified for the NYC

Housing Preservation and Development (HPD) set-aside units for people with sensory disabilities.

- ODA has continued to host an Annual ADA Celebration Event. This year's theme was *Demystifying Special Education: Guidance for DSS/HRA/DHS and Provider Agency Staff*.
- This past year, ODA issued the *Disability Digest* Newsletter for client-facing Agency and Provider staff with topics ranging from housing for people with disabilities; special education resources; resources for people who are blind or low vision; epilepsy/seizure disorders; dementia/Alzheimer's disease; and sickle cell disease.
- ODA continued to host regular Lunch & Learns for Agency and provider staff. Topics included: *Untangling SSI and SSDI; Sensory Integration; Skip the Trip: Using ACCESS HRA to Help Clients Access Benefits Remotely; An Overview of Adult Protective Services (APS); Substance Use Supports: Recovery and Harm Reduction Resources at DSS-HRA-DHS; and All About Access-a-Ride!*.
- Through a generous two-year grant from The Taft Foundation in collaboration with AHRC NYC, ODA now has a Director of Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities Complex Needs Initiatives embedded in the team, working collaboratively with DSS's Health Services Office to support people with I/DD in DHS and HRA shelters.
- Due to that initiative, ODA also launched a Lunch & Learn Series on Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities, hosting the following events:
 - *Unlocking Opportunities: Navigating the Service System for Children with Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities*
 - *Unlocking Opportunities: Navigating the Service System for Adults with Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities*
 - *"When They Lose It, You Don't Have To": Understanding Behavior as Communication—and Responding Effectively*

By May 2026:

- The Director of Disability Affairs for Homeless Services will begin conducting scheduled and unscheduled in-person site visits to shelters across the DHS system serving a variety of populations.
- DSS HSO will continue to roll out the Enhanced Services program for mobile health services to additional sites across the DHS system and anticipates serving approximately 500 clients by May 2026.

Effective Communication

As of May 2025:

- DSS has developed a communication tool (a “Communicard”) that will be used by shelter clients who communicate using sign language. Shelter clients will be able to use the card by pointing to images and simple phrases to indicate basic needs in the following categories: Household, Toiletries, Maintenance, Food, Office, Health, and Requests. The card includes a pain scale, numbers and letters in ASL and a QR Code that will link to a video explaining how to use the card as well as downloadable versions of the card in different languages. Individuals who use sign language to communicate will be provided the card at intake. This card does not replace ASL interpretation. Rather, it will enable shelter clients to make urgent requests quickly, including but not limited to a request for an interpreter.

This card has been through several iterations as we have conducted focus groups with people who are deaf who use sign language for communication— many with shelter experience — as well as with professionals who are deaf. We will conduct a soft launch of the card this summer.

- In the past year, DSS continued to collaborate with the Mayor’s Office for People with Disabilities (MOPD) in offering DSS/HRA/DHS and provider agency staff with 5-week, hour-long ASL mini-courses for four different cohorts. Students continue to be selected based on the value of the course to their day-to-day work and their ability to commit

to the program. The courses have been very well-received and popular, with a waiting list of several hundred staff.

- DHS has released updated signage regarding effective communication to all DHS and provider sites, replacing a previous version. The new signage includes improved plain language and provides all DHS clients with information about their right to communication assistance – including access to sign language interpretation, help with reading forms, and other communication aides.

By May 2026:

- DSS will seek funding for an additional staff member who can take videophone calls at ASL Direct.
- The Communicard will be provided to clients who use sign language to communicate at all DHS shelter intake locations and available at DHS, DV and HASA shelters.
- DSS will continue to offer ASL mini-courses to DSS and provider agency staff in collaboration with MOPD.
- DSS will seek funding for a Digital Inclusion Officer.

Workplace Inclusion

As of May 2025:

- In June 2025, the DSS EEO and ITS departments finalized a new system to fast-track and prioritize access to equipment and technology to improve access to RAs for DSS staff.
- DSS ITS has begun upgrading Visual Studio, which has programmer accessibility tools, to ensure digital accessibility of new and modified

systems developed or supported by ITS to meet accessibility requirements for digital content.

- The Partnership for Inclusive Internships (PII), a program initiated with grant funding between NYC DSS and AHRC NYC continues to grow citywide with current oversight and funding through NYC Talent. DSS continues to be an active partner, both in hosting and in subsequently hiring interns.
- DSS provided the *Creating a Mentally Healthy and Disability-Friendly Workplace* training twice in the past year through our Leadership Development Institute.
- DSS' Human Resources Solutions (HRS) and Office of Equity & Inclusion (OEI) are in the process of working on a Recruitment Plan that will include:
 - Engagement with MOPD regarding job fairs for people with disabilities and posting positions on the NYC: ATWORK job boards.
 - Updates to diversity recruitment resources to include disability access.
 - Updates to the interview and candidate confirmation letters and emails to include information on requesting reasonable accommodations.
 - A reference tool for hiring managers and new hires regarding arranging accommodations for an interview.
- DSS' OEI has conducted outreach regarding staff participation in a Disability Employee Resource Group (ERG) and has identified candidates who would like to participate.
- OEI added the phrase "*If you need a reasonable accommodation to attend this event, please email equity@dss.nyc.gov by (date)*" to communications about Agency events/activities. Accessibility symbols are included, as appropriate.

By May 2026:

- DSS ITS will continue the process of upgrading Visual Studio to meet accessibility requirements for digital content for our employees.
- The DSS ITS QA Testing Group will continue to seek funding for 1-2 full-time digital accessibility staff to enhance QA testing prior to production deployment.
- DSS ITS will work with ODA to identify digital accessibility training platforms for current IT staff in addition to those provided by MOPD.
- DSS will explore more opportunities to provide the *Creating a Mentally Healthy and Disability-Friendly Workplace* training to a broader range of supervisory staff.
- DSS' HRS and OEI Offices will complete and publish a Recruitment Plan that will include the previously mentioned items related to accessibility.
- By the close of summer 2025, the Absorb (training scheduling and management system) notice to staff will be revised to ask, "Do you need a reasonable accommodation to attend this training?" with details regarding how to request an RA with a deadline.
- DSS' OEI will launch the Disability Employee Resource Group (ERG).

Consultations and Feedback

Following the 2017 *Butler v. City of New York 15-CV-3783* settlement, DHS underwent a comprehensive review and overhaul of its accommodation systems for people with disabilities living in shelters. This led to robust procedures that ensure meaningful access and equity. The Office of Disability Affairs has continued its commitment to accessibility through consultations and feedback.

To further enhance accessibility, ODA actively engages in the following:

Shelter Accessibility Advisory Panel: Although the NYC Council Local Law 23 requires the panel to meet quarterly, this group convenes monthly to ensure consistent progress and communication.

MOPD Community Updates: The ODA Executive Director also provides updates at Mayor's Office for People with Disabilities (MOPD) quarterly meetings with the disability community.

Review of Complaints: Besides the cases and complaints that ODA receives directly, ODA regularly reviews complaints and issues related to disability that are received by Office of Constituent Services (OCS). ODA responds to trends identified through these reviews, leading to remediation of access concerns, development of policies/procedures and edits to or additional training. These reviews informed the development of this Plan.

Monthly Lunch & Learns: The Office of Disability Affairs offers informative sessions designed to educate staff and stakeholders about disability-related topics, ensuring continuous learning and growth.

Monthly *Disability Digest*: The Office of Disability Affairs sends out a dedicated resource for sharing updates, research, and best practices in accessibility and disability services with DSS/HRA/DHS.

Collaboration with internal and external stakeholders: This includes regular meetings with advocacy organizations serving clients with disabilities in shelter and people experiencing unsheltered homelessness, other City and State agencies, and correspondence from the community, Agency staff, and providers received through our office's publicly available email inbox, disabilityaffairs@dss.nyc.gov.

Conclusion

DSS/DHS is committed to ongoing support for initiatives that ensure accessibility and inclusion of people with disabilities in shelter in 2025-2026 and beyond.