



**Department of
Social Services**

Human Resources
Administration

Department of
Homeless Services

March 25, 2021

Re: Turning the Tide on Homelessness

Steven Banks
Commissioner

150 Greenwich Street
New York, NY 10007

929 221 7315

Dear Congressman,

Just over four years ago, the Mayor announced “[Turning the Tide on Homelessness in New York City](#),” our comprehensive plan for addressing the challenge of homelessness, which has built up over four decades and affects every community across the five boroughs. The plan’s guiding principle is community and people first: preventing homelessness whenever we can, providing permanent housing, addressing street homelessness, and giving New Yorkers experiencing homelessness, who come from every community across the five boroughs, the opportunity to be sheltered in their home boroughs. Among other actions, we are phasing out the stop-gap quick-fixes of prior administrations, including the 21-year-old cluster program and the use of commercial hotels, which dates back on and off to the 1960s, and replacing them with a smaller number of high-quality borough-based shelters nearer to the anchors of life for New Yorkers experiencing homelessness like schools, jobs, healthcare, houses of worship, and family support networks.

We are writing today to provide you with our annual update and request for help.

Even amidst the upheaval of the unprecedented COVID-19 pandemic, in the fourth year of Turning the Tide, our strategies have continued to show real, measurable progress in the right direction, undoing 40 years of policy failures and helping tens of thousands of New Yorkers experiencing homelessness get back on their feet. As a result, after first breaking the multi-decade trajectory of growth in the Department of Homeless Services shelter census and holding it flat for several years, we have driven the DHS census down from a high-point of over 61,000 to less than 52,000, with the number of children and adults in families experiencing homelessness now below 2012 levels. A [recent report from the Independent Budget Office \(IBO\)](#) confirms that over the past 12 months, the City has seen a decrease in families residing in shelters, largely attributed by the de Blasio Administration to the ramp up in spending on rental assistance — in addition to our prevention-first strategies like providing lawyers to tenants facing eviction and paying rent arrears.

We also continue to make significant progress in meeting our goals to transform the approach to shelter, reforming the haphazard shelter system that we inherited and raising the bar for all those who we serve, including by closing sub-par shelter locations that the City has relied on for too long and opening a smaller number of new, high-quality sites citywide. Throughout this effort, we’re focused on ensuring

shelters are equitably distributed so as to meet the need, which means ensuring there is sufficient shelter capacity within communities to offer New Yorkers who may fall on hard times and experience homelessness the chance to get back on their feet in those communities, closer to their support networks.

To that end, since 2017, we've closed more than 200 shelter locations that did not meet our standards and sited a smaller number of borough-based shelters across all five boroughs, thereby shrinking the ongoing DHS shelter footprint by just over 30 percent. As the Mayor has said, homelessness doesn't adhere to arbitrary geographic or political boundaries, so we know New Yorkers can and do experience homelessness in every community across the five boroughs. That's why we need every community to come together to address homelessness. Today, we're proud to report that *we have identified and sited shelters in every single Community District in New York City, except for one, and anticipate siting a shelter there in the coming weeks. As a result, we will meet our commitment to site shelters in every community across NYC.*

Just four years into the transformation of the City's approach to addressing homelessness that dates back to the 1980s, we know there is much more work to be done, but we're proud of how far we've come. For your information, here is a status report on progress on all four key pillars of our multi-year transformation plan, as we continue to redouble our efforts and build on what we have achieved for New Yorkers in need so far:

1. **Prevention:** Aggressively expanded free legal assistance for New Yorkers in danger of illegal eviction, increasing funding for legal services for tenants from roughly \$6 million to \$166 million in FY22, the final year of the phase-in of the City's first-in-the-nation right-to-counsel in eviction cases program. As a result, pre-pandemic, while evictions were up all across the country, evictions in New York City dropped by 41% and thousands of New Yorkers were able to stay in their homes from 2014 thru 2019. And amid the unprecedented COVID-19 pandemic, our right-to-counsel initiative has continued to be a vital tool for protecting New Yorkers during this crisis and helping them keep their homes. Since the outset of the pandemic, we have worked closely with our dedicated legal services provider partners on a range of immediate, comprehensive steps to ensure New Yorkers can access this vital resource, including: advocating for and securing state-wide protections from eviction; conducting proactive outreach to tenants to provide up-to-date information on available resources and changes to the legal landscape around evictions; launching an online tenant portal in partnership with other City agencies and standing up a dedicated hotline to connect tenants with the services they may need; and establishing protocols for ensuring unrepresented tenants on the cusp of eviction or facing other emergencies can access free legal representation, while also arranging for representation for thousands of tenants in pre-pandemic eviction cases.
2. **Rehousing:** Helped more than 160,000 children and adults remain in or secure permanent housing, through our Department of Social Services rehousing programs, with the vast majority moving out of shelter into housing. And additionally, since 2014, we have helped nearly 12,000 New Yorkers transition out of shelter to permanency via supportive housing placements.

3. **Transforming the approach to providing shelter that has built up over 40 years:** Under our Turning the Tide plan, we've closed more than 200 shelter sites that did not meet our standards (down from the 647 sites reported in the plan) and, as mentioned above, sited new high-quality, borough-based shelters, shrinking the DHS shelter footprint by more than 30% —well on our way towards our goal of shrinking the footprint by 45 percent overall. Specifically, since January 2016, when the City was using a high-point of approximately 3,650 cluster units and first announced our initiative to end the cluster site program, the Department of Homeless Services has reduced the citywide use of cluster apartments to shelter families by more than 75 percent using multiple strategies, including through outright closure, transition to alternative uses, and conversion to permanent affordable housing – and we're confident we will meet our goal of phasing out the remaining units this calendar year. And we've also been phasing out the use of commercial hotels as shelter for families with children. At the same time, as discussed above, we are on track to meet our goal of siting at least 90 high-quality, borough-based shelter across the five boroughs, offering New Yorkers in need the opportunity to get back on their feet nearer to the anchors of their lives, including siting these vital resources in every Community District in NYC.

4. **Addressing street homelessness:** Helped more than 4,000 New Yorkers off the streets who've remained off the streets and subways since the launch of HOME-STAT in 2016, the nation's most comprehensive street outreach program —while tripling to nearly 600 the number of dedicated outreach workers on the streets and subways 24/7 and more than quintupling the number of specialized beds dedicated to supporting individuals to come off the streets, from 600 in 2014 to more than 3,000 now, with more on the way. Last year alone, in the midst of the pandemic, we opened more than 1,200 such specialized beds, which enabled us to bring in more than 750 people from the subways who continue to remain inside.

As the shelter needs continue to evolve during and post-pandemic and we continue to phase out additional sub-par locations, we continue to welcome suggestions for potential shelter sites that we may need to meet the future demand consistent with our legal and moral obligations to serve New Yorkers who have a right to shelter from the elements. With homelessness impacting every single community in New York City, every neighborhood across New York City will continue to play a part in addressing this challenge.

To that end, in the four years since announcing the plan, we've said repeatedly—in public and private forums, in meetings, in conversations with communities and elected officials, and in the plan itself—that in order to truly implement our plan to leave the band-aids of the past behind, we need to open the type of high-quality facilities that our neighbors experiencing homelessness deserve as we phase out shelter sites that do not meet our standards. Our doors remain open: we remain committed to open, ongoing engagement, and we encourage all communities to join us at the table in this process.

As outlined in our plan and as demonstrated in the past four years, we continue to seek high-quality proposals from not-for-profit social service providers to operate borough-based transitional housing

facilities, which will help us ensure shelters are more equitably distributed across the five boroughs so as to meet ongoing and future community need, including in communities where there either: is not currently enough existing shelter capacity to support New Yorkers from the community who fall on hard times or where there may not be enough capacity to meet our legal and moral obligation to provide shelter once we close all clusters and commercial hotel locations. This borough-based approach seeks to ensure that those New Yorkers who may be experiencing homelessness are afforded the opportunity to get back on their feet as close as possible to their support networks and the communities they called home.

Every community has the opportunity to provide input in the site selection process by helping to identify viable locations that social service providers can propose to us through our updated Open-Ended Request For Proposals (OERFP). Quality proposals must reflect the borough-based approach and equitable siting goals that are central to our transformation plan.

We're heartened by communities that have responded with compassion to this call to action. And we are confident that, working together with communities across the city, we will make this the best experience it can be for New Yorkers in need as they get back on their feet.

A link to the Mayor's comprehensive "Turning the Tide" plan can be found here: nyc.gov/tide. We have also attached a Turning the Tide informational sheet and reference map for your information. Should you identify a location within your district you believe may be potentially suitable for transitional housing, please contact DHS First Deputy Commissioner Molly Park, at (212) 361-8579, or preferably at intergov@dss.nyc.gov, to provide the information we would need in order to evaluate this potential site further.

Thank you, as always, for your commitment to helping New Yorkers in need.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'S Banks', with a stylized flourish at the end.

Steven Banks
DSS Commissioner

Attachments:
Turning the Tide informational sheet
Turning the Tide reference map