Human Resources Administration
Department of Homeless Services
Department of Social Services

Testimony of Craig Retchless, Deputy Commissioner, Office of Supportive and Affordable Housing and Services, New York City Human Services Administration

Before the New York City Council Committee on Criminal Justice
Oversight - Examining Recommendations from the Independent Rikers Commission's Blueprint to Close Rikers
and
Introduction 1100

April 16, 2025

Good afternoon, Chair Nurse and members of the Committee on Criminal Justice. My name is Craig Retchless and I serve as Deputy Commissioner for the Office of Supportive and Affordable Housing and Services (OSAHS) within the Human Services Administration (HRA). Thank you for holding today's hearing on "Examining Recommendations from the Independent Rikers Commission's Blueprint to Close Rikers." Today, I will testify on Introduction 1100, which would expand supportive housing eligibility for justice involved persons.

Supportive Housing Overview

Supportive Housing provides permanent affordable housing for individuals and families who have experienced long-term homelessness or who are at risk of homelessness. Supportive housing provides a continuum of integrated services to assist vulnerable individuals and families transitioning from homelessness, especially those with severe mental illness and substance use disorders. Proven results show that supportive housing fosters greater stability, self-sufficiency, and overall improved health and mental health. Approximately, 94% of supportive housing units are occupied by long-term tenants.

The Office of Supportive and Affordable Housing and Services (OSAHS) is focused on developing permanent housing solutions for individuals and families who have experienced homelessness. OSAHS works closely with other divisions of HRA, partner agencies, and not-for-profit service providers to develop new housing programs and to refer applicants to housing so those we serve can achieve their maximum functional capacity in a safe supportive environment. OSAHS is the coordinating entity for New York City's 15/15 Supportive Housing initiative, working closely with the Department of Health and Mental Health (DOHMH) and Housing Preservation and Development (HPD).

Introduction 1100

As previously mentioned, Introduction 1100, would expand supportive housing eligibility for justice-involved persons. More specifically, the proposed legislation would require the Department of Social Services to include single adults or adult families and families with children where the head of household has a severe mental illness (SMI), substance use disorder (SUD), or both, is homeless or at risk of homelessness, and has had justice system involvement in the last 12 months to any eligibility parameters for any existing supportive housing program administered and wholly funded by the city, otherwise known as NYC 15/15.

The bill, as it is currently written, presents significant concerns. This overly broad criteria would create even more demand for limited available units essential to stabilizing homeless individuals on the streets or in shelter who meet the HUD chronic homeless definition and have limited options for housing security. NYC, through a government and community led stakeholder group, adopted the HUD definition to focus on the most vulnerable of the homeless population, as research suggests this targeting helps communities solve chronic homelessness. Many of the applicants for supportive housing from carceral settings are eligible under other supportive housing initiatives like NY NY I/II and SMI categories. Combined, there are over 16,000 units of SMI and NY NY I/II units that are developed in NYC and over 1700 units of these were available in FY 2024. Connecting eligible individuals to available units can be a challenge given the operational realities of incarceration and discharge. Discharge planning in correctional facilities often poses a real challenge for referral and placement as discharge dates are not known in a timely manner which could result in units remaining unoccupied for longer than necessary. Given the existing resources for this population, DSS feels advancing with this legislation as written will likely overwhelm the referral system and negatively impact those most in need of these supportive housing resources.

In an effort to address the housing challenges faced by individuals experiencing housing insecurity as well as stays in both the criminal justice and hospital systems, DSS recently issued an addendum to the NYC 15/15 RFP to expand supportive housing eligibility to single adults with jail or hospital stays who otherwise would not qualify under the HUD chronic homelessness requirement. The new criteria targets individuals with a history of two or more incarcerations or hospitalizations and 180 days of homelessness within the last four years. The new eligibility criteria will take effect on May 5th, 2025.

Conclusion

DSS/HRA/DHS will continue to work with stakeholders to improve the mechanisms for referral and placement for those SMI/SUD individuals being discharged from jail to homelessness. Although we cannot support this bill in its current state, we look forward to working with the Council and the bill sponsor to address the agency's concerns. Thank you for the opportunity to testify today. We are happy to answer any questions you may have.