

**Testimony of Steven Banks, Commissioner
Department of Social Services**

**Before the New York City Council General Welfare and Mental Health, Disability and Addiction
Committees**

Shelter Accommodations and Services for those with Disabilities

September 20, 2018

Good afternoon. I would like to thank the City Council's General Welfare and Mental Health, Disability and Addiction Committees as well as Chairs Levin and Ayala for giving us this opportunity to testify today about the Department of Homeless Services' work to ensure all applicants and clients, including those with disabilities, have meaningful access to shelter. My name is Steven Banks and I am the Commissioner of the New York City Department of Social Services (DSS). In this capacity I oversee the Human Resources Administration (HRA) and the Department of Homeless Services (DHS). I am joined today by our DSS General Counsel, Martha Calhoun. And I am also joined by my colleagues from the Mayor's Office for People with Disabilities, Commissioner Victor Calise and Deputy Commissioner and General Counsel Kleo King.

We have worked together on numerous projects together including ensuring the kiosks in HRA service centers are accessible to individuals who have vision disabilities, those who have limited reach ranges, and those with hearing disabilities.

Operating since 1973, the Mayor's Office for People with Disabilities (MOPD) is the liaison between New York City government and the disability community. MOPD, with the assistance of the New York City Department of Information Technology & Telecommunications (DoITT), launched a Call Service Platform (named ASL Direct) to assist Deaf constituents in New York City. Callers who are Deaf and who communicate in American Sign Language (ASL) will be connected to a MOPD staff member who is fluent in ASL, facilitating direct communication without the need of an interpreter. A second ASL Direct platform is being created at HRA.

One of MOPD's principal functions is being a resource to the disability community and to its City Agency partners. Relevant to the focus of this hearing, HRA and DHS worked with MOPD on housing-related issues with 1,280 constituents from June 27, 2017 through September 12, 2018.

In this testimony, I will begin by providing an update on the Mayor's *Turning the Tide* plan to transform the City's approach to providing shelter and homeless services, particularly focusing on the way in which we are creating an accessible system as part of our reform of the haphazard system that developed over nearly four decades. I will then describe how this new approach incorporates two recent settlements of long-standing federal litigation about accessibility, *Lovely H and Butler*, and our work both within and beyond these settlements aimed at improving shelter accessibility for people with disabilities.

Progress in Context: Turning the Tide

As you know, last year Mayor de Blasio announced *Turning the Tide on Homelessness in New York City*, a new approach to addressing the challenges of homelessness that is grounded on four core pillars: preventing homelessness whenever we can; rehousing families and individuals so they can move out of shelter or avoid homelessness altogether; addressing street homelessness; and transforming the City's haphazard approach to providing shelter and services that has built up over the last four decades.

While we know we have more work to do, we are headed in the right direction and we can report the following measures of progress so far:

Though our prevention first initiatives, including increasing funding for tenant legal assistance from \$6 million in 2013 to \$93 million in FY19 as part of the implementation of the first in the nation initiative for universal access to counsel in eviction cases, we provided over 264,000 rent arrears grants from FY14 through FY18, helping an average of 53,000 households each year. Since 2013, evictions by City Marshals have decreased by 27% and more than 70,000 New Yorkers have remained in their homes.

Because of the DSS rental assistance and rehousing initiatives, from 2014 through July 2018, 97,479 children and adults have relocated from shelter to permanent housing or averted homelessness altogether, with most benefiting from our new programs by moving out of shelter.

By doubling the number of street homeless outreach workers across the five boroughs and in the subways and doubling and soon tripling the number of safe haven beds, with an increased investment from \$44.6 million in FY14 to \$97.7 million this year, we have brought in 1,815 individuals from the streets and subways since we launched HOME-STAT in 2016 and these individuals have continued to remain off the streets and subways in transitional programs or permanent housing.

We have eliminated use of more than 1,800 individual units in the Giuliani-era cluster program – half the units in this 18-year program – as part of our plan to phase out clusters completely.

In fact, over the past year, we have reduced the DHS shelter footprint by getting out of 179 shelter sites, going from the 647 buildings we reported in the *Turning the Tide* plan 18 months ago to our current use of 468 buildings – which is about 30% of our goal to get out of 360 shelter locations and thereby shrink the overall DHS shelter footprint by 45% as we implement our multi-year transformation plan.

And beginning last year, we have already sited 21 new high-quality, borough-based shelter facilities, with 15 already operating fully.

As we continue to phase out 360 shelter location and replace them with the smaller number of 90 new borough-based shelters, we are committed to siting shelters that increase and enhance the shelter system's ability to provide meaningful access to DHS shelter and services for applicants and clients with disabilities, as well as increase our capacity to place children and adults as close as possible to their anchors of life – schools, jobs, healthcare, houses of worship, and family.

And as we develop new purpose-built shelters, of which we anticipate to be 25 of the 90 shelters under *Turning the Tide*, as well as implement various capital improvements and design and construction projects in the shelter pipeline, which are required to be compliant with all applicable building codes, including requirements concerning accommodating people with disability challenges or other reasonable accommodation needs, the shelter system will further develop to meet the needs of clients with disabilities. Indeed, with a Capital budget of over \$300 million for shelter development and improvement, we are increasing the proportion of existing shelter units that are accessible for people with disabilities.

Both through the Agency's work on the *Butler* Settlement and in general, we are working to improve the client experience by updating intake processes to ensure they are comprehensive, understandable, and properly implemented. This includes addressing client inquiries, training, robust technology supports, and creating back-end quality assurance measures. At intake and assessment, DHS asks clients a series of questions regarding their physical and mental health, disabilities, and/or functional needs. Self-reported answers to these questions assist DHS in determining client placement and the answers are stored in DHS's system of record. In addition, DHS allows reasonable accommodation requests to be made at any time, not only at intake. The agency will be revising and updating these intake forms through the *Butler* process, including updates to its system of record, which will also include ensuring that shelter eligibility investigations take disabilities into account when looking at potential viable non-shelter housing options.

In the DHS system, families are placed in private rooms, with either private or shared bathrooms, and these units can accommodate home health aides and/or visiting nurse services, for persons in need of such services, such as those who cannot independently complete their Activities and Daily Living (ADL). Shelter for single adults, being congregate settings under State regulation, cannot provide space and services to meet these needs.

To more effectively respond to these New Yorkers who turn to DHS for help, DHS has an Institutional Referral Discharge Procedure, which applies when, for example, a health care facility discharges a patient to shelter. This procedure was recently revised and updated with comments from Health and Hospitals, the Greater New York Health Association, and hospitals around the city, as well the Coalition for the Homeless. Through this revised procedure, DHS created templates for discharging institutions to complete so that DHS can evaluate a patient's appropriateness for shelter in accordance with State regulation. If a person is not medically appropriate for shelter pursuant to State regulation, this procedure enables DHS to collaborate with the health care facility to identify other options for the facility's patient, including supportive housing, nursing homes, or permanent housing with rental assistance and medical supports.

However, the settlements in the *Lovely H.* and *Butler* cases exemplify the reforms we are putting in place to provide clients with disabilities with meaningful access to our services, after many years when there have been barriers to obtaining essential services. In recognition of the major reform efforts that are involved, federal district court judges approved both settlements with multi-year implementation plans and milestones.

Lovely H.

The *Lovely H.* case, brought against HRA in 2005, and settled by the de Blasio Administration in 2015, highlighted the problems persons with disabilities in need of public benefits experienced in obtaining and maintaining the benefits and services to which they were entitled, including reasonable accommodations (RA). DSS is committed to ensuring that people with disabilities get the help they need, and therefore we settled the case to make public benefits more accessible to people with disabilities. Pursuant to the milestones in the federal court approved settlement, we are improving our ability to screen clients in need of reasonable accommodation as the result of physical and/or mental health disabilities, as well as providing case management. For example, we have:

- Issued an agency-wide reasonable accommodation/modification policy.
- Created a reasonable accommodation request, review, determination, and appeals process.
- Assisted clients in obtaining clinical documentation to support their reasonable accommodation requests.
- Developed a Client Services Screen that informs staff of all active reasonable accommodations for clients.
- Sent clients pre- and post-appointment reminders to assist them in meeting program requirements.
- Created a direct contact number specifically to serve clients with homebound/home visit needed status.
- Formed a Disability Advisory Panel to share information with and gather expertise, input, and feedback from the disability community.
- Implemented a full day *Introduction to Disabilities* training that is mandatory for all employees.
- Developed and are implementing a Supervisory Training that supports front-line supervisors in their ability to oversee the implementation of reasonable accommodations at their sites.
- Trained staff and developed reasonable accommodation processing and notification services in HRA central call centers such as Infoline.
- Created an “Office Hours” partnership between HRA staff and Street Homeless outreach teams to expedite homebound status services to street homeless clients.
- Issued a plain language and clear design policy to create client notices that are easier to read for clients with cognitive or visual disabilities.
- Worked with Expert Consultants to develop a Disability Screening Tool currently being implemented at five sites throughout the City and in the process of being rolled out to all HRA Job Centers.

Many of the policies and practices implemented at HRA pursuant to the *Lovely H.* settlement also benefit DHS clients as well as DHS service delivery. The integration of DHS and HRA within the shared-services model of DSS allows offices, such as finance, communications, personnel, external affairs and training to serve both agencies and share best practices and experiences. As a result, practices such as improved communications mechanisms, materials for the people who are blind or low vision, and

training of staff working with clients who are deaf or hard of hearing, benefit the clients both agencies serve.

Butler Settlement

DHS has the legal and moral mandate to provide essential shelter on demand to all eligible families and individuals who need it, and on the same day on which they apply. This requires having a system that not only has sufficient capacity and vacancies to be able to appropriately assign persons within the system, but a system that also provides sufficient capacity to accommodate the varying needs of people with disabilities.

Last December, the City of New York reached a federal court settlement of multi-year litigation to enhance access to shelter and its attendant services for applicants and clients with disabilities. This settlement capped years of productive negotiations with the Legal Aid Society (LAS), class counsel for a not only a class of plaintiffs that includes all applicants for and clients of DHS shelter who have disabilities, but also institutional plaintiffs, including the Center for the Independence of the Disabled of New York and the Coalition for the Homeless. The settlement, including a multi-year reform plan, was signed by all parties and approved by a federal court judge in the Southern District of New York, Justice Sweet, after a public comment period. This settlement is monitored by the Legal Aid Society over a period of five years from its effective date, and, pursuant to the terms of the settlement, Legal Aid is able to review and comment on DHS deliverables, including new and revised procedures as well as an accessibility survey tool developed by DHS' expert consultant and proposed remediation plan(s). The communication structure outlined in the settlement provides an avenue through which advocates can provide input on the many ways in which DHS is improving its system to increase shelter access for people with disabilities. At a December 7, 2017 public fairness hearing, Judge Sweet approved the settlement reached between the Agency and Legal Aid Society.

The comprehensive settlement provides that the City of New York will:

- Enhance the DHS's practices to ensure all applicants and clients with disabilities are provided reasonable accommodations to ensure meaningful access to homeless shelters.
- Utilizing the services of an expert consultant, survey intake sites, assessment sites, and selected shelters to identify barriers to access and develop remediation plans to enhance accessible features in existing shelters.
- Modify existing procedures, as needed, to enforce best practices in line with legal standards regarding accessibility, and retrain staff consistent with the federal, state, and city disability rights and DHS's enhanced practices related to disability rights.
- Ensure that shelter evacuation plans recognize the particular needs of people with disabilities.
- Provide communication accommodations for individuals who have vision or hearing disabilities.
- Conduct a population analysis of the DHS system based on available data sets to determine the percentages and types of persons with disabilities seeking or using DHS shelter services.
- Overall, ensure that the Agency has sufficient accessible capacity to meet the needs of homeless applicants and clients with disabilities.

DSS has committed to these reforms in order to improve shelter accessibility for individuals with disabilities. Even before its effective date in December 2017, DHS began work pursuant to the settlement because we recognized the important opportunity to reform our Agency's practices and ensure all applicants and clients with disabilities have meaningful access to the homeless shelter system. Given the magnitude of the reform effort, the parties agreed to, and the federal court approved, a five-year implementation timeline with interim milestones.

One key benchmark we executed is contracting with an expert architectural consulting firm to develop a DHS shelter survey tool consistent with the Department of Justice guidelines and survey existing DHS shelters, including all intake and assessment sites and other shelters already classified as accessible, and provide training such that DHS teams can continue survey work of additional and new shelters, and develop remediation plans to increase accessible shelter capacity, including an Initial Remediation Plan by April 2019. For this expert and comprehensive analysis, in consultation with the Legal Aid Society, DHS contracted with Steven Winter Associates (SWA), an expert architectural and building systems consulting firm with expertise in accessible design and ADA guidelines and construction requirements of federal, state, and local laws. SWA has vast expertise in this area, exemplified by their ongoing work since 2004 with respect to a Consent Decree between the US Department of Justice and the Housing Authority of Baltimore City (HABC) through which SWA has conducted field inspections of thousands of dwelling units and created remediation plans to ensure HABC was in compliance with the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA). Their expertise working with plaintiffs, government agencies, and housing programs make them uniquely well-suited to assist DHS with its accessibility-based efforts. Moreover, the Department of Justice was one of the references we consulted regarding SWA before we hired them. And pursuant to the Settlement, the Legal Aid Society approved the City's hiring of SWA.

Under the Settlement and in accordance with the terms of the City's hiring SWA, the expert consultant will: survey existing intake and assessment sites as well as a stock of over 60 other shelters to assess accessibility at those shelters pursuant to the ADA Accessibility Guidelines and the Federal Department of Justice ADA Best Practices Toolkit; develop and implement a DHS facility survey tool, as well as attendant training for DHS staff to continue to survey shelters in its system as well as new shelters that are coming online; identify accessible features of facilities and individual units that can be added to DHS's Building Compliance System so as to make better and more accurate placements of clients with disabilities into appropriate shelter locations; and propose remediation of existing shelters to enhance and improve accessibility options for the DHS shelter system.

Our survey work with SWA involves conducting full-day, in-depth surveys at select DHS shelters that evaluate access to every public space in shelter, ranging from the shelter entrance to every common area, library, cafeteria, sleeping unit type, bathroom type, water fountain, and more. This analysis, combined with a population analysis, will provide deep insight into the current and anticipated characteristics of individuals with disabilities in shelter, along with the ways in which we can ameliorate barriers for them to access services. The initial analysis is expected to be completed in the spring of 2019, and we look forward to using the tools as a means to enhance our shelters in a manner that best serves individuals with disabilities. We are already using lessons learned in the early stages of the

architectural analysis to inform our efforts in siting new shelters and shrinking the shelter footprint through *Turning the Tide*.

Our success thus far in meeting this benchmark, as well as many others, is in large part due to the robust working group system we developed to enable staff across DSS/HRA and DHS to work together to implement the various components of the five-year plan. In this framework, staff members from more than 16 different program areas within our agencies collaborate to pool ideas and resources to maximize services for our clients. The working groups consist of teams of agency experts that focus on different components of the work to implement the *Butler* settlement's provisions. Importantly, these working groups are naturally interrelated and this structure enables each team to share ideas and implement changes that complement each aspect of the implementation plan. This dynamic and effective structure is a feature of the integration of DHS and HRA in which there are groups focused on policies, facilities, trainings, and, in this case, reasonable accommodation procedures.

With the *Butler* settlement, we are also expanding on our existing agency-wide goal to develop more enhanced reasonable accommodation processes for clients and applicants with disabilities. As I have testified previously, the DSS Office of Disability Affairs (ODA) ensures that the ability to request reasonable accommodations is readily available and simple, and that staff is properly trained on how to assist and expedite requests. The integrated working group framework to implement the *Butler* settlement has allowed DHS to draw from previous lessons learned from ODA's overall work and the work related to *Lovely H* and collaborate with staff representing adult shelters, family shelters, constituent services, customized assistance services, information technology services, and numerous other offices in our agencies to work out policies and procedures that will best implement reasonable accommodations across systems. A key component of this work is not only revising and retraining on processes and procedures, but also making the process more client-friendly and client-centric, and empowering staff to be able to grant these accommodations on site as much as possible. The DHS Director of Disability Affairs adds additional review and expertise in enhancing these efforts.

Finally, pursuant to the Settlement, to add more resources to this effort, DHS will be developing a team of Disability and Functional Need (DAFN) coordinators, who will work directly and on the ground with DHS clients and program staff at intake and assessment shelters, as well as program shelters, to triage issues pertaining to disabilities and reasonable accommodations, offer specific advice and knowhow, advocate for clients expressing accessibility-based needs, and focus on and identify areas for improvement and training.

In relation to the agreed-upon, five-year implementation timeline stipulated in the *Butler* settlement, which is overseen by the federal court and monitored by the Legal Aid Society, we are in line with the milestone time frame, or have, when needed, received a formal modification.

To date, we completed the following deliverables and milestones:

- As mentioned, we have hired an expert consultant firm SWA. Since that time, we have developed the DHS facility survey tool, which the Legal Aid Society approved, and have begun

surveying our intake and assessments sites. Our shelter survey selection criteria were also shared with the Legal Aid Society.

- We conducted an initial baseline population analysis which we expect to repeat periodically throughout the process, refining it as systems become more refined to track individual's specific requests and needs.
- We instituted an "informal relief mechanism" by which advocates, through LAS, can work with our agency's legal team to triage reasonable accommodation issues.
- A DHS Director of Disabilities Affairs was hired and, as indicated previously, a "DAFN" team is in the process of being hired.
- To ensure continuity of access to shelter and shelter-related services for our clients with disabilities who may be absent from shelter due to hospitalization or institutional placement, or clients entering shelter from such a facility, we developed and provided the Legal Aid Society with DHS's *Referral from Healthcare Facilities Policy* and a staff best practice guide.
- In addition to the reasonable accommodation work described above, we are revising our reasonable accommodations procedures and will be sharing drafts with Legal Aid Society in accordance with the settlement.
- Lastly, we are in negotiations with Legal Aid Society about the details of a monitoring protocol, which includes our progress implementing the settlement terms and performance and outcomes implementing our procedural and architectural changes.

As mentioned, DHS conducted an initial baseline population analysis, pursuant to the settlement, to determine the extent the shelter population may have a functional need and require some form of placement-related reasonable accommodation for a disability. This would include accommodations such as placements in accessible sites for people using wheelchairs, air conditioning, durable medical equipment, or auxiliary aids for communication, and placements in mental health shelters. The Legal Aid Society reviewed, commented upon, and helped improve the initial analysis, which is based on existing data in the DHS CARES system of record, as well as other systems including the Welfare Management System and SDX, and information from the US Census Bureau's American Community Survey, and will continue to be fine-tuned as we enhance our systems throughout the five-year plan to implement the *Butler* settlement and are able to collect more nuanced data. The initial analysis, which represents an analysis of November 2017 shelter residents, showed that 28% of households included one or more people who may have a condition requiring air conditioning; 28% included at least one person who may have a condition requiring specific appliances or medical equipment; and 18% of households included at least one person who may experience some form of mobility disability requiring accommodation, (for example, someone may require wheelchair-based accessibility options). Overall, 61% of households in the DHS shelter system included at least one person who may experience a disabling condition that may require a placement-related reasonable accommodation.

Although this initial analysis represents a specific point in time and the shelter population is not static, this extensive analysis it is still incredibly valuable in developing an initial level of understanding of people living in shelter and we are proceeding to build up our systems in accordance with this understanding. As we continue refining the analysis of the needs of the shelter population and turning

the tide on homelessness, we are prioritizing getting out of cluster sites, which overall tend to provide less access to features such as air conditioning and/or wheelchair accessibility than other types of shelter.

We are confident that the overarching aim of the *Butler* settlement, which is to provide reasonable accommodations, communicate effectively with clients with disabilities, and improve accessibility for people with disabilities who are homeless, will improve on our existing efforts to serve all New Yorkers who need our services.

Office of Disability Affairs

Our commitment to improving the lives of people with disabilities is embodied in our Office of Disability Affairs, which was established in 2015 and is housed in DSS to ensure that New Yorkers with disabilities have access to the full breadth of services that HRA and DHS provide. This Office ensures that the needs of persons with disabilities accessing or applying for HRA and DHS services are addressed. For example, we are doing so:

- By making available request forms for reasonable accommodations and accessible versions of frequently requested HRA information.
- Training public-facing employees on how to assist clients with disabilities.
- Addressing complaints from clients who feel they have been discriminated against or treated unfairly due to a disability.
- Working closely with disability advocates to collaboratively improve services.
- Reviewing and/or assisting with the development of policies and procedures related to serving people with disabilities.
- Providing technical assistance and support to DSS/HRA/DHS staff on serving people with disabilities.
- And hosting informative events, such as the all-day *Homeward Bound* event held last year dedicated to educating staff and DHS vendors about housing options for people with disabilities. This event, attended by 300 staff, including shelter provider staff, served as an opportunity for professionals who serve individuals with disabilities to listen to twelve speakers and presentations and learn about a variety of housing options specifically for people with disabilities such as Home Sharing, HPD Housing Connect Lotteries, Family-Type Homes for Adults, OPWDD-funded housing, Assisted Living Programs, Olmstead funding, Supportive Housing, and more.

To complement these efforts and to use as independent resources, ODA creates guides to help individuals navigate housing opportunities and to help staff learn best practices for serving clients with disabilities. For example, ODA put together a *Housing Reference Guide*, which is a guide of selected resources to help identify appropriate housing placements and subsidies available for people who are aging and/or have disabilities. This guide also includes addenda on Legal Services related to housing issues and a Home Modification Guide so that people with disabilities have the resources to either remain in homes or move into homes, once they are made accessible. The Office also created a *Desk*

Guide to Reasonable Accommodation Requests, which gives staff direction for how to process both informal and formal reasonable accommodation requests and a Desk *Guide to Working with Clients Who are Deaf or Hard-of-Hearing*.

ODA also has developed and conducts a variety of trainings for staff. ODA developed a mandatory full-day *Introduction to Disabilities* training for public-facing DSS and HRA staff that includes modules on history, legislation, disability etiquette and culture, and disability specific techniques that can better help the people we serve; and detailed instruction on the HRA reasonable accommodation process. Supervisors of Center-based staff are then required to take a Supplemental Training entitled: *Access for People with Disabilities – Ensuring Success Through Supervision*, which, as mentioned above, with input from the Mayor’s Office for People with Disabilities. In addition, this past summer, DHS and ODA rolled out the *DHS Auxiliary Aids and Services Training*—launched through iLearn, DHS’s new web-based training platform—to inform staff of strategies and procedures for serving clients who are deaf and hard of hearing.

Further, DSS has been fully committed to encouraging, and in some instances requiring, agency staff to take Mental Health First Aid Training, promoted by NYC DOHMH, which improves our ability to serve our clients with Mental Health conditions. Since 2016, 2,872 HRA staff and 451 DHS staff have been trained to be First Aiders.

The Office of Disability Affairs works to ensure the DHS and HRA internet sites have a page dedicated to providing access information to people with disabilities. The Office also works to ensure the respective agency Intranet sites have readily accessible reference materials for staff related to serving people with disabilities.

This Office includes a Director of Disability Affairs for Homeless Services. This person focuses specifically on supporting DHS and its applicants and clients with disabilities.

These are just some of the examples as to how DSS prioritizes the importance of ensuring clients with disabilities are well served and that needs are adequately addressed.

Transforming Shelter through New Investments and Partnerships

The City has made important progress transforming a haphazard system decades in the making by investing in historically underfunded not-for-profit service provider partners and facilities to ensure those partners are appropriately funded to deliver the services our homeless neighbors depend on as they get back on their feet; addressing conditions that have built up over many years; implementing the NYPD Management Team to oversee shelter security citywide; and raising the bar for services that we provide our homeless neighbors, moving away from a one-size-fits-all strategy towards a people- and community-based system that is response to families’ and individuals’ unique needs.

This includes:

- Addressing shelter conditions built up over decades through comprehensive repairs, renovation, and a new partnership with the NYPD to ensure a safe and secure environment for New Yorkers

in need as they get back on their feet. In 2016 and 2017, the Mayor's Interagency Shelter Repair Squad conducted more than 34,000 inspections and reduced violations that went unaddressed for many years by 84 percent—and we've allocated necessary funding to make further major renovations improving shelter conditions that have built up over decades and will continue making progress restoring our infrastructure.

- Investing in historically underfunded facilities and providers, dedicating unprecedented dollars (more than a quarter-billion new dollars annually) to modernizing the outdated rates that our vital provider partners had been receiving for years to ensure those partners are appropriately funded to deliver the services our homeless neighbors depend on as they get back on their feet, while expanding education-focused programs and increasing our social work staffing and mental health services.

Under the Mayor's *Turning the Tide* plan, DHS has already opened 15 of 21 new sites, and 12 of the first 15 received new Certificates of Occupancy, requiring them to meet all applicable requirements, including those concerning accessibility, under the most recent building codes. The remaining three locations (185th Street, 31st Street and North Star) all were opened under the building's existing Certificates of Occupancy. DHS's ongoing work relating to the *Butler* settlement also means that these, and other, shelter locations are subject to additional inspections for accessibility. The survey tool mentioned above is being used not only to identify remediation for existing shelters, but also to survey new shelters before they come online.

Since the announcement of *Turning the Tide*, we have made it clear in forums, meetings, communications with communities and elected officials, and in the plan itself that we are committed to ongoing engagement, and we invite interested communities to work with us on shelter siting. Shortly before our preliminary budget hearing earlier this year, we sent a letter to all 59 community boards, as well as to local elected officials, reiterating our request for input in site selection by helping to identify viable sites that not-for-profit providers can propose to us through our open-ended Request For Proposal procurement process. This commitment certainly extends to our efforts to improve access to shelter for those with disabilities. As we look to decrease our shelter footprint by getting out of clusters and commercial hotels and siting a smaller number of new shelters instead, we welcome input from communities and elected officials to help locate sites and buildings that are architecturally designed to accommodate individuals with physical and mental health disabilities. With your help to identify new and accessible sites, we can ensure that the next wave of borough-based shelters will provide additional capacity to reasonably accommodate and provide meaningful access for all.

Central to *Turning the Tide*, the Mayor's plan to transform the shelter system ensures that accessible capacity is equitably distributed across all five boroughs. As we turn the tide on homelessness, we will be able to maintain a vacancy rate to ensure the flexibility we need to implement a more equitable, borough-based system that takes into account the individual needs of the children and adults we must shelter, including the needs of New Yorkers with disabilities who are experiencing homelessness.

Conclusion

Overall, this Administration has continually demonstrated its priority of improving our policies, systems, and services to better the lives of low-income New Yorkers, including those with physical and mental disabilities. Beginning with the 90-day review of homeless services, we have focused on implementing measures that reinforce systemic change that will outlive the five-year plan laid out by the *Butler* settlement. We are still less than a year into implementing the reforms set forth in the *Butler* settlement, but the improvements we are making now and over the next few years will set up the City as a leader in implementing ADA-compliant approaches to enhance shelter accessibility. Our work to date has already helped us identify effective practices for how we serve clients with disabilities – and using the integrated working group framework, we have been able to implement procedures that reflect an efficient uniform system even among the programs that contain significant operational differences. Moving forward, the insight gained from this experience will allow us to best connect vulnerable New Yorkers to the services that enable them to thrive.

Thank you again for this opportunity to testify. Commissioner Calise and I welcome your questions.