

**Testimony of Commissioner Gary P. Jenkins
New York City Department of Social Services**

**Before the New York City Council, Committee on General Welfare
Oversight Hearing: Long-standing NYC Shelter Intake Issues and the Recent Increase in
Asylum Seekers**

August 9, 2022

Good morning, I want to thank the General Welfare Committee and Deputy Speaker Ayala for holding today's hearing. We are here to update the Committee on the ongoing work that our agencies are doing each day to support the asylum seekers arriving in New York City in unprecedented numbers. My name is Gary P. Jenkins, and I am the Commissioner of the New York City Department of Social Services (DSS), which is made up of the Human Resources Administration (HRA) and the Department of Homeless Services (DHS). I am also joined today by Commissioner Manuel Castro, from the Mayor's Office of Immigrant Affairs (MOIA) and DHS Administrator Joslyn Carter.

New York City has been, and will continue to be, a city of immigrants. We have, and under the Adams Administration, will continue to welcome immigrants from every corner of the world and ensure that however they arrive in our city they have the support they need to thrive in our neighborhoods. These are the same values that guide our work in supporting New Yorkers experiencing homelessness: values that prioritize care and compassion for our most vulnerable families and individuals.

Our city is currently experiencing a substantial increase in the number of families and individuals seeking asylum through our southern border, many from Central and South America and other regions. These individuals and families are arriving at our city's shelter intake centers with little more than the clothing on their backs. These shelter intake centers include: the Prevention Assistance and Temporary Housing Intake Center, better known as PATH, for families with children, located in the Bronx; our 30th Street intake center for single adults and adult families, located in Manhattan; and, for women's intake, the Franklin Women's Intake Center located in the Bronx, and HELP Women's Shelter, located in Brooklyn.

As you well know, New York City is one of the few jurisdictions with a right to shelter, meaning that we are legally required to provide transitional housing for those seeking a place to stay, including the many asylum seekers being discussed here today. This means that we honor our legal and moral obligation and will turn no one away.

As we begin our discussion on how the Adams Administration is supporting asylum seekers that are coming to our city and seeking assistance from the shelter system, it is important to provide context on DSS-DHS and homelessness in New York City.

DHS is committed to preventing and addressing homelessness across our city. Our staff and providers employ many innovative strategies to help individuals who are in temporary shelter or are unsheltered to successfully transition to permanency. The mission of DHS is to prevent homelessness, when possible, address unsheltered homelessness, provide safe temporary shelter, and connect New Yorkers experiencing homelessness to suitable housing. We carry out this mission with care and compassion for each client and their circumstances, and these values extend and apply to the vulnerable families and individuals seeking asylum in our city.

As a right to shelter city, we remain committed to meeting our legal and moral mandates to provide temporary emergency shelter to all eligible New Yorkers. Our staff and providers also help these individuals access a variety of wrap-around services to ensure a seamless transition back to independent living and stability.

In several briefings by this Administration, we have described a significant uptick in our families with children and single adults shelter censuses over the last few months. That uptick has been largely driven by an increasing migrant population seeking asylum.

Our temporary housing services are available to all, regardless of immigration status. DHS and its contracted providers do not ask about documentation status, and instead, rely on self-reported information across our intake system. In early Summer, DHS shelter staff began noticing an uptick in asylum seekers during intake interviews. As the uptick in asylum seekers continued, DSS-DHS developed a strategy to more robustly identify these individuals while continuing to ensure their citizenship status was not disclosed.

As of yesterday, August 8, there are more than 4,000 asylum seekers who have presented themselves to our shelter intake system, which has been a driver of the approximately 10 percent increase in the DHS census since April. Approximately 100 people are applying at our intake sites per day.

Asylum seekers are a mix of families with children, adult families and single adults arriving and seeking shelter and security after a long and grueling journey to New York City from their homeland. These are unprecedented numbers, and I want to thank our staff, providers, and colleagues in government for stepping up and ensuring these families and individuals are welcomed into our system and provided with the same care and compassion we would have for any New Yorker experiencing homelessness.

While challenges have arisen, our existing system is withstanding the many stresses placed upon it, and we are serving hundreds of individuals and families in need. Our DHS teams keep these families and individuals fed, sheltered, and cared for, and, most critically, provide a place for them to stop, rest and begin to stabilize their lives.

Asylum seekers are entering shelter through DHS' existing intake facilities. For families with children, as mentioned earlier this means the PATH intake center in the Bronx. Longstanding PATH rules require that if a family presents at the PATH intake center by 10:00 PM, we are required to place the family in conditional placement by 4:00 AM. As reported by the Mayor, Commissioner Castro and myself in mid-July, four families were not assigned conditional placement by the required time. In these cases, the three families were placed by 6:45 AM and the remaining family by 11:00 AM. We are accountable for this shortfall and have taken steps to ensure this does not happen again. However, it must be emphasized that no families have been sitting for days in our intake center waiting for placement.

We look forward to continuing to support the needs of this vulnerable community and we ask that you join our efforts in calling for adequate resources to meet the needs of this moment. At the City level, we are leaving no stone unturned to support the unprecedented number of asylum seekers arriving each day. Just last week, the city announced a declaration of emergency for asylee services and shelter, which would allow us to rapidly procure services specifically designed to support this community in need. This is an interagency, all hands-on deck effort, where we will be tapping into our non-profit partners to ensure asylum seekers have access to wrap-around services, including legal support, health care and education. Moreover, we are continuing to work with our federal and state partners to access much needed financial resources to meet the rising costs of this emergency.

This landscape highlights our shelter capacity needs, a topic that I, along with my team, have testified about many times before. Given this moment of need, and the fact that we must meet our legal and moral mandates to provide shelter, we must expand and be creative in our expansion to temporarily house those seeking asylum in our city. Because we must provide shelter to all who seek it, we are looking across the five boroughs to place asylum seekers in facilities where they can find stabilization and the resources needed to acclimate to New York City and eventually move out of shelter.

As the Mayor has said, we must continuously find new locations for emergency temporary housing, and we are looking for assistance from this committee, as well as the Council at large, to find locations within your districts to shelter asylum seekers. We are all in this together, and we need your help to find and secure the necessary capacity to house this vulnerable population.

In closing, the DSS-DHS shelter system has done its job even as this unprecedented surge has stretched its resources. We continue to be a lighthouse that lights the way for so many vulnerable individuals and families who have come to New York City seeking nothing but safety. As I've said before, DSS-DHS often acts as the safety net of the safety net, and we are proud of the work that our staff have done to bring stability and safety to the thousands of individuals arriving at our doors. We are a city of immigrants, and we look forward to continuing New York's tradition of welcoming newcomers with open arms.

We thank you for the opportunity to testify today, and we welcome any questions that you may have.