



NEW YORK CITY COMPTROLLER
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Housing First:

A Proven Approach to Dramatically Reduce Street Homelessness

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Executive Summary

The vast majority of individuals and families experiencing homelessness in New York City seek temporary shelter within the City's shelter system.¹ However, despite accounting for only a small fraction, less than 5%, of the overall population of unhoused New Yorkers, individuals living on the street are often the dominant face of homelessness, prompting public outcry for action. In addition to being more visible, individuals experiencing street homelessness are more likely to be chronically homeless, have higher rates of serious mental illness, substance use

disorders, and other severe health problems than homeless families in the shelter system.¹

The 2022 HOPE (Homeless Outreach Population Estimate) count estimated that there were 3,439 individuals in New York City living on the street, in parks, or on the subway on January 25, 2022. However, advocates believe that the HOPE count is a significant undercount of people experiencing unsheltered homelessness. While an independent accounting of the street homeless population has not been conducted, the Coalition for the Homeless cites the outreach numbers from the City's end-of-the-line subway program to illustrate the vast discrepancy: between May 2020 to January 2022, 9,231 unique individuals accepted offers of transportation to drop-in centers and various types of shelters.²

In March 2022, Mayor Eric Adams created a task force involving four City agencies: the Department of Homeless Services (DHS), the Police Department (NYPD), the Department of Sanitation (DSNY) and the Department of Parks and Recreation (NYC Parks) to dismantle and remove homeless encampments across the City, in actions referred to as "cleanups" or "sweeps." The sweeps had two stated goals: (1) to provide the individuals living in these encampments access to temporary housing, financial assistance, or mental health and substance use assistance and (2) to clear temporary physical structures in public spaces.

Between March and November 2022, the task force conducted a total of 2,154 sweeps, 196 of which were of "encampments" and 1,958 were of "pop-up sites."^{2,3} During these sweeps, DHS outreach staff participated in the removal of 2,308 homeless individuals.

The Comptroller's Office conducted an audit of DHS' role in these sweeps.³ The audit found that the sweeps failed to meet the goals of the task force:

- Only 119 (5%) of the 2,308 individuals engaged during sweeps accepted temporary shelter and, of these, 29 left shelter on the very same day they entered.

¹ While those living unsheltered on the street have higher rates of mental health and substance use disorders, it is important to not paint a diverse population with a broad brush or assume that every individual requires the same intervention. A client centered approach to outreach and a broad array of permanent housing options should be made available to individuals experiencing street homelessness in order to better match services and housing placements to each individual's needs and preferences.

² DHS defined "encampments" as sites with fixed or temporary physical structures built or erected as shelters or dwellings in areas not meant for human habitation, such as areas lacking access to sanitation services, water, trash removal. "Pop-ups sites" are defined as areas not meant for human habitation where individuals and groups regularly sleep but which lack fixed comforts (e.g., furniture, standing structures, curtains, tents, or mattresses).

³ The sweeps above covered a total of 161 encampments and 1,093 pop-up sites, as some were cleared more than once by taskforce teams. Beginning in February 2023, NYPD began re-visiting sites to see if encampments have been re-established. If encampments were found, NYPD referred the sites to DHS to re-engage individuals found there. As a result, some sites have been swept multiple times.

- Only 90 individuals (3.9%) stayed in shelter for more than one day. Of those 90, 59 individuals (65%), stayed for less than 6 days and 70 individuals (78%), had departed shelter by January 23, 2023.
- As of January 23, 2023, only 43 individuals (2%) remained in shelter.
- Only 3 people had entered permanent housing (0.1% of the 2,308 individuals engaged in the sweeps; 2.5% of those who accepted shelter) as of January 23, 2023.
- A survey of 99 homeless encampment sites which had been cleared by the sweeps by auditors from the NYC Comptroller’s Office found that 31% had been rebuilt within one year.

To complement the audit and develop recommendations to improve the City’s success rate in connecting street homeless individuals to permanent housing, the Comptroller’s Office conducted a review of a policy shown to be effective in achieving that goal: Housing First. Housing First is an evidence-based practice that prioritizes providing permanent housing without first requiring individuals to enter shelter or graduate through a series of programs or services. The Comptroller’s review of policies from across the country found that 70-90% of Housing First participants remain stably housed two to three years after receiving services, compared to 30-50% of participants in traditional “housing ready” or “treatment first” programs (and compared to the 0.1% of individuals stably housed following New York City’s sweeps from March to November 2022).^{4,5}

Based on the audit findings and policy review, the Comptroller’s office recommends the following, to connect New Yorkers experiencing chronic homelessness more effectively to the support they need and reduce street homelessness:

- End the counterproductive sweeps targeting homeless New Yorkers with involuntary removal. Instead, rely on trained professionals to conduct outreach, provide resources, and connect people to low-barrier housing options.
- Continue to invest in the expansion of single rooms in “safe haven” shelters and private stabilization beds.
- Establish a large-scale Housing First program, building on successful models.

A decade ago, the City of New York largely applied these policies to help homeless veterans, and the result was a remarkable success, reducing veteran homelessness by 90%. We can and should do the same to address street homelessness today.

Overview: Housing First Policies

Housing First is an evidence-based practice that prioritizes providing permanent housing without first requiring individuals to enter shelter or graduate through a series of programs or services. The policy originated in New York City three decades ago and has since been adopted by dozens of localities and states across the United States and by other countries around the world. Designed for people with a history of chronic homelessness, Housing First practitioners recognize that many people need a place to live, before they can adequately address other issues impacting their quality of life, such as psychiatric and substance use disorders.

The NYC Comptroller's office conducted a review of the studies on street homelessness and Housing First programs across the country and found that Housing First is the most successful approach to ending chronic and unsheltered homelessness.

Housing First Spotlight: Philadelphia

Beginning in 2011, Philadelphia began to see a sharp increase in opioid-related deaths. A mayor's report found opioid overdoses to be the leading cause of death in the city, with drug users particularly vulnerable to homelessness and homeless drug users at an even greater risk of overdose.⁶ To respond to the growing crisis, in 2016, Pathways to Housing PA launched a pilot program that targeted chronically homeless individuals with opioid addiction. The program combined Housing First with other street outreach strategies, such as needle exchanges and Narcan training and disbursement, and access to medication-assisted treatment (MAT).

The program placed 75 chronically homeless individuals in permanent scattered site housing, providing each with a community-based team of peer specialists, case managers, substance abuse counselors, and medical providers. After one year, 100% of participants remained stably housed and 52% received MAT or were sober.⁷ As of 2022, Pathways to Housing PA had 550 people in its care, and over the course of 5 years, 85% have maintained housing.⁸

Housing First Spotlight: Denver

In 2016, the City and County of Denver, Colorado created the Denver Supportive Housing Social Impact Bond Initiative (Denver SIB) to promote housing stability and reduce jail stays among chronically homeless individuals with frequent interactions with the criminal justice system.⁹ The Housing First initiative, which targeted individuals who had eight or more arrests over three consecutive years,¹⁰ provided permanent supportive housing, including rental subsidies and intensive support services, to immediately move homeless people into housing. The initiative created a randomized controlled trial in which half of the participants were placed in permanent supportive housing while the other half were referred to traditional continuum of care services.

After three years, 77% of the individuals who moved into permanent supportive housing remained stably housed. In addition, participants who moved into permanent housing experienced eight fewer interactions with the police and four fewer arrests than those receiving traditional services, representing a 34%-40% reduction in interactions with the criminal justice system.¹¹ Participants in supportive housing also had fewer jail stays and on average spent 38 fewer days in jail than those receiving usual care. Denver SIB's positive results demonstrate that when governments offer housing and support services to those with the greatest need, they can successfully disrupt the homelessness to jail cycle and reduce the costly and dehumanizing interactions between homeless people and the criminal justice system.

A series of rigorous evaluations and case studies on Housing First reveals that:

- Between 70-90% of Housing First participants remain stably housed two to three years after receiving services, compared to 30-50% of participants in traditional programs.
- Individuals experiencing street homelessness are more likely to be chronically homeless, which the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) defines as individuals or families who experienced homelessness for at least one year or on at least four occasions in the last three years.¹²
- Single adults experiencing chronic homelessness have higher rates of serious mental illness, substance use disorders, and other severe health problems than families experiencing homelessness.¹³
- Mental health challenges and drug dependency are more likely in the chronically street homeless population than in the general shelter population, making the “housing ready” model — that may rely on treatment compliance or the individuals’ ability to navigate complicated application processes prior to placement in permanent housing — a challenging threshold for many unsheltered individuals to meet.
- Stable housing enables chronically homeless individuals to pursue their goals and improve their quality of life. Once stably housed, individuals are better able to take advantage of supportive services, like psychiatric and substance abuse treatment, which promotes

their long-term housing stability, employment, and recovery. Without stable housing, these goals are much more difficult to achieve.

- Individuals in supportive housing programs that emphasized client-centered services, harm-reduction strategies, and open, nonjudgmental dialogue about substance use and its consequences were more likely to retain housing and less likely to report using stimulants or opiates in follow-up interviews.¹⁴
- Housing First can be successful in breaking the homelessness-jail cycle: participants receiving permanent housing and support services experienced fewer interactions with the police, fewer arrests, and fewer jail stays than those receiving usual care.¹⁵
- Housing First is a cost-effective strategy to ending homelessness and addressing mental illness. Individuals with serious mental illness who experienced chronic homelessness incur higher public costs per year than those in permanent supportive housing, especially within the criminal justice and healthcare systems.^{16,17}

Housing First: A Cost-Effective Strategy

	Daily Cost per person	30 day cost per person
Supportive Housing	\$68	\$2,040
Shelter	\$136	\$4,080
Incarceration at Rikers Island	\$1,414	\$42,420
Hospitalization	\$3,609	\$108,270 ⁴

A methodology for the above cost analysis is included in the appendix.

⁴ This estimate does not reflect one 30-day stay, but rather several short stays as the average cost per day of a hospital stay decreases with length of stay. We assume that unsheltered individuals may stay for short stints over a longer period of time.

Recommendations

End the Counterproductive Sweeps Targeting Homeless New Yorkers with Involuntary Removal. Instead, Rely on Trained Professionals to Conduct Outreach, Provide Resources, and Connect People to Low-Barrier Housing Options

The City should immediately end the counterproductive practice of “homeless sweeps” which have proven unsuccessful in achieving their goals, and which damage the relationships that are often necessary in order for outreach workers to successfully connect homeless New Yorkers to shelter and housing options. The sweeps, which may result in people’s belongings being thrown away, including medication and personally valuable items, have eroded trust between those living unsheltered on the streets and City workers and nonprofit outreach staff.

The City currently contracts with five nonprofit street outreach providers that canvass streets and subways. Unsheltered New Yorkers may be wary to engage with these outreach workers if they believe the interaction may result in their arrest or involuntary commitment. Ending the sweeps is therefore a necessary first step in building trust. Moving forward the City should employ a harm reduction, client-centered approach to street outreach that focus on providing those living on the street with what they want.^{18,5}

One example of a such an approach that has been proven to be successful is providing workers with the essential items that people living on the streets need, like winter clothing and toiletries. The City has maintained that providing these items might deter people from coming inside, and discourages its contractors from doing so, but years of experience of outreach teams proves otherwise. The City should add the cost of these items to outreach contracts and explore the expansion of other harm-reduction measures, including improving access to low-barrier medical care through street medicine programs.

To be sure, many New Yorkers living unsheltered on the street have taken advantage of the City’s low threshold beds after being engaged by an outreach worker or walking into one of the City’s five drop-in centers. They are most likely to do when outreach workers can offer them what they want: single, private rooms in safe haven shelters, stabilization beds, or permanent housing.

Continue to Invest in the Expansion of Single-Room Safe Haven Shelters and Stabilization Beds

Safe havens and stabilizations beds are low-barrier programs specifically tailored for individuals experiencing unsheltered homelessness who may be resistant to accepting or who may not be

⁵ The City’s [Street Outreach program for Runaway & Homeless Youth](#) already utilizes a model that more aligns with this approach. It should be expanded to adult populations.

best served by other services, including traditional shelter settings. Many unsheltered New Yorkers have previously resided in the City’s shelter system and are choosing to live outdoors instead. Their negative experiences include concerns for their safety, lack of security, strict rules that may be arbitrarily applied or difficult to follow, and a lack of privacy.

The expansion of safe haven shelters and stabilization beds – which was begun under Mayor Bill de Blasio and has continued under Mayor Eric Adams – represents a clear leap forward in responding to these concerns. In December 2016, there were 690 beds available across 11 safe haven shelters; by December 2022, there were 1,473 beds available across 26 different safe haven shelters. While lack of data makes it difficult to track the precise utilization rate of these beds, multiple sources indicate that nearly all of them are full every night and that demand for them has remained high despite the increased supply of available beds.^{19,20}

Individuals who have been living outdoors for at least 9 months can access safe haven or stabilization beds, which don’t require intake at a central processing center and are a less restrictive alternative to traditional shelters. Ideally, safe havens offer more privacy and provide intensive case management, mental health, and substance abuse assistance. Stabilization beds have the same flexibility, but case management is provided through scheduled visits. They are reserved for clients who are on DHS’s caseload and can care for themselves. In FY 2022 there were, on average, 2,086 individuals in these beds each night.²¹

Individuals who are offered safe haven beds are much more likely to stay long-term, with 63% of individuals who accepted placement in a safe haven shelter after engagement in the City’s end-of-line subway outreach from 2020 to 2022 still residing there by the end of 2022. This is compared to the just 24% of individuals who remained in traditional shelter following the same form of outreach.²²

In order to increase capacity, some safe haven shelters have been opened that do not provide single, private rooms. While these shelters may provide more privacy than a traditional congregate setting, single rooms more directly address the barriers that often keep individuals experiencing street homelessness from coming indoors. The City should continue to develop new safe haven shelters with single rooms and expand the number of stabilization beds, in addition to making policy changes that help get residents out of these forms of temporary shelter and into permanent housing more quickly.

Improve and Expand the City’s Housing First Programs

There is currently almost no pathway for homeless New Yorkers to permanent housing other than through the shelter system. Nonetheless, many unsheltered New Yorkers choose to live outdoors because they have had past negative experiences living in congregate shelter settings, making the requirement that an individual reside in shelter before becoming eligible an often-insurmountable barrier to permanent housing options. In addition to increasing the number of single rooms in safe haven shelters and stabilization beds, the City should establish a large-scale Housing First program, building on successful models from around the country, to provide a path towards stability and permanent housing for those experiencing chronic homelessness.

While its scope is limited to a specific population, New York City does have successful experience designing and scaling up a housing first program for veterans with federal support: HUD-VASH (Housing and Urban Development – Veteran Affairs Supportive Housing). The coordinated effort started in 2011 following a federal commitment to end veteran homelessness nationwide by 2015. As a direct result, veteran homelessness has declined by 90% since 2011 in New York City, from 4,677 individuals in 2011 to 482 in 2022,^{23,24} and the City has effectively ended veteran homelessness, reaching the national standard of “functional zero” by providing veterans permanent housing within 90 days of entering the shelter system.^{25,26}

The program combines federal housing choice vouchers with case management and support services, such as healthcare, mental health treatment, and job training. In addition to rental subsidies, the City conducts public outreach campaigns, including running subway and bus ads, engages landlords, provides peer-to-peer assistance, aftercare assistance, like regular check-in calls, and referrals to community partners. The founders of Housing First noted in their 2015 book that the program was faithful to the principles of the model, including a commitment to match support services to the needs expressed by the veterans themselves.²⁷

In November 2022, Mayor Eric Adams announced the Street-to-Housing pilot, which draws on Housing First principles and seeks to connect up to 80 single adults with supportive housing. In this pilot, individuals who had been living unsheltered on the street and agreed to enter one of the City’s “welcome centers” following end-of-the-line subway outreach became eligible to move into supportive housing units managed by the Volunteers of America Greater New York (VOA-GNY) in Brooklyn and the Bronx. Once placed, residents received support from VOA-GNY case workers to complete their application for rental assistance and benefits. The City has funded the operations of the building during the transitional period before rental assistance for the individuals can be secured. Staff from VOA-GNY also provide dedicated mental health and other health supports. As of April 25, 58 individuals have moved in and 23 of them have signed a permanent lease (compared to 3 individuals out of 2,308 who were connected to permanent housing as a result of the sweeps).²⁸

While this program is a welcome departure from the sweeps, the Street-to-Housing pilot was designed to reach just 80 individuals – less than 3% of the City’s estimated street homelessness population.²⁹ In addition, while it is lower barrier than the City’s other permanent supportive housing programs, the VOA-GNY Street-to-Housing pilot still includes conditions that the participants must comply with in advance, a departure from Housing First best practices.

Evaluations of these programs, including the voices of participants, as well as engagements with stakeholders from cities across the country that have deployed Housing First successfully, can help New York City establish a large-scale Housing First program. This should be done alongside an evaluation of the City’s current supportive housing models to ensure that the expansion of a new Housing First program builds on decades of experience and makes necessary modifications, as Housing First does not end at placement. This should include an evaluation of the City’s compliance with relevant fair housing and anti-discrimination laws and a review of the existing scope of services and funding. Both evaluations should be done in partnership with elected officials, city agencies, supportive housing providers, and supportive housing tenants, including those who participated in the Street-to-Housing pilot.

The City should identify units that can be used for a Housing First model both in the City's supportive housing developments, operated by nonprofit supportive housing providers, and in the broader housing stock. To ensure that we can both establish a Housing First program and increase the number of permanent supportive housing units available for people exiting the shelter system, the City must redouble its efforts to hit the targets set forth in NYC15/15 and push to bring additional units of supportive and affordable housing online.⁶

Reporting over the past two years has found that there are approximately 2,500 vacant units of supportive housing.³⁰ These vacancies are driven in part by bureaucratic challenges in the administration of supportive housing that create barriers for providers and unsheltered New Yorkers alike, such as sobriety requirements and the need for clients to gather significant documentation before the provider can access rental assistance. A review of the data available through Local Law 3 confirms that many clients are rejected because they are unable to locate essential documents, because of substance use or failure to take prescribed medication, or because of significant provider discretion, including rejection of applicants due to their belief that a client is not being forthcoming in an initial interview about their mental health or substance use and frequently because the provider does not think that the program provides the level of care that they believe the client needs.³¹

The City should work with supportive housing providers, supportive housing tenants, shelter operators, and organizations that represent unsheltered New Yorkers to develop a policy that would set aside 10% of supportive units that come online or that become vacant for the development of a Housing First program that can significantly reduce barriers to entry and rapidly rehouse unsheltered New Yorkers.

While many New Yorkers living unsheltered likely qualify for supportive housing, not every unsheltered individual requires this level of care, and many may prefer more flexible and independent living arrangements. Additional options outside of supportive housing should be offered, including the ability for outreach workers to help individuals experiencing street homelessness apply for CityFHEPS vouchers and find suitable housing.

The City recently announced the Unlocking Doors program, which seeks to fix up vacant rent-stabilized units and get them rented to formerly homeless New Yorkers with a CityFHEPS voucher. The program provides a reimbursement of up to \$25,000 to landlords of rent-stabilized units and then matches the owner with a qualified individual or family. The City should consider setting aside a certain number of these apartments for unsheltered individuals as an additional source of Housing First units.

Further, the City should make additional permanent housing options available to unsheltered New Yorkers, including homeless set aside units in City funded affordable housing, which are typically only available to those who enter the shelter system first.

⁶ NYC15/15 was announced in 2015 and established a commitment to add 15,000 units of supportive housing to New York City's stock by 2030.

The City could cover the cost of the operating subsidy while case workers support individuals in securing rental assistance with an expedited process with City agencies.

Finally, the City should continue to push the Governor and State Legislature to establish and fund the Housing Access Voucher Program, which would create thousands of housing vouchers dedicated to providing rental assistance to prevent homelessness and get New Yorkers out of shelter.

Conclusion

The evidence is clear: New York City’s homeless sweeps do not work. Housing First does.

Out of 2,308 homeless New Yorkers removed by sweeps in 2022, only 43 individuals (2%) remained in shelter as of January 2023 and only 3 were connected to permanent housing. By contrast, between 70-90% of Housing First participants remain stably housed two to three years after receiving services. Housing First is more cost-effective than shelter, and far more than jail or hospital beds.

A decade ago, the City of New York applied Housing First policies to help homeless veterans, and the result was a remarkable success, reducing veteran homelessness by 90% and reaching the national standard of “functional zero.”

By ending the sweeps, supporting professional outreach workers to build trust, investing in low-barrier options including single-rooms in safe haven shelters and stabilization beds, and especially by establishing a large-scale Housing First program, New York City can achieve similar results today – to dramatically reduce street homelessness.

A Housing First approach to street homelessness, combined with preserving the right-to-shelter, could make New York City the first large city in the United States to reach the national standard of “functional zero” for street homelessness.³² It is an aspiration worthy of “the city that never sleeps” than no one should sleep on the street.

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Endnotes

¹ Because of the right-to-shelter, New York City has far less street homelessness than its peers. While approximately 5% of New York's homeless population are unsheltered, over 70% of Los Angeles County's homeless population is living on the streets (approximately 48,000 people). Figures are similar for other large cities: San Francisco (57%), Phoenix (56%), Las Vegas (51%).

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²⁸ “Dozens of Homeless New Yorkers are Moving into Vacant Apartments Thanks to a New Program.” *Gothamist*, April 25, 2023. <https://gothamist.com/news/dozens-of-homeless-new-yorkers-are-moving-into-vacant-apartments-thanks-to-a-new-program>

²⁹ “Mayor Adams Takes Major Steps to Help New Yorkers Access High-Quality Housing More Quickly, Move From Streets to Permanent Homes,” *Office of the NYC Mayor*, November 14, 2022, <https://www.nyc.gov/office-of-the-mayor/news/835-22/mayor-adams-takes-major-steps-help-new-yorkers-access-high-quality-housing-more-quickly-move#/0>.

³⁰ In December 2021, [the Supportive Housing Network of New York](#) estimated that there were 2,500 vacancies. In March 2022, [the NY Post](#) reported that there were approximately 2,500 units vacant and that number was confirmed by HRA within the article. By November 2022, the [New York Times](#) reported that the number had grown to 2,600 units. By March 2023, the [New York Daily News](#) reported that there were 2,646 vacant units, within that article HRA claimed that they had filled 464 vacancies by May 28th (the time of publication) that 2,182 units remained vacant.

³¹ Local Law 3 of 2022 was passed after years of organizing by supportive housing tenants, including members of SHOUT (Supportive Housing Organized and United Tenants). The law requires DSS to publish an annual report that among other things, must list reasons clients have been rejected for placement in supportive housing. See: [HRA-Local-Law-3-CFY2022-08302022.pdf \(nyc.gov\)](https://www.nyc.gov/hra-local-law-3-cfy2022-08302022.pdf)

³² Only three communities across the Country have achieved functional zero for both veterans and have solved chronic homelessness. One community is our neighbors in Bergen County, New Jersey who should be included in the group of stakeholders that work to develop and expand a New York City program. See: “Functional Zero,” *Community Solutions*, <https://community.solutions/built-for-zero/functional-zero/>

Appendix

Methodology of Cost Estimates

The daily cost of providing supportive housing is based on the annual subsidy available to providers through the State’s Empire State Supportive Housing Initiative, <https://omh.ny.gov/omhweb/rfp/2022/esshi/esshi-round-seven-rfp.pdf>

The daily and 30-day cost of shelter is based on the Mayor’s 2023 Management Report, available here: <https://www.nyc.gov/assets/operations/downloads/pdf/pmmr2023/dhs.pdf>. The daily cost of providing shelter for single adult facilities is \$135.83.

The daily and 30-day cost of detaining an individual in custody is based on the Mayor’s 2023 Management Report. The average daily population based on that report is 5,559 and the total funding, excluding intracity costs is \$2.87 billion. The annual cost was calculated by dividing \$2.87 billion by the average daily population, 5,559. The daily cost is inferred to be \$1,414 per person.

The daily cost of hospitalization was sourced from the Kaiser Family Foundation, Hospital Adjusted Expenses per Inpatient Day | KFF, which estimates that the average cost of hospitalization per night in New York State is \$3,609.