

## **Oversight: The Future of Section 8 in NYC**

February 23, 2010

### **Introduction**

Good afternoon Chairwoman Palma and members of the General Welfare Committee, Chairman Dilan and the members of the Housing & Buildings Committee, and Chairwoman Mendez and members of the Public Housing Committee. Thank you for the opportunity to testify before you today. I'm Robert Hess, Commissioner for the Department of Homeless Services. I'm here today to speak to the Committees about DHS' homelessness prevention efforts and the services New York City has to offer families and individuals who are at-risk of becoming homeless.

Since 2006, Section 8 has been one of a variety of tools we have used successfully to prevent homelessness. As you know, new vouchers under the Section 8 program are presently unavailable. But the Department of Homeless Services will use all available options to prevent families and individuals from entering or re-entering our shelter system.

### **Community Prevention Network –**

In these tough economic times, we want families to know that shelter is not their only option. Under the leadership of Mayor Michael Bloomberg and his innovative approach to homelessness prevention, DHS has expanded our programs and coverage. Now, DHS offers such services Citywide, helping households on the brink of homelessness remain stably housed in the community.

As the City's community-based homelessness prevention program, Homebase targets at-risk families and gives them customized assistance when and where they need it most. Homebase helps ensure families remain stably housed in their communities and prevents homelessness by assisting families and individuals with hardships they may face.

Our Homebase program began in September 2004 with six sites serving the most at-risk community districts. It has since expanded to 13 sites in all five boroughs serving the entire City, ensuring that services are available to families in every community district.

Homebase offers both client and community-based services including the most frequently used services such as employment training and placement, benefits advocacy, housing relocation assistance, legal referrals and life skills education, including financial and household budgeting. Additionally, Homebase offices assist our community members with casework and limited short-term emergency financial assistance such as rent arrears, rental deposits and broker fees.

Homebase has assisted more than 17,700 households since inception — 90 percent of which remained in the community for one year after receiving services.

DHS also funds an extensive network of community-based legal offices that help thousands of at-risk families avoid eviction each year. Since 2004, the Family Anti-Eviction Legal Services programs have provided over 28,000 families with children with full legal representation. In 2009,

DHS began serving single adults with legal services through funding from the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act.

We also fund court-based services to help our most vulnerable families retain their housing. In 2005, we launched our Housing Help program in partnership with the New York City Civil Court and the United Way of New York City. The program provides an innovative combination of legal assistance and ongoing social service supports to address the immediate housing crisis and longer-term economic and social challenges that can lead to recidivism and shelter entry. Since 2005, Housing Help has served over 1,900 families with children and 95 percent of those served have not entered shelter.

The DHS homeless prevention services are operated by the most highly regarded organizations with deep roots in the communities they serve. The services are accessible with over 30 store-front locations. In fact, if you look inside the folder we provided you – there is a map of the Homebase and Anti-Eviction legal services offices. By dialing 311, families can find their nearest service center and receive the help they need to remain stable and independent in their communities.

DHS closely monitors the efficiency and effectiveness of its prevention services to ensure continuous quality improvement. It looks at how well we're serving our communities, the quality of those services, and most importantly, the outcomes. Our homelessness prevention programs are some of the most data-driven in the country. We even retain independent evaluators to give us their assessment of our programs. Over the past year, we partnered with SEEDCO to evaluate our court-based Housing Help Program and with CUNY, Columbia University and the University of Pennsylvania to conduct a rigorous examination of Homebase.

Part of what makes DHS homeless prevention services so effective is the way they are integrated with other services throughout the city, most notably the homeless prevention services offered by HRA. The homeless prevention services funded by DHS operate hand-in-hand with the services available through HRA. Every day, we work together to provide one-time emergency cash assistance to eligible families and individuals facing eviction and help with relocation assistance to help our clients secure new housing. Along with HRA and our providers, we help eligible families link to the Family Eviction Prevention Supplement (FEPS) which provides future ongoing monthly rental assistance to families who are being evicted.

DHS is continuing to think innovatively and creatively about how to prevent homelessness. However, in this difficult economic climate we face, we must be strategic in our use of limited resources. Some have suggested that DHS should use stimulus dollars to fund the revoked Section 8 vouchers. I believe, and I know that many of you agree, that cutting our homelessness prevention programs to make up for the loss of federal assistance would be a huge mistake. At the same time, we must offer as many opportunities as possible for clients in need. To that end, DHS is creating a Homebase Housing Flex-Fund to support those whose needs cannot be met through any other means. This \$1 million fund – maintained by Stimulus dollars – will be available to our Homebase offices to assist any Advantage client who finds themselves in difficult times due to these unique circumstances and in need of assistance.

**Conclusion –**

I would like to thank you for the City Council's continued commitment to the issue of homelessness and I look forward to working with you as we work to find solutions to ensure that any clients affected by this crisis are served. I recognize that together, we are all committed to finding housing stability for New York's homeless. I am glad to answer any questions that you may have.