



New York City Comptroller  
**Scott M. Stringer**

# NEWS

PRESS RELEASE

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NEWS RELEASE

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## **COMPTROLLER STRINGER AUDIT: DEPARTMENT OF HOMELESS SERVICES PLACES FAMILIES WITH CHILDREN IN SHELTERS WITH DEPLORABLE CONDITIONS**

*DHS Fails to Provide Oversight of Inspections, Conditions and Services  
Provided to Families*

*Fourteen Staff Oversee 12,500 Homeless Families In Shelters  
DHS houses families in shelters plagued by rodents, mold, peeling paint  
and broken windows*

(**New York, NY**) – The New York City Department of Homeless Services (DHS) places homeless families with children in shelters plagued by rodents, mold, peeling paint, and broken windows, according to an [audit](#) released today by New York City Comptroller Scott M. Stringer.

The audit identified a number of operational deficiencies that contributed to the deplorable conditions, including the fact that DHS:

- Allows shelter providers to “self-monitor” their own facilities,
- Has inadequate oversight over inspections performed by shelter staff,
- Failed to meet the agency’s own goal for helping families transition out of shelters into long-term housing, and

- Regularly failed to sign contracts with shelters, instead relying on verbal agreements with 64 shelter locations, which significantly limited vendor accountability.

“Over 23,000 homeless children in our City slept in nightmare conditions last night, many of them surrounded by peeling paint, some feeling the chill from broken windows, and others sharing space with vermin,” said New York City Comptroller Scott M. Stringer. “And when those same children woke up today DHS still had no plan in place to help their families make it out of the shelter system.”

“It is essential for DHS to repair all of the operational deficiencies that helped lead to the current conditions, develop a bold, new plan, and take decisive action. The City needs to secure appropriate funding to fix these problems, and ensure that essential services are being provided. DHS must – must – get rid of the rodents and the mold, stop gas leaks, fix the holes in the walls, and repair the windows. The agency must also start meeting its own standards for helping the 12,000 families living in shelters to find their way out of this deplorable, broken system, and into permanent housing.”

Comptroller Stringer’s audit sampled one hundred and one randomly selected housing units out of the City’s 155 shelters that serve families with children. It focused on families that had been placed in shelters during fiscal years 2013 and 2014, and that still lived in a shelter in October 2015.

Auditors found the following:

- 53 percent of inspected apartments had evidence of rodents, roaches and other vermin.
- 87 percent of inspected units had conditions that raised health and safety concerns such as malfunctioning smoke detectors, blocked fire escapes, mold, mildew, peeling paint and walls with holes.

The audit also included the individual anecdotal experiences of several families, including:

- DHS placed a family with five children in a shelter just three days after a severe fire had occurred in the neighboring apartment, which forced the family to live with the stench of smoke for over a month. Soon after moving into the unit, the head of household, an asthmatic, was admitted to the hospital for difficulty breathing, and the children experienced frequent nosebleeds.
- In September of 2015 auditors spoke with a mother with a two month old child who was living at a cluster site. The mother informed auditors that there was a heavy gas smell in her apartment, and told them that it had been an ongoing problem for months – even while she was pregnant. She said that she had filed a complaint about the odor in May of 2015 – which the auditors confirmed – but that no action was taken to address the situation. Auditors alerted DHS to the issue, and they finally replaced the stove. However, in a subsequent inspection report, auditors found that the oven in the replacement stove was already broken.

### **Inadequate Oversight Procedures**

Auditors found that DHS failed to hold shelter providers accountable:

- DHS had just 14 Program Analysts -- the frontline staff who oversee social services -- assigned to oversee services at 155 shelters housing 12,500 families. This meant that each analyst was responsible for 11 shelters, and 900 families.
- DHS Program Analysts told auditors that due to the large caseloads, it was “not reasonable” for them to be aware of all shelter conditions. Instead, analysts relied on the shelter providers themselves to flag issues, and “self-report” compliance and repairs.
- In 2014, DHS failed to ensure the creation of Corrective Action Plan reports, which are used to correct insufficient services and unsafe conditions, within the required period of 30 days:

- 51 percent of the randomly selected Corrective Action Plans from 2014 were submitted 10-60 days late.
- Of the 29 Corrective Action Plans submitted late, DHS only followed up with 6.

“When DHS doesn’t monitor its facilities, New Yorkers suffer. Without oversight, the City has no idea whether the shelters are safe, clean and appropriate for families with children to be staying there. DHS must increase inspections, file its reports, and make sure that the shelters are safe,” commented Comptroller Stringer.

### **Inadequate Efforts to Transition Families**

DHS set a goal of transitioning shelter residents out of emergency housing within 270 days. Examining a sample of 12 ‘long-term’ shelter families, housed in eight different facilities, auditors found that DHS failed significantly to meet these standards:

- Shelter providers did not submit Independent Living Plans (ILPs) within the required time period – 10 days after being found eligible for shelter. In one case, the ILP was submitted 87 days past the 10 day requirement.
- DHS shelter staff failed to ensure that the 12 families in the auditors’ sample attended all of their ILP sessions, and the reasons for failure to attend were not always sufficiently documented.
- DHS shelter staff also failed to issue warnings to 6 of the 12 sampled families (50 percent) who missed their ILP sessions.

### **Weak Shelter Security**

State law mandates that shelters ensure the safety of residents, with on-site cameras and adequate security. Auditors found:

- One cluster site, which houses 300 families in 16 buildings, had only one guard, who was stationed in the main building. There were no security

guards stationed at the other 15 buildings. In direct violation of DHS's own rule, there were no sign-in and sign-out logs for residents to use when entering or exiting the building, which further contributed to security concerns.

- Although residents reported break-ins at another shelter, which houses 97 families in three buildings, auditors found that there were inoperable cameras on site. According to shelter staff, the number of intruders had increased over the years, and one resident approached auditors during a site visit to say she had experienced repeated break-ins in her apartment.
- At a third location, which houses 54 families in two buildings, there was one security guard. When auditors asked the guard how she addressed security problems in the second building, she informed them that she would leave her post in the first building to investigate.

### **Shelters Operating Without Contracts**

- The City Charter mandates that all services paid with City money be procured in accordance with the Charter and Procurement Policy Board rules.
- During the time frame of the audit, DHS placed families in 64 shelters that were operating without a written contract (51 hotels, 10 cluster shelters and 3 Tier II shelters).

“It is critically important for DHS to have contracts with shelter providers,” commented Comptroller Stringer. “If you don’t have a contract, it’s extremely difficult to enforce health and safety codes, and it’s almost impossible to ensure shelters make important repairs.”

Comptroller Stringer recommended that DHS:

- Transfer staff from other DHS units so that there are more Program Analysts to oversee shelters in which children are at risk;
- Revamp monitoring controls to ensure that shelters provide ILPs for individual families in a timely manner;

- Ensure that apartments in which families are placed are inspected by shelter providers and that all necessary repairs are completed in a timely manner;
- Ensure that DHS shelter providers sign written contracts with the City, so they are accountable for care provided to families, and are subject to competition that can drive down costs.

“When it comes to housing children and families, DHS has failed the test again and again,” Comptroller Stringer said. “It is an agency in disrepair, and this audit shows how badly management has fallen short in its responsibility to provide safe and secure shelter. As the administration begins to re-organize and re-focus its homeless policies, I hope it will use the findings in this audit to help protect and lift up our city’s most vulnerable residents.”

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