



THE CITY OF NEW YORK  
**OFFICE OF THE COMPTROLLER**  
SCOTT M. STRINGER

November 24, 2020

Honorable Bill de Blasio  
Mayor  
City of New York  
City Hall  
New York, NY 10007

Steven Banks  
Commissioner  
New York City Department of Social Services  
150 Greenwich Street, 40<sup>th</sup> Floor  
New York, NY 10007

Re: Addressing Street Homelessness Amid COVID-19

Dear Mayor de Blasio and Commissioner Banks:

As our first winter living with COVID-19 approaches, I am writing to address the urgent situation of street homelessness in New York City. Winters are always perilous for New Yorkers who live on the streets, but this winter, with many of their usual support systems disrupted by the pandemic, I am concerned that individuals without shelter will face even more dire, unsafe conditions that could contribute to the spread of the virus. With many businesses still closed, few available public bathrooms, and drop-in centers operating at reduced capacity, New Yorkers experiencing street homelessness have fewer resources at their disposal to stay safe at a time when COVID-19 cases are on the rise.

While the City has taken significant steps to minimize the spread of COVID-19 in congregate shelters by moving many residents into hotels where social distancing is possible, a robust set of actions to make life safer for unsheltered New Yorkers is also needed. These actions must aim to not only improve public health and safety for those who sleep unsheltered, but also ramp up efforts to move as many New Yorkers off the streets and into appropriate shelter and housing as possible.

To that end, the following recommendations aim to reduce the risk of COVID-19 transmission this winter while improving the overall health and well-being of homeless New Yorkers and the communities they call home. I also have a number of questions about how the City is assessing the needs of and preparing to serve unsheltered New Yorkers in the coming months. I would appreciate answers to the questions below and responses to my recommendations in writing by December 8, 2020.

## 1. Make Public Restrooms Readily Available

Before COVID-19, New Yorkers experiencing street homelessness could rely on public restrooms in libraries, recreation centers, coffee shops, and other businesses to meet basic hygiene needs. With many businesses closed and restaurants and coffee shops offering limited access to indoor areas, unsheltered New Yorkers currently have few options for washing their hands or using the bathroom. Access to safe, clean bathrooms is always important to maintaining hygiene, but the need is heightened due to public health guidance that frequent hand washing is critical to reduce the spread of COVID-19.

The City should take the following steps to increase access to public bathrooms throughout the five boroughs:

- **Install portable restrooms** throughout the City, and ensure they are frequently cleaned and stocked with necessary supplies so they are sanitary for those who use them. These portable restrooms should be sited in consultation with homeless advocates and organizations to ensure they are in convenient locations where unsheltered New Yorkers congregate so they are well utilized.
- **Open public restrooms** in City-operated facilities that are currently closed due to the pandemic such as recreation centers run by the Department of Parks and Recreation. These facilities should be appropriately staffed and cleaned to create safe and sanitary conditions for those seeking public restrooms. The Coalition for the Homeless advanced this recommendation along with several others pertaining to public restrooms over the summer, and I believe it warrants serious consideration.

## 2. Open Drop-in and Warming Centers using Shuttered City Facilities

The City only operates a few drop-in centers, and several are currently unable to operate at full capacity due to the need for social distancing in indoor settings. This means there is limited space available where unsheltered New Yorkers can get off the street during the day, stay warm, obtain PPE, and of course, use the bathroom. Additionally, as the weather gets colder, warming centers will likely be needed to provide overnight emergency shelter for New Yorkers who sleep outside. While congregating indoors brings risk during the pandemic, remaining outside does as well, and those risks need to be assessed and balanced. Assuming the benefit of providing indoor space where social distancing is possible outweighs the risks, the City should:

- **Open and staff additional drop-in sites** that allow for social distancing, service engagement, access to restrooms, and a safe place to be off the street. Opening some of the City's nearly 250 senior centers, recreation centers operated by the Department of Parks & Recreation, or homeless shelters that are no longer being used for sleeping but have appropriate space for drop-in usage could provide the space that is needed. A survey of the City's existing assets should be undertaken immediately to identify viable spaces for drop-in and warming centers.
- **Conduct outreach to unsheltered New Yorkers to advise them of new drop-in sites.** If additional drop-in sites can be opened, the City should undertake a robust information campaign utilizing street outreach teams to inform unsheltered New Yorkers of the locations, hours, and available resources at each new site.

### **3. Ensure Sufficient Planning for Stabilization Beds**

Providing space for New Yorkers experiencing homelessness to practice social distancing is key to curbing transmission of COVID-19. The City acted swiftly in the spring and summer to move thousands of New Yorkers residing in congregate shelters out of dormitory-style rooms and into hotel rooms where they could sleep safely. The City also increased access to “stabilization beds” for unsheltered New Yorkers in hotels and hostels, which helped move people off the streets and into transitional shelter. I understand from homeless advocates that these hotel and hostel beds have been an important tool, and that demand for them will likely continue to increase as the weather gets colder. I therefore urge the City to closely monitor stabilization bed capacity and ensure there is sufficient supply so homeless outreach workers can continue to offer safe, secure accommodation to unsheltered New Yorkers in need. To that end, please provide the following information to my office:

- How many stabilization beds has the City brought online during the pandemic to serve unsheltered New Yorkers?
- Will the City be procuring additional stabilization beds for unsheltered New Yorkers in the coming weeks and months? If so, how many?
- How many stabilization beds would be needed to meet the current demand among unsheltered New Yorkers?

### **4. Continue Opening Safe Havens**

New Yorkers who live on the street are often resistant to staying in traditional shelters for a range of reasons. Many chronically street homeless individuals who have slept outside for years may be concerned for their personal security in a traditional shelter, resistant to shelter regulations such as curfews which curtail their personal freedom, or unable to abide by rules that require sober living if they are drug- or alcohol-dependent. Your administration acknowledged this reality in its December 2019 action plan to end long-term street homelessness: *The Journey Home*, and committed to open 1,000 new Safe Haven beds. These low-barrier shelters with robust case management services have proven more effective than traditional shelter in moving chronically street homeless individuals off the street and towards permanent housing.

However, the siting and opening of Safe Havens must keep pace with demand. Homeless advocates and outreach workers have informed my office that while they work diligently to encourage New Yorkers experiencing street homelessness to accept services, they at times cannot find available Safe Haven placements when they are needed, delaying their ability to help New Yorkers who are ready to accept shelter and move off the streets. Additionally, while COVID-19 remains a public health threat, newly developed Safe Havens should provide single occupancy rooms, private bathrooms, and the option of grab-and-go meals whenever possible.

In light of the proven success of this model and your Administration’s pledge to open more, please provide answers to the following questions:

- How many new Safe Haven sites have been identified since the City pledged to create 1,000 new units in December 2019?
- How many new Safe Haven beds have opened during the same period?
- What steps is the City taking to identify properties that could be developed as Safe Havens that meet current safety standards?

## 5. Keep Pace on Supportive Housing Development

While stabilization beds and Safe Havens will keep New Yorkers off the streets during this challenging time, and public bathrooms and drop-in centers will help meet immediate daily needs, there is only one long-term solution to homelessness, and that's permanent housing. Supportive housing that combines affordability with social services is desperately needed to ensure homeless individuals and families can transition to independent living. In 2015, your Administration committed to building 15,000 new units of supportive housing over 15 years. These units cannot come fast enough to meet the needs of New Yorkers who are currently in shelter. In light of this urgent need:

- How many shelter residents currently have been approved for supportive housing but are unable to find placement?
- How many units and beds of supportive housing have already been developed and are currently occupied under NY/NY15?
- How many additional units and beds of supportive housing are under construction as part of NY/NY 15 at the current time?
- What steps can be taken to accelerate the development of the remaining supportive housing units so more New Yorkers can benefit in the near term?

Thank you for your prompt attention to the pressing issues identified in this letter. I look forward to your response and to the additional steps the City will undertake to support unsheltered New Yorkers in the coming months.

Sincerely,



Scott M. Stringer  
New York City Comptroller