Review of the New York City Department of Homeless Services' Programs

What questions did the review look at?

▶ What are the intended outcomes of Department of Homeless Services' (DHS) programs and how is the agency achieving them?

▶ What populations are served by DHS?

What changes did the agency commit to make following the review?

▶ DHS will merge its data systems that record outreach engagements with street homeless people, in order to improve its ability to better track the use of low-barrier beds.

Why does it matter for New Yorkers?

DHS is one of the largest non-federal social services agencies of its kind in the United States, overseeing a network of over 300 homeless shelters that serve different population groups.

The purpose of this review was to improve transparency and provide an overall picture of DHS' programs, both inside and outside of the shelter system. The review found that the process that homeless New Yorkers must go through to receive services is complex. Additionally, homeless New Yorkers must face many barriers when seeking permanent housing.

DHS does not generally provide a pathway to permanent housing outside of the shelter system. This means that homeless New Yorkers helped by DHS must enter and remain in shelter to receive these vital services—a significant barrier for many homeless people who, for various reasons, may be unwilling to enter the system. Additionally, housing subsidies and voucher programs—by far the most effective tools to reduce homelessness that DHS has at its disposal—are limited in their reach. Finally, DHS' data is limited, and it does not track several key metrics. This hinders the agency's ability to measure success and improve its programs and services.

DHS operates under tremendous public pressure, but the review found that the agency could take several steps to tangibly improve its programs and services. In October 2022, at the peak of the surge in migrants seeking asylum, DHS reported the highest-ever number of homeless people living within the shelter system. As New York City continues to recover from the pandemic and the affordable housing crisis worsens, its mission is more critical than ever before.

REVIEW FINDINGS

👍 Less than 5% of single adults and less than 1% of families who received subsidized housing placements returned to shelter.

👍 DHS opened 135 emergency sites between June 2022 and May 2023 to help manage the influx of asylum seekers.

👍 DHS increased the number of clients placed in Safe Haven and stabilization beds by 33.5% in the first quarter of Fiscal Year 2023 and added over 780 beds in Calendar Year 2022.

⚠ To access permanent housing, homeless New Yorkers seeking DHS help are generally required to enter and remain in shelter.

⚠ The average length of time homeless New Yorkers spend in shelter far exceeds one year.

⚠ One in five (22.1%) single adults who received an unsubsidized housing placement returned to shelter.

⚠ DHS lacks comprehensive data about chronic street homelessness, social services, and diversion efforts.

⚠ DHS does not publicize data related to the population of asylum seekers living in the shelter system

	Suggestions for Improvement	Agency Response
1	Expand pathways to permanent housing for individuals resistant to and/or lacking capacity to enter and remain in shelter.	**AGREED**
2	Develop and implement effective strategies to reduce length of stays in shelter.	**AGREED**
3	Track return rates for more than one year to obtain a more complete picture of persons who exit the system and return beyond one year.	**DISAGREED**
4	Track the number of clients receiving the various types of services on an aggregate level in order to determine additional needs for services and to identify by population whether additional behavioral health and substance use shelters are needed.	**AGREED**
5	Finalize the integration of StreetSmart and CARES so there is a single data system to track street homeless engagements, and outcomes from such engagements, to improve the capacity to track the use of low-barrier beds and determine the success of outreach efforts.	**AGREED**
6	Track diversions by the various categories on an aggregate level in order to track trends by diversion category or population.	**AGREED**
7	Increase transparency by publicly reporting data on adults and families found ineligible for shelter, length of stay and subsidized and unsubsidized exits for street homeless clients from low-barrier beds, and asylum seeker census.	**DISAGREED**

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