

# A Letter from Mary

It's wonderful to report that, since our last newsletter, we've won two significant victories for our homeless neighbors.

In April, I stood with City Council Speaker Chris Quinn, Public Advocate Bill DeBlasio and the Commissioner of the Department of Homeless Services to announce that the Bloomberg Administration agreed to a pilot program to stop the placement of frail homeless men and women into illegal boarding houses. More recently, in early June, Steve Banks and I joined Mayor Bloomberg, State Senator Daniel Squadron and Assemblymember Keith Wright, to announce that the City would abandon its plan to charge "rent" in shelters. Instead, homeless parents will contribute to a savings plan and be able to take those savings, along with interest, with them when they move into permanent housing.

These victories didn't come easily or quickly. You may remember in the Autumn/Winter 2007 edition of Safety Net, Lindsey Davis summarized her months of research on the City's practice of putting hundreds of homeless people into extremely overcrowded and

hazardous boarding houses. Many residents had severe mental and physical illnesses. The places they wound up in were largely two-families homes, which had been carved up into dangerous warrens of "rooms" with no egress – up to 16 men sleeping in bunkbeds in a single room.

Lindsey's tireless advocacy set the stage for the agreement for the pilot program to end these egregious placements.

On the second front, roughly a year ago, the Bloomberg Administration began charging homeless families with

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working parents "rent" in exchange for emergency shelter. News of the policy, which took anywhere from \$200 to \$1700 a month from low-income wages, was met with tremendous public outcry. Moreover, it was implemented in a completely arbitrary way, and the Legal Aid Society threatened to sue. The outcry and threat of litigation forced the City to suspend implementation of the plan, but City officials continued to assert that charging rent would 'teach responsibility' to homeless people, the absence of which, they presumed, led them to become homeless in the first place.

Over the past several months, working behind the scenes with the State Senate and Assembly, the Coalition and Legal Aid helped forge an alternative – savings plans for homeless families. Parents who have jobs will put money aside each month and be able to recoup their savings and interest to move out of the shelters and establish lives in permanent housing. It took countless hours of negotiations and at times it looked like there was no way

for an agreement to be reached. But, ultimately, common sense prevailed and this is truly a victory for homeless families and all New Yorkers.

But our work does not end with these victories. It may take months or even years as it did in these two examples – but we did it. We did it because of your amazing support – not only with contributions, but with the literally thousands of letters, faxes and phone calls you made to our elected leaders, demanding change.

We owe tremendous thanks to Senator Daniel Squadron and Assemblymember Keith Wright – whose leadership made the savings plan possible. Keith was particularly eloquent at the press conference, speaking about a young mother he met when the original

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plan to charge rent was unleashed. She had two small children and was making slightly more than minimum wage. Her steadfast dream was to save enough to get her children up and out of the shelters. That dream was nearly dashed when she was told she would have to give the City fully half of her take-home pay. When Assemblyman Wright told her he was going to fight for her, tooth and nail, she burst out crying. He was proud to report back to her that he was able to make good on his promise.

These are *your* victories, because your support has made them possible!

Thanks again.



Mary E. Brosnahan  
Executive Director

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**COALITION FOR THE HOMELESS**

129 Fulton Street  
New York, NY 10038  
Telephone: 212-776-2002  
www.coalitionforthehomeless.org

MARY E. BROSNAHAN  
Executive Director



**Editor**  
SARAH MURPHY

**Design**  
CLARE MANIAS

**Photography, Page 3**  
PATRICK MCMULLAN

**Page 7**  
DARRYL HENRY