

Safety Net

The newsletter of Coalition for the Homeless

Autumn/Winter 2007

No Home for the Holidays: New Bloomberg Policy Denies Homeless Families Emergency Shelter



A Letter From Mary

We were broke in a way only kids can be broke. Our toes were black with dye from wearing boots that weren't waterproof. We had infected earlobes and green rings around our fingers from cheap jewelry. No one even had a chocolate bar. We'd steal containers of cottage cheese and eat them together in the park.

Heather O'Neill
"Lullabies for Little Criminals"

The Advocacy and Crisis Intervention staff of the Coalition spent many nights over the past month at the PATH intake center for homeless families in the south Bronx. In Richard Gelber's main article in this edition of *Safety Net*, you'll read just a few of the stories of families with small children who have wound up sleeping on the streets, on the floor of a church, in subway trains and other public spaces.

It's difficult to convey how heart wrenching it has been to see these parents and children struggle to stay safe and warm. I spent one night with 20-year-old Yaritza, whose 14-month old son, born prematurely, looked about the size of your average four-month-old. He



was obviously sick and was having trouble breathing and holding down food. Yaritza had run out of clean clothing that morning and they had one thin baby blanket to fend off the cold night air.

By coincidence, I was able to stop a higher-level official from the Department of Homeless Services, as she arrived around 10pm. That chance encounter and some heartfelt advocacy got the family's "ineligible" determination overturned – at least for that one evening. The following day, Yaritza brought the child to his doctor, who hospitalized the baby for six days.

As we go to press, many of the families – including young Yaritza – are in a brutal holding pattern. Some have been admitted to the shelter system (after their initial applications were denied). Many others have gotten ten-day, temporary placements and are left wondering each morning if they will once again be cast out. New families are found "ineligible" almost every evening.

Your support of the Coalition allows us to be there each evening. You helped us buy formula and diapers that cold night for Yaritza. You allowed us to rescue the Rosa family – mother, father and three children – who had spent two nights sleeping on a sidewalk. It was only when the weather turned rainy and cold that they said they reached their breaking point. You helped us get the Rosas to an inexpensive hotel room on 111th Avenue – just for a single night. You also paid the salary of the crisis workers who, the following morning, successfully fought to get them admitted into a safe shelter.

Although some would like you to believe otherwise, it's really not that complicated. These boys and girls, like

yours and mine, need food in their stomach and a roof over their heads. When they are sick, they need to see a doctor. For the children caught in this snare, they desperately want someplace where they can let their small shoulders down. Some place to store a few toys and books. A place to do their homework. A way to get to school tomorrow morning.

Your support brings immediate help and restores hope to homeless families. The enclosed postcard is a simple way to speak out against this destructive policy. As the holidays approach, thank you for sharing our vision of a New York in which each of our neighbors has a place to call home.

Sincerely,

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

Editors

RICHARD GELBER, JOSHUA KLINSKI

Photography

JUAN DE LA CRUZ, LINDSEY DAVIS,
NURA QURESHI

Design

CLARE MANIAS

Volunteer Spotlight: Lance Eisenberg

By Pamela Grove and Juan De La Cruz

Every night of the year, three white vans with blue logos depart from the curbside of St. Bartholomew's Church in midtown Manhattan, and follow uptown, downtown and Bronx routes. Manning the vehicles are volunteers of the Grand Central Food Program (GCFP), the Coalition's mobile soup kitchen that delivers upwards of 1,000 meals every night of the year to New York City's homeless and working poor people. This late fall evening, one of the volunteers in the Bronx van is Lance Eisenberg, who has served the GCFP for a decade. As a Team Leader, he has earned the respect of Coalition staff, other volunteers and most importantly, those men and women who come to the vans for a hot meal.

Lance shares that "around ten years ago, I was hanging out at a homeless encampment near the Seaport and although I was not technically homeless myself, it was a hard part of my life. I'd lost a business, so, there I was... I'd see this van coming to feed people and I thought to myself, when things get better, I'm going to do that too."

Things did improve for Lance and he kept that promise.

"I rely heavily on consistent and caring volunteers. They are the lifeline of the program," states Juan De La Cruz, Director of the GCFP. "Lance, in particular, gives clients a sense of dignity, orients new volunteers, and I never have to worry about Wednesdays and Fridays, his days on."

Lance admits that he was skeptical that the Coalition would be successful in bringing emergency food resources to the Bronx. "I thought that we wouldn't have enough food to expand out of Manhattan or that no one would come for it or there wouldn't be enough volunteers. I'm glad I



“... although I was not technically homeless myself, it was a hard part of my life. ... I'd see this van coming to feed people and I thought to myself, when things get better, I'm going to do that too.”



was wrong.” In fact, the importance of the Bronx route, instituted in late 2005, is now one of the main reasons Lance continues his role.

The first stop is in the Hunt's Point section, by nighttime a deserted commercial area of squat buildings adorned with signs like: "We Buy Junk – Wrecked Cars." Tonight, a man rides a creaky bike to the van, picks up a bag of food and asks Lance for extra meals for buddies hidden away in an abandoned car lot. Lance explains that "we never see all the people who stay in this neighborhood, but we do know they are here."

The next stop is near a drop-in center and many of the homeless people who sleep there eat irregularly. Lance and his volunteer partner that night, Tharesis (who studied Nutrition while in the Marines), quickly organize over thirty people into a single line, hand out plastic bags into which they place hot soup, an orange, a bagel and low-fat milk. Lance and the homeless people greet each other by first name.

As the van starts to move away, a woman runs toward it, yelling, "Stop, stop!" It's assumed that she is racing to get food, but that's not it. She holds out a folded five dollar bill, insisting that the GCFP accept it as payment for the food her three children have just received.

Of course the money is refused, but her appreciation touches Lance in a way that currency cannot. "This is why I do what I do," he says.

Coalition for the Homeless deeply appreciates the support of volunteers like Lance. For more information about ways you can get involved, please visit our website at: www.coalitionforthehomeless.org

No Home for the Holidays: New Bloomberg Policy

By Richard Gelber

On October 11, the Bloomberg Administration announced that it had “closed a loophole” in New York City’s shelter system. The “loophole” the Administration referred to was the provision of emergency shelter to homeless families who had been denied longer-term shelter assistance. Starting the following night, families with small children wound up with few alternatives. Some made their way to St. Ann’s Episcopal church, a few blocks away from the intake facility. Days later, others sought refuge in hospital waiting rooms, subway trains, an all-night McDonald’s restaurant, and the cold city streets.

The decision to rescind emergency shelter to vulnerable families and children represents a direct assault on a fundamental human right won by the Coalition for the Homeless more than 25 years ago – the right to shelter for all homeless New Yorkers.

Of all the rights the Coalition has fought for since its inception in 1981, none is more critical to the well-being of our homeless neighbors and New York City as a whole than the right to shelter. Thanks in large part to the efforts of the Coalition, New York is the only major city in the United States which, under law, must provide safe and decent shelter to anyone who needs it.

The Bloomberg Administration’s decision to no longer provide emergency shelter for families declared ineligible to enter the shelter system comes at a time when family homelessness is at a record high in New York City (more than 9,500 families, including over 15,000 children). Since the mid-1980’s, a rejected family would be granted an emergency shelter stay while they re-applied to enter the shelter system. Under the new policy, rejected families are simply forced out onto the streets.

Families are regularly denied shel-

ter for a number of reasons, most often because the City declares they have other housing options. In reality, the Coalition and the Legal Aid Society have documented numerous cases of families erroneously denied shelter. The City’s own Department of Homeless Services website shows that families frequently must apply multiple times in order to be found eligible. In 2007, 33 percent of the 11,792 families deemed eligible for shelter – or some 3,891 families – had their initial application rejected. Thankfully, emergency shelter was available during the re-application process. Had it not been, we would surely have seen many of these families sent out into the cold.

Unfortunately, today we find ourselves in a dire situation. Since the new policy took effect on October 12th, scores of homeless families, including pregnant women and children with medical conditions, have been turned away by the City. Both children and adults have become ill as a result, and we are fearful that even greater harm will occur to additional homeless families who are shut out of the system. There is hope for these families, however, as many compassionate New Yorkers have stepped up to help.

In the South Bronx, St. Ann’s Church has opened its doors to homeless families, using the Church’s floor as a sanctuary. “People with young children are being turned away from shelter on cold nights in a brazen attempt at intimidation” said Mother Martha Overall of St. Ann’s. “This is not the New York City I know and love.”

On October 24th representatives from the Coalition and Legal Aid testified before the New York City Council and urged for an end to the new policy. Both organizations are working together to undo the damage done by the Bloomberg Administration. With your continued support, we will succeed, as we have in years past, in keeping New York’s most vulnerable citizens safe and off our streets.



On the night of October 12th, the Bloomberg Administration

On the night of October 12, New York City’s new policy of denying emergency shelter to homeless families declared ineligible took effect. The results were immediate and devastating. These three accounts offer just a glimpse into the ordeal endured by countless homeless families affected by this new policy.

Donna and her one-year-old daughter Rebecca spent the nights of October 12th and 13th sleeping on the floor of St. Ann’s, a church in the South Bronx which opened its doors to scores of homeless families rejected by the City. The City denied Donna and her daughter a place to sleep on the night of October 12, telling them to return to Donna’s ex-boyfriend’s step-parents’ overcrowded apartment. Not only did they refuse to house Donna and her daughter since she and her boyfriend separated, but Donna and her daughter were in severe danger staying there. The apartment was the scene of constant disputes between her, her ex-boyfriend, and other members of his family. In one instance, a member of the household threw one-year-

Denies Homeless Families Emergency Shelter



instituted a new policy of denying emergency shelter to homeless families. Many families with small children took refuge on the floor of St. Ann's church in the South Bronx.

old Rebecca down the stairs. On a separate occasion, Donna's ex-boyfriend pushed her into a wall while she was holding her daughter. In doing so, Donna's ex-boyfriend injured Rebecca so severely she required emergency room treatment.

After Donna was initially found ineligible for housing assistance, she attempted to return to her ex-boyfriend's step-parents' apartment. They, however, had changed the locks and refused to open the door – telling her not to come back. After sleeping on the floor of St. Ann's on the nights of October 12 and October 13, Donna and her daughter spent the night of October 14 at the Living Room drop-in center sleeping on a chair. Only after a Coalition staff member accompanied Donna and her daughter to the Department of Homeless Services intake center and insisted that the City properly assess the domestic violence threat in the family's case did the City relent and provide the family with a ten-day shelter placement. As we go to press with this edition of *Safety Net*, the family's future remains uncertain.

From October 12, until the night of October 19, New York City denied shelter to Thomas Smith and his 15-year-old son Jackson on the grounds that they had two available housing “options” – a dangerous and illegal basement apartment and Thomas' mother's overcrowded house in Puerto Rico. Both were obviously unrealistic prospects. Jackson suffers from epilepsy, chronic asthma, hyperactivity, and developmental delays. Jackson's mother sent the boy to live with his father because she underwent rheumatoid arthritis surgery, an ailment which relegated her to a wheelchair, and she could no longer give Jackson the proper care he needs.

Thomas and his son had been residing in a basement apartment with exposed wires, sewage water that leaked from the ceiling, and severe mold. After sleeping on the floor of St. Ann's church for a week, the City reversed its decision and provided the family with shelter only after the Coalition, in partnership with Legal Aid, presented pictures of the dangerous and unlawful basement apartment. Although Thomas and Jackson finally found relief, the City has only agreed to shelter them

on a temporary basis. Under the new policy, they are in danger of losing their shelter in the near future.

Sheila and her two-year-old daughter Lindsey, who suffers from asthma, became homeless in July when they were evicted from their Housing Stability Plus apartment. Sheila found another apartment, but was prevented from moving in because the residence had not yet passed the required Section 8 Program inspection. With no place to go, the family applied for temporary shelter and was denied by the City.

Without any alternative housing, the family slept on the floor of St. Ann's on the nights of October 12th and 13th, in a waiting room at Lincoln Hospital on the night of October 14, and again on the floor of the church on the night of October 15. With the help of Legal Aid, the Coalition uncovered a ruling by New York State which reversed the City's ineligibility finding and directed the City to provide stable shelter to the family. Thanks to the work of the Coalition, Sheila and her daughter are now receiving shelter until they are able to move into their new apartment.

A Non-Traditional First Step

“I wanna have my own business,” Jill said, “I wanna be my own boss.”

By Rich Lombino, Esq.

Jill is a student in First Step, the Coalition’s 14-week job training program that helps homeless, formerly homeless, and low-income women gain the skills and confidence they need to reach economic independence. While many women who enroll in the program do so to gain the career and technical skills necessary to obtain entry level office jobs such as administrative assistants and receptionists, others like Jill aspire to be entrepreneurs.

“I’m in sales. I can sell anything,” she proudly explained to her new classmates during orientation. Jill’s past business ventures include setting up a table on the street to sell everything from cell phone accessories to shoelaces. “People will buy anything in New York. I once sold one shoelace,” she said laughing.

That kind of entrepreneurial spirit excites the First Step staff and inspires other women in the program to dream big. Our goal is to funnel that energy into constructive and positive career opportunities for each woman.

First Step’s current curriculum includes literacy, administrative and computer skills, job interview techniques, mentoring, and self-esteem building activities. The program’s success stories permeate businesses throughout New York City. Graduates work at high profile companies such as JPMorgan Chase, UBS, Newsweek, and Time Warner Cable; at leading non-profits such as God’s Love We Deliver and Lighthouse International; and at major institutions including Columbia University.

However, some of our students, like Jill, have wide-ranging interests and skills and may not be interested in



The Coalition's First Step job training program helps homeless women reach financial independence.

First Step’s current curriculum includes literacy, administrative and computer skills, job interview techniques, mentoring, and self-esteem building activities.

finding a job specifically in an office environment. Offering as many career options as possible to homeless women is crucial to their success. First Step is not a “one size fits all” program.

Over the coming year, First Step hopes to expand internship and job opportunities for our students and graduates into areas of “non-traditional employment.” The term refers to career areas in which women are typically underrepresented, and can include construction, fire fighting, painting, plumbing and countless other skilled occupations. Other industries we’re also looking to expand into

include retail, hotel, media and catering. Already, members of the First Step team have met with successful people in non-traditional industries and are forming linkages with other organizations in an effort to better serve our clients.

In the meantime, First Step continues to offer hope and inspiration to hundreds of homeless women on their often difficult journey to self-sufficiency.

“I know it’s not gonna happen overnight,” Jill conceded, “but I have to start somewhere. First Step is the place for me.”

If you or your company would like to learn more about offering job or internship opportunities to First Step students, please visit the Coalition for the Homeless website at www.coalitionforthehomeless.org, call 212-776-2075, or email rlombino@cfthomeless.org.

In Harms Way: City Places Homeless in Illegal Housing

By Lindsey Davis

Over the past two years, the City of New York has placed hundreds of homeless adults, many living with mental and physical illnesses, into illegal boarding houses despite knowledge of hazardous conditions. Coalition for the Homeless has learned of nearly fifty illegal houses to which homeless New Yorkers have been referred, seven of which have been condemned or ordered vacated by City housing inspectors in the past year. City officials have been repeatedly warned of these conditions but continue to send vulnerable New Yorkers to such residences, creating a dangerous market for illegal, substandard housing concentrated in the city's lowest income communities.

Such residences, often called “three-quarter houses” or “transitional housing,” are a tool used by the City to transition homeless adults out of public shelters, but do so at the expense of the residents’ safety. These buildings, often designated as one or two family homes, are overwhelmingly concentrated in low-income neighborhoods of Brooklyn, including East New York, Bedford Stuyvesant, and Crown Heights. Landlords illegally subdivide rooms and utilize space not meant for living (garages, basements, and attics) as sleeping spaces. As many as thirty-five men have been crowded into one building, with up to twelve men sleeping in bunk beds in one small room. Residents are typically charged \$250 per month in rent, the majority of which landlords arrange to have paid directly by the New York City Human Resource Administration, the agency responsible for administering welfare benefits. Typically, no formal lease is signed. Instead, informal agreements regarding rent and house rules, many of which deny residents basic tenancy rights, are made.

According to Department of Homeless Services data, the number of homeless individuals referred to “inde-



For years, New York City has placed hundreds of homeless people in illegal residences like this building in the Bushwick area of Brooklyn, now boarded up.

pendent living,” a catch-all category which includes placements to three-quarter houses, has increased 36 percent in the past year and 93 percent in the past three years. Seventy-two percent of all housing placements for single adults are now made to “independent living.” However, Coalition for the Homeless has found that many illegal boarding houses operate in violation of City buildings and housing maintenance codes, posing a genuine threat to formerly homeless residents. Violations include collapsing floors and ceilings, illegal conversion, fire hazards, holes in the walls, infestations of roaches, mice and bedbugs, as well as a lack of essential services. Additionally, the Department of Buildings has issued numerous violations for use as an “illegal homeless shelter,” “illegal SRO,” “illegal boarding house,” and even for collapsed exterior walls. Seven of the homes which the Coalition has investigated have been ordered vacated or have partially collapsed in the past year.

Despite the misleading moniker “transitional housing,” none of the

houses report offering services to assist individuals in moving on to more permanent, supportive housing, nor do they offer any ongoing mental health or medical services for people with psychiatric and physical disabilities. For example, nine men staying at the Fort Washington shelter in Northern Manhattan, a shelter designated specifically for homeless adults diagnosed with mental illnesses, were sent to a three-quarter house in Brooklyn which provided no services to assist with the maintenance of psychiatric and mental health. Even more tragic, this particular building partially collapsed earlier this year, forcing some of the men to return to shelters, and others to the streets.

The City of New York should not refer or place homeless individuals into housing which is illegal, has documented substandard conditions, is structurally impaired, or in any way threatens their health. Coalition for the Homeless will continue to monitor this troubling trend, and ensure the safety and provision of appropriate care to vulnerable shelter residents.

Thank You From a Fellow New Yorker:

Dear Coalition for the Homeless:

I can't thank you enough for all your help and financial support. I'm still living in my home and have you to thank for it.

I didn't have the mental or physical stamina to face homelessness and the shelters, and still don't, so you saved my life, I believe.

I will never forget what you have done for me.

Sincerely Yours,

Alicia

13TH ANNUAL

ARTWALKNY

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