



Promises to Keep

*The Reality Gap
in the Mayor's Plan
on Homelessness
and
How He Can Close It*

by
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For over a quarter century, New York City has been driven by crisis management in dealing with homelessness, spending almost a billion dollars on emergency services to fuel a sprawling shelter system that consumes an ever-growing stream of homeless families and individuals.¹ During that time, we've virtually ignored the possibility of actually solving the problem.

That's why New Yorkers gave the proverbial thumbs-up to Mayor Michael R. Bloomberg for announcing, at the start of his administration, what we all believed was a thoughtful and far-reaching plan to reform the city's approach to homelessness.² At the time, his focus on prevention certainly signaled a welcome sea change in policy—a paradigm shift that was in synch with current national thinking and trends.

In fact, the Mayor was so emboldened by his plan that he pledged to reduce the family shelter population by two-thirds.³ Surely, at the time, he was unaware of the challenges ahead, especially since prior administrations had failed to

invest in initiatives to solve the problem, instead relying almost exclusively on expanding our shelter system.⁴

Nonetheless, no one could quarrel with the Mayor's position that it was more judicious to allocate dollars to help stabilize a family already in housing than to spend \$36,000 a year to warehouse an evicted family in a city shelter.⁵ And proven prevention strategies—especially the

creation of community-based support systems—are critical to keeping people in their homes. For every family that isn't uprooted, every child who remains in his own school, every senior citizen who keeps her home of 40 years, that's an enormous victory.

But the Mayor's immense promise has fallen short. There is now a wide gap between the Mayor's rhetoric and reality.

The reality is that today the family shelter population is at a five-year high. Over 16,000 children and nearly 9,000 families call a shelter

home: comprising almost 75% of our city's entire shelter population.⁶ These figures, obviously, do not include the countless thousands sleeping on the living room couch in an overcrowded apartment of a family member or friend, or those who are about to lose their home as they struggle to pay more than 50% of their income toward rent.⁷

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And, most notably, the dramatic increases in the shelter population are not the result of our economic crisis. Rather the families desperately seeking shelter are from communities that have been suffering under a “great recession” for decades, routinely making unthinkable choices between paying for rent or food or medical care.⁸

So what went wrong?

As a start, we’re simply not addressing our city’s dire affordable housing shortage. While the Mayor touts his “New Marketplace” housing plan for its production and preservation of affordable housing, that initiative reserves only a small share of the units for households who are either homeless or most at risk.⁹ And the Independent Budget Office reported not long ago that the Mayor already met his low-income housing targets, which were largely fueled by the preservation of thousands of Mitchell-Lama housing units.¹⁰ This is certainly an important city-wide effort, but it does nothing to increase the number of affordable units available and thus stem the tide of poor families in need of housing.

Moreover, as it turns out, the Mayor’s prevention programs were not designed to create robust community support systems of care or build neighborhood-based structures that could address the systemic causes of homelessness. Rather these programs simply divert families from shelter, mainly providing the quick-fix of a short-term rent subsidy, keeping families out of the shelter system and the shelter numbers from growing even larger—but for how long?¹¹

So with family homelessness at record highs, and the

Mayor now ensconced in a third term, it's time for him to take a step back to reflect on his earlier pledge, to reassess his priorities and work with various stakeholders outside of government to craft effective solutions. Otherwise, that promise will continue to drive his administration to create

a cosmetic, patchwork of initiatives that just tinkers with a system that is fundamentally flawed—but still in the hope of somehow reducing the size of the family shelter population. For instance, the Department of Homeless Services, for some time, has been trying to shrink those numbers by any means possible, occasionally creating stricter eligibility requirements for entering shelter, charging rent to stay in a shelter, threatening to evict families for failing to comply with so-called shelter rules, or offering a one-way ticket out of the city.¹²

Perhaps worse, many of these initiatives are calculated to divert the public attention from the depth of the problem we're actually confronting and to shift the blame to those who have been victimized by homelessness. The underlying message is that many families seeking shelter are really not in need, or they're rule breakers and not deserving of help, or they're non-New Yorkers taking advantage of the wealth of city services.

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So what should the Mayor do over the next four years?

As a start, the Mayor and his administration must broaden the frame in which they view homelessness, understanding the problem in the context of the larger anti-poverty struggle.

With that perspective, there certainly must be a real commitment to the production and preservation of low-income affordable housing, which also has to include the strengthening of rent regulations.¹³ And as a parallel effort, there needs to be a better mix of subsidies that ease the pathway out of shelter and promote long-term housing stability, especially greater access to section 8 certificates.

But we can not end our efforts there. Or else we'll simply be perpetuating the belief that we'll always have a permanent underclass—and insidiously shoring up the status quo.

Rather any housing plan needs to be tied to a larger and bolder set of initiatives. A plan that invests in the infrastructure of communities and promotes safe, vibrant neighborhoods all throughout our city. A plan that truly prevents homelessness rather than just manages it, where housing becomes the first step on a course to health and well-being and economic prosperity.

And the Mayor raised expectations that the mechanism was in place to help jump-start that process with his Commission on Economic Opportunity, which was supposedly formed to offer him concrete proposals for

“reducing” poverty here in our city.¹⁴

Thus far though his Commission has taken a rather tepid approach, concentrating its attention primarily on initiatives that rest on the principal idea that we just need to change poor people’s behavior; that we can break cycles of poverty if we simply motivate poor people through cash incentives to ‘do the right thing.’¹⁵

This ‘lift yourself up by your bootstraps’ approach, while appealing to those who believe it’s only about taking personal responsibility, misses a more widespread reality: the necessity to address the pernicious effects of living in need as a first step to creating (or rediscovering) the personal “wherewithal” to succeed and thrive. Study after study have shown that the stresses of poverty create genuine measurable physical and emotional distress, and that mental health issues are endemic in poor communities worldwide. And while the physical ailments associated with poverty may be clearly evident, no less real is its emotional toll, ranging from low-self esteem and hopelessness to depression and post-traumatic stress disorder.¹⁶

So while we should not entirely eschew “personal responsibility”, we can not look solely at the individual as the source for change. Our thinking must shift and focus on understanding that “place” matters too, that we cannot have a real impact on poverty without changing the conditions under which poor people live. These conditions are real stressors that put individuals’ well-being at risk, create a sense of powerlessness and despair,

and entrap people into believing they are unable to create positive change in their lives.¹⁷

Through this lens then our efforts should center on a broad, integrated neighborhood-based strategy that creates realizable results on the community level. Some obvious key areas include: the lack of affordable, safe housing; an education system that fails its students; minimal opportunities to share in the economic prosperity of our city; and inadequate access to quality health and mental health care.

We also must design a multi-generational approach—one that works with young children and families to older adults. Otherwise, we'll be dividing people into "camps" of investment, which simply perpetuates injustice and inequality. Thus, for example, a great early development program for a toddler has to be matched with programs that help older siblings thrive in high quality schools, that assist mom and to complete their own schooling and aspire to well-paying career paths, and that ensure grandparents healthfully age-in-place in their own homes.

And for change to occur at the community-level, we

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can not rely solely on a top-down approach, one that rests exclusively on the edicts of government or others. Rather, there needs to be effective strategies to empower community residents, training them to take on leadership roles in their neighborhoods and to create organized campaigns to tackle the structural issues that are often the drivers of homelessness. Successful on-the-ground,

Successful on-the-ground, participatory leadership can create a greater sense of collective efficacy, breaking the feeling of powerlessness that's pervasive in many poor communities.

participatory leadership can create a greater sense of collective efficacy, breaking the feeling of powerlessness that's pervasive in many poor communities. In this way, residents who have been disenfranchised for much too long, often treated as invisible, can actually influence those who pull the levers of power and, ultimately, become power-brokers in their own right.

Finally, to achieve success, we must wean ourselves away from the “quick-fix” and “putting up the numbers” mentality. Too often, we focus on programs that have the luster of superficial accomplishments.

But, the household bottom line is often the same as it was before—marginally above, at or below the poverty level. Nothing happens to break generational patterns of poverty, little changes for these families to realize their inherent potential to contribute fully to our community.

Yes, it will require us to develop audacious goals. But it's a sure way to inspire New Yorkers to dedicate their collective energies, creative vision, ambitions, and resources to a fundamentally different approach to combating homelessness. These tough economic times demand nothing less. The enormous dollars spent on shelter and other emergency stop-gap measures solve nothing and only continue to be a huge drain on the public fisc.

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Endnotes

1. Give 'Em Shelter: Various City Agencies Spend Over \$900 Million on Homeless Services, New York Independent Budget Office, March 20, 2002.
2. The City of New York Office of the Mayor, *Uniting for Solutions beyond Shelter, The Action Plan for New York City* (2004).
3. *Supra*, footnote #2.
4. Notably absent was a commitment to affordable housing and virtually no focus on prevention. And as a lead-in, the Giuliani administration was largely punitive in its approach, ignoring the depth of need.
5. See e.g., Office of Mayor Michael R. Bloomberg, Press Release, *News from the Blue Room*, July 9, 2009.
6. New York City Department of Homeless Services, *Daily Report*, October 27, 2009.
7. See, *The Big Apple Housing Squeeze: Paying 50 Percent of Income on Rent Becomes More Common*, New York, NY, April, 2008.
8. See, *Understanding Family Homelessness in New York City, An In-Depth Study of Families' Experiences Before and After Shelter*, Section, Vera Institute of Justice, March 2004.
9. *The New Housing Marketplace, Creating Housing for the Next Generation*, New York, 2004.
10. *The Mayor's New Housing, Marketplace Plan: Progress to Date and Prospects for Completion*, New York Independent Budget Office, November, 2007. Additionally, during the Mayor's tenure, about 200,000 units of low-income housing were lost because of market forces, meaning a net loss of 128,000 when offset by the 72,000 that were preserved. See, *As City Adds Housing for Poor, Market Subtracts It*, NY Times, October 15, 2009.
11. *Has the Rise in Homelessness Prevention Spending Decreased the Shelter Population?*, New York Independent Budget Office, August 2008.
12. See e.g., *Homeless Families Could face Eviction Over Rules*, NY Times, July 28, 2009.; *City Aids Homeless With One-Way Ticket*, NY Times, July 29, 2009.

13. During the Mayor's tenure, the number of low-income units, either in new or rehabilitated buildings, was drowned out by the number lost to deregulation. In fact, there was an estimated loss of about 128,000 units. See, NY Times, *As City Adds Housing for Poor, Market Subtracts It*, October 15, 2009. Further, in a recent survey done by Picture the Homeless along with the Manhattan Borough President, they found, in Manhattan alone, there was a total of 1,723 vacant buildings with 11,170 empty units in those buildings, which could be rehabbed and converted into low-income units.

14. See, *Increasing Opportunity and Reducing Poverty in New York City*, Commission for Economic Opportunity, September 2006.

15. See e.g., *Bloomberg Plans New Office to Help New York's Poor*, NY Times, December 19, 2006; *Cash Incentives for Poor Families Renewed*, NY Times, September 21, 2009.

16. See, Saegert, S. & Evans, G. (2003), *Poverty, Housing Niches, and Health in the United States*. *Journal of Social Issues*, 59(3), pp.569-589.

17. Brooks-Gunn, J. & Duncan, G. (1997), *The Effects of Poverty on Children*. *The Future of Children: Special issue on Children and Poverty*, 7(2), pp.55-71; Ross, C. & Mirowsky, J. (2009), *Neighborhood Disorder, Alienation, and Distress*. *Journal of Health and Social Behavior*, 50(3), pp. 49-64; Ross, C. (2000), *Neighborhood Disadvantage and Adult Depression*, *Journal of Health and Social Behavior*, 41(1), pp.177-187; Ross, C., Mirowsky, J. & Prisbesh, S. (2001), *Powerlessness and the Amplification of Threat: Neighborhood Disadvantage, Disorder, and Mistrust*, *American Sociological Review*, 66(4), pp.568-591.; Geis, K. & Ross, C. (1998), *A New Look at Urban Alienation: The Effect of Neighborhood Disorder on Perceived Powerlessness*. *Social Psychology Quarterly*, 61(3), pp. 232-246; Wallace, D. & Wallace, R. (2001), *A Plague on Your Houses: How New York was Burned Down and National Public Health Crumbled*.

Our Mission

The Partnership for the Homeless is committed to fostering a just society and creating lasting community change through the development of solution-oriented programs and policy initiatives that will eliminate the root causes of homelessness.



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