



Statement of Policy

Housing and Homelessness are Public Health Issues

Mission The mission of NYSPHA is to promote and protect the public's health through professional development, networking, advocacy, and education.

Vision Strengthening public health and taking action to make New York the healthiest state.

Problem Statement

Homelessness is a growing problem in the United States and has reached levels in some areas that have not been seen since the Great Depression of the 1930s. Lack of affordable housing and the declining number of assistance programs have added to an increase in homelessness. Poverty is directly linked to homelessness and crosses all geographic areas, urban and rural. People who experience a lack of job opportunities, affordable health care, domestic violence, mental illness and addiction coupled with poverty are more likely to be homeless. Homelessness also adversely impacts health and is, therefore, a public health problem.

Position Statement

The New York State Public Health Association (NYSPHA) advocates for preventing homelessness through solution-oriented programs, policy initiatives and eliminating the causes of homelessness. We encourage coalitions with federal, state and local governments and non-profit organizations to address the issues of homelessness and encourage and support the following:

1. View housing as a public health issue and a major social determinant of health
2. Prevent evictions through rental assistance programs, legal aid, landlord mediation, renter/tenant education, and connect tenants to income support services
3. Increase access to mental health services and COVID-19 relief through increased access to healthcare

4. Ensure children have access to schools and continued education opportunities and avoid disruptions in education due to their housing status
5. Advocate for protections against income discrimination and increase in vouchers for housing to increase housing stability
6. Increase access to emergency services, such as local food pantries and other social services
7. Keep individuals in permanent housing supported by federal assistance programs, such as Housing Choice Vouchers (footnote1)
8. Advocate for providing permanent supportive housing along with support services for people with mental illness, HIV/AIDS and serious health problems, such as the New York/New York Agreement (footnote 2)
9. Advocate for individuals who are homeless or struggling with housing stability due to COVID-19 by providing medical and additional support to homeless individuals and families who are COVID-19 positive through quarantine hotels
10. Encourage mediation and financial assistance between renter and rentee to limit homelessness
11. Promote health and vaccine equity for those who are homeless
12. Support better connections between housing services, veteran affairs and social services to assist in the prevention of homeless veterans

Justification

While the definition of homelessness varies across different agencies, a key component is an individual and/or family who does not have a fixed, regular, nighttime residence. Homelessness manifests in a number of ways including shelters, temporary housing, “couch surfing”, the street or living in locations not meant for housing purposes, such as a car (US Department of Housing and Urban Development, 2021).

In the United States, approximately 1 in 10 people live in poverty (National Alliance to End Homelessness, 2021). Poverty leads to a lack of affordable housing in both urban and rural areas. In non-metropolitan counties, 1 in 5 have a 20% or higher poverty rate as compared to 1 in 20 metropolitan counties. People living in non-metropolitan areas are 1.2 to 2.3 times more likely to have a lower socioeconomic status than those in urban areas and are more likely to be white, female, married and homeless for the first time (National Coalition for the Homeless, 2021). In 2018, 6.5 million Americans were spending more than 50 % of their income on housing. This is 13% more than it was since 2007 when the US began monitoring homelessness data. This severe housing burden puts people at risk of homelessness due to lack of affordability (National Alliance to End Homelessness, 2021).

Poverty is a driver of homelessness and an increase in protections against income discrimination as well as access to public assistance will bolster housing stability. Homelessness

is often rooted in lack of affordable housing, forced eviction, overcrowded housing, domestic violence, job loss and poor housing conditions. Every night in New York City, thousands of unsheltered homeless people sleep on the streets, in the subway system and in other public places, with a large percentage of these people suffering from health problems and mental illness (Coalition for the Homeless, 2021). Over the past ten years, the number of homeless people living in shelters or on the streets of NYC has risen by 55%, which accounts for over 60,000 people, of which one-third are children (The Partnership for the Homeless, 2021).

In New York State, over 91,000 people were homeless on any given night in 2020, of which approximately 54,000 were individuals and 39,000 were families. This translates to a rate of 47 out of 10,000 individuals per year which is the second highest state rate in the nation (National Alliance to End Homelessness, 2021). In New York City, homelessness has reached the highest levels since the Great Depression of the 1930s (Coalition for the Homeless, 2021).

In New York City, the number of homeless people living in shelters each night has increased from 39,066 in January 2010, to 53,199 in April 2021. Similarly, the number of families living in homeless shelters increased from 10,375, in January 2010, to 14,682 in January of 2020. New York City's homeless population in May 2021 was 51,882 people of which 15,930 were children and 20,064 were single adults who slept in a shelter. In 2015, homeless families were only found in the poorest neighborhoods in NYC. However, today they can be found in all zip codes in NYC. The number of people residing in shelters has increased by 39% over the previous ten years (Coalition for the Homeless, 2021).

In New York City, Black and Hispanic/Latinx communities are disproportionately affected by homelessness disproportionately when compared to their White counterparts. More specifically, in shelters, approximately 75% of heads of households are Black and 32% are Hispanic/Latinx, while only 7% are White (Coalition for the Homeless, 2021).

Homelessness has a profound impact on the health of adults and children. People that are homeless are at a disproportionate risk for poorer health outcomes, experience more chronic diseases, such as HIV infection, alcohol and drug abuse, tuberculosis and experience more physical and mental illness. Homeless individuals have a harder time seeking health care, resulting in sickness that goes untreated and an increase in chronic diseases that are not addressed. Contributing factors to poor health include lack of access to adequate food, protection and access to social services (CDC, 2021). School-age children that are homeless exhibit increased physical and mental illness and behavioral problems and need of health care services to address their needs (Gultekin, et al, 2020). A comprehensive intervention that includes, health, housing, legal and social services can improve health outcomes (Bovell-Ammon et al, 2020).

Since the onset of COVID-19, many New Yorkers have lost their jobs with unemployment rising to 13% (City of New York, 2021). While New York did invoke an eviction moratorium during which rent is paused, many will face evictions as it is set to expire early 2022, and past rent will

need to be paid. Renter/tenant education can address concerns of landlords and provide tenants with guidance on renting (US Department of Housing and Urban Development, 2021). While housing is often deemed affordable if rent costs one-third or less than what individuals earn, a quarter of New Yorkers pay half their income on rent (City of New York, 2021).

People who are homeless are also at an increased risk of contracting COVID-19 due to lack of adequate spacing in shelter, inadequate access to hygiene and sanitation facilities and lack of access to healthcare (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2021). COVID-19 protocols are especially hard for homeless people living on the street or in shelters in close quarters to maintain safe distances, wash hands regularly, wear a mask, receive tests and seek healthcare when sick (The Partnership for the Homeless, 2021).

Homelessness prevention is key during the post-COVID era and historically been found to be cost effective. For example, housing a family in a shelter in NYC (\$68,000 annually) is three times the cost of subsidizing the yearly rent (\$20,000 annually) for the same family. Preventing eviction through mediation and financial assistance results in 76% more families staying long-term in housing. Children that stay in their homes miss fewer school days and are twice more likely to graduate high school than those in shelters. People who stay in their homes experience less trauma of being homeless resulting in better physical and emotional health and long-term stability (The Partnership for the Homeless, 2021). By keeping people in permanent housing and using federal assistance programs, homelessness can be reduced or eliminated (Coalition for the Homeless, 2021). The number of temporary beds for homeless individuals in the US has decreased by 9% from 2007 – 2019. However, the number of permanent beds has increased 20 % over the last five years, which reflects a shift in priorities to increase permanent housing and decrease homelessness (National Alliance to End Homelessness, 2021).

To address homelessness, New York has a wide range of support services and programs for at risk families and individuals, including the Solutions to End Homelessness Program (STEHP), New York State Supportive Housing Program (NYSSHP) and the Empire State Supportive Housing Initiative (ESSHI) (New York State Office of Temporary and Disability Assistance, 2010). New York City has developed programs and initiatives to help individuals that include prevention, child support services, assistance in finding permanent housing in their communities, COVID-19 vaccination sites, street outreach to bring homeless New Yorkers indoors and Homebase, designed to keep people out of shelters (NYC Department of Homeless Services, 2021).

Footnote 1: Federal Housing Choice Vouchers allows low-income households to rent modest housing and provide a subsidy based on the family's income over time (Coalition for the Homeless, 2021).

Footnote 2: In 1990, the New York/New York Agreement was a housing initiative that supported permanent housing along with important support services (Coalition for the Homeless, 2021).

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Record of Action

10/13/21 – Adopted by the NYSPHA Policy and Advocacy Committee (PAC)

10/27/21 – Approved by NYSPHA Board of Directors