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New York City Council Hearings,
General Welfare Committee:

Oversight - Examining DHS' Strategies and Progress toward Meeting
the Goal of Reducing Homelessness by 2/3 by 2009

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Testimony respectfully submitted by

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Good morning. I would like to thank Chairman DeBlasio and the City Council members present here today for this opportunity to testify on this important issue.

My name is Christy Parque and I am the Executive Director of Homeless Services United. HSU is a coalition of 60 non-profit agencies serving homeless and at-risk adults and families in New York City. HSU provides advocacy, information, and training to member agencies to expand their capacity to deliver high-quality services. HSU advocates for expansion of affordable housing and prevention services and for immediate access to safe, decent, emergency and transitional housing, outreach and drop-in services for homeless New Yorkers.

Homeless Service United's member agencies operate hundreds of programs including shelters, drop-in centers, food pantries, Home Base and outreach services. Each day HSU member programs work with thousands of homeless families and individuals preventing shelter entry whenever possible through counseling, legal services and public benefits assistance among many other supports. Our member agencies provide high quality and compassionate emergency shelter to over 16,000 homeless New Yorkers nightly. Homeless service providers toil at the cross section of many society's problems. Our clients confront high housing costs, difficulty finding work, mental and physical illness, substance abuse, and domestic violence, and are particularly vulnerable during financially hard times such as these.

On behalf of my members I would like to thank the Bloomberg administration and the City Council for the much deserved and appreciated 3% COLA for Human Services workers. The key to success of any program designed to prevent homelessness or move clients from homelessness to housing is a stable, compassionate, professional, well trained and well compensated workforce. Staff working on the front lines of the battle to overcome homelessness appreciates the COLA as a vote of confidence and recognition from the City for their hard work and commitment.

I will focus HSU's testimony in four broad categories:

1. Measuring Progress Towards Homelessness Reduction
2. Access for the homeless or those at-risk for homelessness
3. Diverse exit strategies from homelessness
4. Reinvesting for the Future

1. MEASURING PROGRESS TOWARDS THE END OF HOMELESSNESS

I commend the Bloomberg Administration for its bold commitment to ending homelessness as outlined in the 2004 Action Plan for New York City ("the Action Plan") and the reforms that followed its introduction. While much of the Action Plan's promise has yet to be realized, the Action Plan was a catalyst for significant progress in reducing the numbers of homeless people on the streets

and the numbers of single adults in shelters. The New York – New York III agreement committing to the creation 9,000 units of supportive housing, the creation of borough-wide outreach collaborations, and the creation of new Safe Havens for chronic street homeless are major accomplishments.

HSU congratulates the City on the settlement of the McCain litigation. This landmark achievement preserves the foundation of New York's commitment to homeless families by preserving the right to shelter for this population while paving the way for positive changes to come. The positive changes at PATH from the previous system at the EAU are remarkable and HSU offers its support and expertise in shaping new PATH and shelter policies that may result as part of this settlement and to address the increase in family census.

It is now apparent that the Administration is likely to fall well short of its target: an overall 2/3 reduction by the end of 2009. But it would be naïve to lay responsibility for the shortfall solely at the feet of the Department of Homeless Services or the Bloomberg Administration. Achievement of these targets can only be attained with major affordable housing commitments requiring State and Federal investments that the City does not control. We are concerned that the City has alone taken on most of the burden and the resulting pressure of showing homeless reductions, and in turn has imposed this pressure on providers of homeless services, who are responsible for implementing the programs and policies by DHS.

Increasingly HSU member's City contracts do not sufficiently cover the basic operating expenses of an effective program. Private dollars which historically have been used to enhance core services for clients and to develop new and innovative service models are now being used to support the base cost of operating programs and shelters. We support measuring outcomes and demonstrating the effectiveness of programs we run. We ask that these metrics be broad, reflective of the diverse programs and clients we serve and moreover that they be fair and realistic. To meet the long term goal of ending homelessness, we must focus on providing solutions that are as diverse as the many needs of our clients.

Further progress in solving New York City's homeless problem will require resources that are adequate to this monumental job.

2. ACCESS FOR THE HOMELESS OR THOSE AT-RISK FOR HOMELESSNESS

We support the creation of accessible, safe and easily navigable entry points to the shelter system. The sooner a homeless individual or family enters the system and the immediate crisis can be addressed, the sooner services and support can be provided to help assist them on the road to returning to the community and stably housed.

For single adults, a multi-service approach which includes multiple shelter intake points complemented by Safe Havens, Drop-In Centers, transitional and permanent housing, outreach and prevention services is needed to ensure continued success in meeting the needs of this population.

We urge prudence and data-driven planning when implementing broad policy changes. The recent DHS decision to close two drop-in centers, in Manhattan and Brooklyn and the re-location of Men's Intake to Brooklyn could yield a reversal in these decreases. The evaluation of more detailed data could shed light on the combined effect of shelter intake, outreach efforts, drop-in centers and Safe Havens on the decrease in adult homelessness.

We appreciate that many chronic street homeless individuals are reluctant to enter shelter and that safe haven and housing first options are needed. However, there is no one-size-fits-all solution, and there is evidence that a Manhattan intake site providing same-day access to a shelter bed has played an important role in preventing and minimizing the duration of street homelessness. The 2008 Hope Street Count indicated that of the unsheltered individuals who slept on the surface as opposed to the subways, 58% were in Manhattan and 16% in Brooklyn.ⁱ The Action Plan indicates that in Calendar Year 2003, 28.3% of single adults entering shelter identified the "Street or Park" as their "Last Place of Stay".ⁱⁱ With more than 10,000 single men entering shelter for the first time every year,ⁱⁱⁱ the limited numbers of safe havens and housing-first apartments are a complement to, but not a substitute for, shelter intake.

We therefore were pleased to learn of DHS's August 14th announcement that there will be an additional Manhattan intake center opened "in tandem" with the proposed Brooklyn site and we welcome this as a positive step in realizing the potential set forth in the Action Plan.^{iv} Yet we are concerned that if the Bellevue shelter is closed before an alternate Manhattan site is identified, ground will be lost in the reduction of adult homelessness.

3. DIVERSE EXIT STRATEGIES FROM HOMELESSNESS

The ultimate goal of homeless providers is to assist consumers to return to the community in a stably housed safe living situation. Without the option of long term rental subsidies like Section 8, homeless services consumers face the risk of returning to shelter after a short term subsidy terminates. The new Advantage programs were a welcome change from the previous HSP program. However, the two-year time limit for Work Advantage recipients, many who are low or minimum wage workers, may force recipients back into shelter or substandard or unsafe housing situations as their benefits expire. We ask that further consideration be given to augmenting this program to extend eligibility beyond

two years and further expand eligibility for single adults. Additionally we ask that Section 8 vouchers become immediately available as a re-housing resource to shelter residents so that they may exit directly from shelter into a long-term housing situation.

With respects to the Advantage program HSU would like to commend DHS in their efforts to coordinate with other agencies impacting the ability of shelter residents to be move back into the community. Numerous cases of residents with “sanctioned” public assistance cases due to administrative error have been resolved due to advocacy efforts by DHS to HRA. Additionally the provision that Advantage apartments be held to the same habitable standards of Section 8 apartments is a fine example of strategic policy development and serves consumers by removing barriers when a consumer transitions from an Advantage apartment to a Section 8 apartment should a voucher be made available to them.

The single, disabled and mentally ill are particularly vulnerable to an emerging questionable rental situation, departing the streets or shelter for “¾ houses” or unregulated boarding houses, which are often times over crowded and provide no services. This becomes the only shelter exit option available to many homeless services clients because of limited income, lack of resources and increasingly unattainable rents. HSU urges State and City agencies to continue to investigate complaints about these homes and to close down those that are unsafe. Additionally HSU urges the development of clear guidelines regarding the operation of those that remain.

4. REINVESTING FOR THE FUTURE

In his 2006 keynote address at the National Alliance to End Homelessness, Mayor Bloomberg promised that “as the number of people in shelter continues to decline, we’ll reinvest more of the resulting savings in prevention, supportive housing, rental assistance, street outreach, and retooled shelters.” We couldn’t agree more, but without a public accounting, it is hard to know how much has actually been saved and reinvested.

Progress towards keeping this promise should be measured by a transparent and regular accounting of savings attributed to downsizing of programs due to decreases in shelter and street homelessness and the solutions into which theses savings have been reinvested.

CONCLUSION

We recognize that New York is confronting tough economic times. It is precisely in times like these that we must carry on New York City's legacy of setting the standard for smart, effective and compassionate homeless policy that cares for all its citizens.

Thank you for your time and commitment to addressing the needs and concerns of homeless and at-risk New Yorkers and those who serve them. Homeless Services United looks forward to working with you to realize solutions that will allow our members' vital programs to continue to provide our neediest New Yorkers with services that support and motivate them to thrive in the future.

ⁱ HOPE 2008-The NYC Street Survey, www.nyc.gov/html/dhs/downloads/pdf/hope08_results.pdf

ⁱⁱ Uniting For Solutions Beyond Shelter: The Action Plan For New York City, page12

ⁱⁱⁱ DHS Critical Activities Report FY 2008

^{iv} August 15, 2008, New York Times, [Concessions Made in Plan for Homeless in Brooklyn](#), K. Fahim