

The Picture the Homeless Oral History Project

Don't Talk About Us: Talk With Us!

The Shelter Campaign



*Ayesha, PTH Shelter Campaign, Department of Homeless Services Budget Hearing.
May 31, 2005*

The Picture the Homeless shelter campaign ran from 2004 to 2007. There was overlap between the EAU campaign and the shelter campaign, and the Rental Subsidies and Housing campaigns – just as the shelter system should bridge homelessness and housing.

Arising from the EAU campaign, as families who were PTH members became eligible for shelter, their concerns were the same as individual PTH members in shelter: safety, police raids, 24 hour transfers, curfews, nasty staff and ultimately the lack of housing that they could afford - so they could leave the shelter system.

The shelter campaign ended because PTH members decided that it was more important to organize to win housing for homeless New Yorkers than fix a broken shelter system. The more PTH learned about how the City was mis-spending hundreds of millions (then billions) of dollars on the shelter system, the more PTH focused on *Housing Not Shelters*. Throughout PTH's history, PTH continued to document shelter conditions and support members in the form of mutual aid, know your rights education, individual case advocacy and launching mini-campaigns against specific shelters or providers. This was also a way for PTH to continue to document the need for *Housing Not Shelters* and to propose alternate uses for money mis-spent on the shelter system.

This zine tells the story of the roots of the shelter campaign, what the campaign focused on, what was achieved. It also points to the development of the rental subsidies campaign and ongoing housing campaign's work to document how money spent on shelters should be diverted to housing – and the ways in which slumlords, welfare hotels and some non-profits make money off of homelessness and homeless New Yorkers. It is based on oral history interviews with shelter campaign members, staff, allies, archival materials, and public documents.



DeBoRah Dickerson: I remember being in a drop-in center. You sit and your hands swell up, and your feet swell up. When you have to go and live in a shelter, or in some kind of government place, and the places are not kept well, it's not clean, it's not sanitary, there's fights, there's arguments—there's all kinds of things.

While I was in the shelter system, I had three major surgeries, and my health started to decline. I came in with kind of a health issue. You know, my leg was bothering me. I had a torn meniscus and then later on, I had to have surgery on the meniscus, so it's kind of scary. In your home, you're able to take care of your medical needs, your financial needs, your mental needs, because you have stability. A home is stability. A home is your sanctuary.

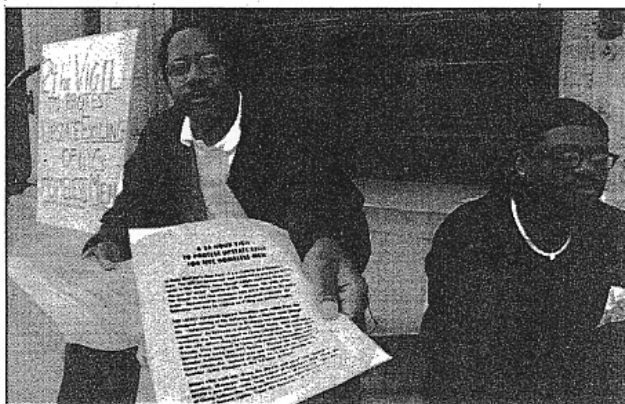
They say, "Yeah, we're giving you shelter—but it's not a home. It's just temporary." Having a home is very, very important, because then your children can be able to grow up and build relationships. And it's a safe place, you know? You try to make it as safe as possible. That's what home to me is. Not living in some city bureaucracy—*they don't care.*



2000: ORIGINS OF PTH: SHELTER CONDITIONS AND POLICE ABUSE



The Villager 3/29/2000



Villager photo by Beth Bianculli

Picture the Homeless

Last Wednesday, two homeless men Anthony Williams, right, and Lewis Haggins, staged a 24-hour vigil on the steps of Judson Memorial Church on Washington Sq. S. to protest the city's homeless shelter policies, which they say include early-morning police searches in which men are thrown up against the walls on warrants for minor infractions like public urination. The pair recently formed a new advocacy group, Picture the Homeless.

2002: HOMELESS PEOPLE ARE WORTH BIG MONEY

PTH's co-founders followed reports in the media about the cost of the homeless shelter system cost and demanded that money be used to create housing for poor people. In this early article from Caribbean Life, in January 2002 Anthony Williams is quoted:

"Every homeless person you see is worth big money. Once we give a provider our Social Security number, our Medicaid card, every time we sign our names on a sheet of paper, that's money from the government. You have to sign your name every night for a bed; you have to sign for breakfast, lunch, dinner each program, everything.

"And," he continued, "I figured out that I am very valuable, but I didn't realize it because I was so caught up in the system, just going from shelter to shelter. In the system I'm worth a minimum of \$23,000 a year. And I found out that services for people with serious mental illness can cost up to \$40,500 annually... Even though the services are provided by not-for-profit companies, a lot of the Executive Directors of these companies make 6 digits a year so they don't necessarily want to end homelessness. And that's across the country."

"We have to ask ourselves why isn't homelessness being ended; why aren't they developing affordable housing? So I started to follow the money. I read an article that said \$60 million had come to New York City for the homeless. I wondered, 'Where does that \$60 million go?' Then I found out that living in a shelter--getting a locker and a bed--costs the government \$2,000 a month per person. I said, 'That's enough for any of us to have an apartment, right?'

"That really got me, finding out about the \$2,000 a month. I looked at the Bellevue Men's Shelter and counted 850 men living there at \$2,000

a month. And that's only one shelter. There's the one on Ward's Island which holds 900 men.

Another in Brooklyn holds about 500. And that's not to mention the women's shelters and the family shelters. I started looking at numbers, asking questions. On any given night, 29,000 people are in shelters--over 12,000 of them children. What does that come to? And why isn't that money being broken down to go into public housing?"



2002: RISING HOMELESSNESS TIGHTENING FAMILY ACCESS TO SHELTER

As the shelter system expanded, PTH early on called for Housing Not Shelter and connected the many vacant buildings to solutions to homelessness. PTH was also learning about horrendous conditions inside EAU, the only intake center into the family shelter system in NYC and how they were actively preventing homeless families from entering the system by determining them "ineligible", aka, not really homeless.

Excerpt from Caribbean Life, September 24, 2002:

"Picture the Homeless calls on the Bloomberg Administration to prioritize the conversion of thousands of currently vacant city owned apartments to housing affordable for the lowest income New Yorkers – full-time, minimum wage workers and below, including public assistance recipients and part-time workers," she continued.

Lewis pointed out that shelters are more costly than housing.

"People experiencing homelessness as well as people who have homes throughout New York want the same thing: housing, jobs and community development that benefit all New Yorkers," Lewis said.



A report from the New York City Independent Budget Office's review of shelter access from 2002 to 2012, confirms what PTH and homeless families were witnessing. "While the city saw a significant increase in applications to emergency shelter for families from 2002 through 2012, it became more difficult to enter shelter during that period."

New York City Independent Budget Office Fiscal Report. November 2014



2004: THE NYC SHELTER SYSTEM GROWS BECAUSE PEOPLE CAN'T AFFORD HOUSING

While for PTH it was a no brainer that more and more individuals and families were becoming homeless due to rising rents, the mainstream media continued to define homelessness as the result of mental illness, substance abuse, families abusing the system to get apartments, or in shelter too long because they were being "too picky." The Bloomberg administration meanwhile ended the decades long preference for homeless families to qualify for Section 8, rents were rising but wages at the lower end were stagnant.



DeBoRah Dickerson: I was at sixty-eight and Lexington. It was an armory, and it was for women. In the beginning it was for working women, and people would fill out different things for housing, and then all of a sudden we lost a housing specialist. So, we had no one there and even though you had a case manager, they didn't do nothing. There's some case managers, and very rare, that would be able to connect you with finding an apartment or studio.



DeBoRah Dickerson: I was working. Yes I was. I was working, but I was looking for something else to do and I was in the shelter. I had been involved with the Coalition for the Homeless and I had also been involved with Life and Faith Sharing.

Being in the shelter it's always good to have support, a group—to know that you're not in this by yourself. That's very, very important because sometimes when you're with a group of people, especially if you're experiencing homelessness, it's always good to have somebody that you can really lock arms or heads with when dealing with a system that is *so corrupt* and don't treat you like a human being.



DeBoRah Dickerson: Then they started coming in, wanting to do locker searches, and there was locker searches. I had got sick, and I had a torn meniscus, but we had to have a pass in order to stay in our room.

They had *one* case manager. She was just really, really *nasty*. She would come in the room doing her rounds and I would *always* have my pass... Somehow or the other, somebody decided to play *a game* and remove my pass... So, I didn't find it and she came in and she started yelling and hollering and screaming at me, and I'm like, "Yo, this is crazy..."

So, I just got a little ticked off, and I was frightened, because I had never lived under that kind of condition, and that bothered me. I'm like, "I'm not trying to bother nobody."

One experience that I remember, they had this woman, her name was Miss Taylor, and Miss Taylor would, at five-forty-five, the lights would start turning, you hear her coming up the stairs... And she had a bullhorn.

She would go knocking on the door, "Turn the lights on!" And then, at six o'clock she's would say, "Rise and shine! It's time to get up!" On the bullhorn. And it frightened me! My heart would start beating real fast! And then she'd come and say, "I said rise and shine, time to get up! Rise and shine, everybody get up!" Then finally I just got mad, you know? She'd turn the lights on and turn them off, and she would go around and make her rounds three times.

I saw a note talking about the Coalition for the Homeless. I said, "We need to do something about that because this woman can't be doing that. She almost has you having a heart attack!" And it was really, really frightful.

So, I told them, "Yes, let's write and tell them that she's with this bullhorn. "Rise and Shine." Somebody said, "Let's take a picture of it. And I said, "Let's take a picture and send it to them."

And that was one of the beginnings of some stuff that I did, in there. And so, she got written up! I got a lot of people, because I know what it means to have petitions.

So, then she was mad about that, and she was cursing, "Which one of you SOB's did this? But, I don't need no bullhorn. I'll just use my mouth!" And Miss Taylor did that. And we wrote her up again. Then I went to a meeting, and we wrote her up, and finally, you know, she had to stop.



DeBoRah Dickerson: I've seen *a lot* of things go on in the system, that was really inhumane. Really, really inhumane and I have gotten retaliation and harassment because I reported them. When I first came into Picture the Homeless they would leave notes on my bed or when I was coming in, they would tell me, "Well, you know Miss Dickerson, you gotta come and talk to us." "About what?"



2004: FROM EAU TO THE SHELTER CAMPAIGN

Tyletha Samuels was hired as the EAU organizer in 2004. She established the Women and Families Committee and from there Shelter campaign emerged. There was a thru line from applying to shelter, to being in shelter to trying to exit the shelter system into housing. For this reason, there was overlap in the membership of each of these campaigns although the EAU, Shelter, and Rental Subsidy campaigns each had their own set of demands.



Charley Heck: Tyletha [Samuels] was there working on women's issues, because the way that women were getting treated by the city was *inhumane*. And some of the things that Picture the Homeless was getting involved in was bringing the city to task about the conditions in these places called EAU [Emergency Assistance Unit]. And the conditions that the persons in there had to live with and their children and sending their children to school and all that and all the problems that a homeless woman would have with children living in New York in those women's shelters. And Picture the Homeless was doing something to erase all those problems.



2004: INHUMANE SHELTER CONDITIONS AT THE WASHINGTON HOTEL

Rather than solve the housing crisis, the City of New York was increased contracts with slumlords and welfare hotels to warehouse the very poor. The Washington Hotel was one of these privately owned welfare hotels. Shelter campaign members were in these places and began organizing to improve conditions at specific shelters where they were staying. Below is an excerpt of a letter written to the manager of the Washington Hotel:

June 7, 2004
Mr. Allen Lapes
Washington Hotel
2289 Third Avenue
New York, NY 10035

Dear Mr. Lapes,

The Residents of the Washington Hotel along with Picture the Homeless would like to meet with you concerning the living conditions at the shelter. We feel that a meeting with you would give us a chance to voice our concerns in the hope that changes will be made. Please give this matter the urgency it deserves. We look forward to hearing from you as soon as possible with a meeting date and time.

Thank you in advance for your time and consideration.

Sincerely,

Laureen Simmons
Washington Hotel Resident & Picture the Homeless Member
Tyletha Samuels Picture the Homeless Community Organizer
Jesse Hightower, Washington Hotel Resident & Picture the Homeless Member
Sabrina Bratton, Washington Hotel Resident & Picture the Homeless Member

2004: A PERFECT STORM – CLOSING THE DOOR ON SECTION 8

As rents and homelessness increase, the Federal Government cuts to Section 8 is compounded by NYC decision to end the Section 8 preference for homeless New Yorkers. The Bloomberg administration justified this because in their view homeless New Yorkers were entering the shelter system just to get housing.

The New York Times

Lesley Kaufman

December 11, 2004

The Pataki administration yesterday approved a rent assistance plan worth \$60 million a year to help families in New York City leave shelters or avoid eviction, while also setting limits on how long and how much they can collect.

As many as 6,000 homeless families could be helped by the new subsidies next year, the city said. The subsidies will also help about 3,000 families a year facing eviction because they cannot pay rent. In addition, parents seeking larger residences so they can reunite with children in foster care are eligible for the program.

The program's approval amounted to a victory for the Bloomberg administration, which in October ended the practice of giving federal rent vouchers to homeless families in shelters. Such vouchers had been the primary way for families to leave a shelter,

but the commissioner of homeless services, Linda I. Gibbs, argued that giving homeless families top priority for the vouchers created a perverse incentive to enter a shelter.

She proposed replacing the federal vouchers, which were becoming increasingly limited anyway, with a city and state subsidy that would average \$925 a month for a family of three and decline by 20 percent a year over five years, but to no lower than a base of \$400.

Advocates for the homeless and other groups that use the shelters like victims of domestic violence had vigorously opposed the declining subsidies, saying the practice would create a dangerous level of instability for vulnerable families. But yesterday, the state sided with the city in supporting a program that echoed the time limits put on cash assistance by the federal government in 1996.

"This program for New York City is consistent with Governor Pataki's welfare reform policies, which have helped to move thousands of New Yorkers into jobs and toward self-sufficiency," Robert Doar, commissioner of the State Office of Temporary and Disability Assistance, said in a written statement. "The city strongly believes - and we agree - that these programs have tremendous potential to reduce and prevent homelessness, while also encouraging those receiving public benefits to move toward self-sufficiency."



EXCERPT FROM 2004 PTH SHELTER CAMPAIGN FLYER

***ARE YOU MAD THAT YOU HAVE NO WAY OUT OF THE SHELTER
SYSTEM, NOW THAT DHS IS CUTTING EVERYTHING?***

COME FIGHT FOR A WAY OUT!

Let's heat things up! They have cut Section 8 for homeless people in shelters, so where are you supposed to go? They have no plans for non-working homeless families! Let's make sure they come up with a housing plan that will be good for everyone.

***Join* with Picture The Homeless to come up with our own plan
for ourselves and our families!**

Come to Shelter Meetings Every Tuesday at 6:00pm

170 East 116 Street, Suite 1W

Between Lexington & 3rd Avenues

**Take the #6 train to 116 Street & Lexington Ave. Metro-cards,
Childcare, Refreshments provided!**

For more information contact:

Tyletha (212) 427-2499

2004: GIVING HOMELESS FOLKS CRAP

In 2004 the Department of Homeless Services announced a new rental assistance plan to offset cuts in Section 8 at the federal level. The acronym for this new city program was "C.R.A.P." PTH had fun with that.

**THE MAYOR AND THE DEPARTMENT OF HOMELESS SERVICES ARE
GETTING RID OF SECTION 8 AND REPLACING IT WITH C.R.A.P.
(Coordinated Rental Assistance Program)**



**COME FIGHT FOR A WAY OUT
& A BETTER SECTION 8 PLAN!**

ACTION WEDNESDAYS!

- **Dec. 1, 2004 - City Council Member DeBlasio** will be holding a hearing at City Hall @ 10:00am about the Housing Stability Plus Program.
- **Dec. 8, 2004 - Albany here we come!** PTH will be meeting with **Commissioner Robert Doar** who has this **CRAP** plan on his desk to tell him what we think of it. This is our chance to **STOP** this plan!
- **Dec 15, 2004 - Section 8 Action/Rally.** We will be holding a press conference/action in front of the Christmas tree at Rockefeller Center. This is our chance to tell everyone, look at the CRAP we will be getting for Christmas. **No Section 8 for Christmas!**

We need people like you! People who are being affected by this horrible plan to come and help stop this plan and extend the Section 8 deadline.

For more information contact: Tyletha (212) 427-2499



Pamela Lynch and Ayesha testifying to New York City Council about proposed changes to rental assistance for homeless families. 2004



PTH Shelter campaign with Voices of Women, at New York City Council CRAP hearing. December 1, 2004

2004: ROCKEFELLER CENTER CHRISTMAS CAROLING ACTION

PICTURES OF THE WEEK | December 11 - 17, 2004



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Wednesday, December 15, 2004

Homeless for Christmas

Homeless New Yorkers sing Christmas carols beneath the Rockefeller Center Christmas tree in New York City. The rally was held to call attention to recent changes to a city rule which prevents homeless families in shelters from applying for Section 8 housing vouchers

Photograph: MARIO TAMA / GETTY IMAGES

TIME

PTH member John Jones re-wrote Christmas Carols reflecting NYC state of homelessness

"Jingle Bells"

Jingle bells, the system smells, tax money goes to waste,
We need to fix the system now; we need to act with haste.

Give us homes, it costs much less, than paying shelter fees,
Put money back, in Section 8, so we're not left out here to freeze!

Jingle bells, the system smells, putting people on the street,
Homeless people need your help, to live and sleep and eat!

“Oh Homeless Me”

O homeless me, o homeless me
We homeless don't need sympathy.
A place to live, that's what we need
High rents will feed the landlord's greed.

O homeless me, o homeless me
We homeless don't need sympathy.

We've all heard of Section 8
But now it's gone, it is too late.

A place to live, a place to live,
That's what we need, not sympathy.

A cardboard box, a cardboard box,
This is my home; they changed the locks.

The Mike plans to force us out,
Please call the ones with budget clout.

A cardboard box and frozen feet,
This is my home right on the street.

2004 Shelter Campaign Chant:

Shelter money is poorly spent

Give us the money to pay our rent!

2004/2005: ACTIONS, DOCUMENTATION AND KEEPING THE PRESSURE ON DHS

Throughout 2004 and 2005, PTH shelter campaign members held actions in NYC and Albany, attended hearings, testified at City Council and State committee hearings, held press events and two accountability sessions for DHS staff in the PTH office, and began documenting the sub-standard housing available to homeless families through the newly launched “Housing Stability Plus Program.”

The PTH shelter campaign drew attention to the ways in which homeless New Yorkers efforts to obtain housing were blocked by high housing costs, understaffed shelter workers—including a lack of housing specialists and poorly planned rental subsidies programs.



PTH shelter campaign, one example of the type of HSP apartments offered to homeless families. December 23rd, 2005

Thrown into a crisis by Federal cuts to Section 8, NYC chose to continue expanding the shelter system and contracting with private landlords to use rent stabilized apartments as shelter units and welfare hotels as shelters instead of addressing the root causes of the housing crisis.

2005: WHEN WOMEN GATHER

Tyletha Samuels, the shelter organizer created a women's group at PTH called When Women Gather. The group met monthly, and the first meeting was on December 12th, 2005. The meetings were a safe space for women to brainstorm and were a resource for every campaign in that ideas and issues surfaced there during a period when there were few women members who were regularly attending meetings and became a powerful organizing space. The first meeting's agenda included the following questions for participants to discuss:

- What kind of working group will this be?
- Identify what it is the organization is working on, and how can we build on that?

Tyletha Samuels: It was a lot of men there. But women was going through a lot! Women was the mothers. I mean, women had children and I was part of the shelter system and most of the shelters that I was going to, it wasn't men's shelters, it was family shelters—and in family shelters, women were the head of the household.

When Women Gather, it was strong. I wanted women to know that they are strong, and that you could make a difference and it was awesome. I liked my *When Women Gather* meetings. I mean, women felt powerful. I wanted women to know that when you gather—and there's strength in numbers—that *you can do something*. And just being a mom, and going through all of that, that in itself *alone*... If your problem don't get solved tomorrow—just you waking up and still going through it and being strong enough to still handle it... *That's power*.

*Ruthie,
DeBoRah
Dickerson,
Tyletha
Samuels,
Lisa Davall,
PTH shelter
campaign
attending
city-council
HSP
hearing.
December
2005.*



Ruthie, DeBoRah Dickerson, Tyletha Samuels, Lisa Davall. December 2005

2005: ACCOUNTABILITY SESSION, DHS at PTH

PTH agitated the Department of Homeless Services (DHS) to be accountable to homeless New Yorkers. Twice in one year top DHS officials travelled to PTH's office in East Harlem to meet with PTH shelter campaign members. One of PTH's member's main concerns was the lack of affordable housing and problems with the HSP vouchers that impacted individuals and families ability to exit the shelter system. Joey Kemp was a shelter campaign member and journalist and reported on one of these visits for *Street News*.



Richard and Mike Slater, PTH Shelter campaign meeting with DHS. January 2005

STREET NEWS

July 17 - August 31, 2005

PTH Got 2 DHS Biggies to Come and Chat!

BY JOEY KEMP

For the second time this year Picture the Homeless got two big wigs of The Department of Homeless Services to do a sit-down session at PTH headquarters. Many homeless persons were invited to come to what turned out to be a very warm and informational meeting. And many showed up armed with personal questions, which were expertly answered by the two invited guests-Deputy Commissioner of DHS MaryAnn Schretzman and Susan Nayowitz, Director of Department of Client Advocacy, another arm of DHS.

The meeting was extremely well organized with the bulk of the homeless questions asked by 3 selected and prepped persons who are or were homeless. The long list of questions was the product of many nightly meetings held at PTH headquarters. Although the questions were prioritized, they were the direct result of input by homeless persons for the homeless population. Many impromptu questions were also answered.

It must be said a forehand, it is a known fact that the Federal Government has abolished funding of Section 8 which produced a huge budgetary dilemma for NYC. It was predictable that many of the answers given by both DHS officials would include mention of that fact. It must be said that even when there wasn't a homeless budget crisis, DHS was doing a mediocre job at best. BUT both DHS representatives came across as concerned and caring. MaryAnn Schretzman tried her best to give as honest answers as possible; there was a sense that she grasped the severity of our homeless dilemma. Needless to say that she expertly shadowboxed and did the rope-a-dope around a few significant questions, but for the most part, she scored high points.

Tyletha seemed quite pleased, "Homeless persons came and got answers to their numerous concerns and questions."

The most significantly disappointing all her negative answers was regarding PTH Homeless Bill of Rights. When asked about

the status of the Bill of Rights, she replied, "I do not know. I will get back to you."

The "Homeless Bill of Rights" is a very impressive list of rights of homeless persons residing in shelters. It also is a product that came from the minds of homeless and formerly homeless individuals and sponsored by PTH. "The 2 and 0 population is the only growing population of homeless people right now" MaryAnn said, "Every other population has seen a decrease... We did get a thousand vouchers for 2 and 0s so at least that will be a beginning...so they will be able to access those vouchers"

For a complete Q&A list of the event, please call Tyletha @212.427.2499. Because all the questions and answers are important and affect the entire homeless populace, most will be published here. Fairness and journalistic integrity were upheld to the highest degree.

Q: What is being done about inadequate training of DHS caseworkers that result in shelter residents having to get information from each other?

A: We would like to go back to Best Practice Forums, hold town hall meetings, and give out info packets from us to further educate caseworkers/housing specialist with housing information.

Q: Why is there no housing specialist for 2 and 0?

A: We are looking at program models and maybe working on a separate housing practice...Eddie Harris is the best one yet...we will look at that shelter and see what models they are using.

Q: Since our last meeting with you what are you doing with people who get SSI or Veterans' benefits?

A: It's been hard working with the state to get people with SSI exempt from HSP guidelines. We need more federal funding in order to come up with different rent subsidies for all homeless population.

Q: Why does the process from assessment to permanent housing take so long, and why

does it differ from person to person ranging from a year to several years?

A: We are looking into it. There is a lot of different reasons....Laws are already on the books to counteract discrimination....If you feel that you are being discriminated against, bring it to DHS Clients' Advocacy.

Q: Can DHS push to get HSP connected to HPD New Market Affordable Housing Program?

A: 12,000 units are committed for affordable housing Fair Marketplace....will get back with the rent guidelines.

Q: When is the EAU closing?

A: We do not have a date as yet. We know for sure the EAU will stay open until the end of the summer.

Q: Is it true that DHS is trying to eliminate fast track by stopping families from reapplying for 90 days?

A: YES

Q: Is it true that homeless families are being shuffled off to P.A.T.H., for remodeling and or rebuilding of the EAU on 151st Street?

A: YES

Q: What are the DHS eligibility guidelines and why are they not accessible to clients?

A: We will find out why they are not accessible and will get back to you.

Q: How can DHS put more community boards in place to focus on homeless families and their issues?

A: We want more community boards in place. With the closing of the shelter in Queens, we will reinvest the money to create more homeless prevention centers like HomeBase.

Q: How come HSP apartments are being approved even though they are raggedy and unfit?

A: We have different, lighter standards now than when we had Section 8; we tell landlords now that they have a certain amount of time to fix up the apartment. If they are not abiding by the guidelines, they are taken off the HSP listings. We have put together a HSP work-group to see how we can fix this problem.

Q: Why is there no sharing of apartment availability between NYCHA, HPD, and DHS?

A: There is a sharing with HPD. With NYCHA they have a strong turn over. The people on NYCHA's waiting list will get those apartments first.

Q: Why are they called DHS "Fraud Investigators" instead of Case Investigators?

A: The words "Fraud Investigator" came from a civil service title. We will look into changing the name.

Q: Where will these families be sheltered for the 90 days while waiting to reapply?

A: They will be accessed and if found ineligible be referred to our resource room. If that doesn't work, they will be asked to go back to where they came from-possibility back to the streets.

APPENDAGE OF ABBREVIATIONS

- P.A.T.H.
Prevention Assistance & Temporary Housing
- 2 and 0s
Adults without children-Parent with Adult Child-2 Adults
- HSP
Housing Stability Plus
- HRA
Human Resource Administration
- HPD
Housing Preservation Department
- EAU
Emergency Assistance Unit

2005: MAKING OUR OWN MEDIA

In addition to working to make sure the homeless folks in the shelter system's voices, analysis and documentation were heard in mainstream media, government hearings and other policy forums, PTH had been working with Manhattan Neighborhood Network (MNN) to learn video production and had a half hour show on MNN's local cable station for a few years. Betty Yu was PTH's instructor at MNN who supported PTH video production work. Wayne Thomas and Hugh Pressley were members of that video team and in this photo are shown not only being interviewed but also working as media makers.

Betty Yu: The other thing I remember being really, really struck by and moved by what folks shared around the conditions in the shelters.

I remember hearing about that, and that was really something that intellectually, you know, you hear about it, you read about it... And then to talk to folks that are living in such conditions but are resilient and are fighting.



Wayne Thomas, Hugh Pressley, PTH Shelter Campaign Press Conference, City Hall. October 5, 2005

2005: TESTIMONY TO NYC COUNCIL FROM SHELTER RESIDENTS

My name is Nikita Price, I became homeless on January 31, 2005. This is my first time in this situation. I'm a single dad with a female teenage daughter. I received HSP as a result of being in the shelter and on public assistance. I feel that HSP is an unfair program that doesn't help all populations of homeless people. What really gets me is the employment part of HSP. I found employment through HRA which made me ineligible for HSP. HRA gave me a WEP assignment that wanted me to go out job searching. I found employment and while being employed I could not seek housing, or keep my HSP, so I quit the job to get housing for my daughter and myself. The choice was not a hard one to make, I wanted out of the shelter system. I feel that a Work Support Program should be implemented into HSP, so that all homeless people can work. By not adding this program to the plan people are forced to choose between staying on Public Assistance or finding a low paying job. By adding this program to Housing Stability Plus people can work in a job that will allow them to maintain the rent, the cost of living, and their dignity.

That's why I joined the Picture The Homeless shelter committee so that I could address problems and issues that homeless people go through with in the shelter, HRA, and HSP.

*Nikita Price, PTH
Shelter campaign
testifying at City
Council Hearing
about HSP.*



My name is Lisa Davall, I now reside at University Family Center. I want to address the Housing Stability Plus Program. HSP.....*(read the paragraph in the brochure)* talk about the 20% step down. I have an HSP voucher.

I would like to tell you how I feel about the HSP program, I think that it is a program set to make people fail at having a decent life. First of all there needs to be better apartments for people to choose from. Since that isn't happening there really needs to be a proper inspection process put into the program like there was with section 8. *(Section 8 is a rent stability program that the government stopped funding, and a better rent stability program for low- income and homeless people)*

With Section 8 inspections you couldn't move into an apartment until the apartment was fully inspected, that meant that someone came out to make sure the apartment was up to code. Not like the HSP program, where all the landlord has to do is sign a piece of paper stating he will fix the repairs necessary. The conditions of the apartments we are forced to see, and some of us forced to take are not fit for human beings.

Lisa Davall, PTH Shelter campaign testifying at City Council Hearing about HSP.



2005: FROM CRAP TO HSP

Housing Stability Plus was the temporary rental subsidy program that required recipients have open welfare cases, excluding working folks, seniors, and folks on disability. Low wage workers in shelter were told to quit their jobs and go on public assistance to qualify for HSP because they needed an open case.

PTH shelter campaign members immediately identified problems with HSP. The value of this subsidy was less than the value of Section 8 or market rent. Landlords were refusing to take the voucher because they could get more money from market rent, or they charged illegal “side deals” telling homeless applicants with HSP that they had to pay additional money to get approved for the apartment.

Shelter campaign members began documenting the substandard conditions of the apartments that homeless families had to choose from. HSP was administered through the Human Resource Administration (HRA), yet HRA and DHS weren’t in coordination and homeless folks fell through the cracks.



Nikita Price: There were civil rights meetings and then there was a shelter meeting, and that happened to fit because I was in a shelter!

Folks that were homeless, were like, "This is the shit that's happening where I'm at. It's fucked up. Or I can't get a place. I've been in the shelter for a while."

Lewis: What were some of the issues at the shelter campaign was working on?

Price: Housing! And that's what I think made me look at the shelter that I was in, because I would hear all of these horrible stories about *shelters*. And then, I would go to a shelter that was, like I said, on a 103rd and Broadway, and it wasn't like the shelters that I was hearing about.

We had a security person on the first floor. The area in which people's visitors could come to see you on the first floor was nice and clean. The elevator always worked... I don't even know if it was an old hotel... I don't know what it was. There was no A/C, so it was hot as hell in the summer, but the building was nice.

Then I heard all of these fucking horror stories about other people's shelters. So, we were doing a lot of work at the time on the City not having a means by which to get people *out of shelters, into permanent housing*, which made me start paying attention to a lot of the folks that were actually in the shelter.

I remember on the second floor, there was a woman who had three children, two teenagers and a little girl. And the little girl I think was four or five? Maybe even six, but she was born in the shelter.

So, that meant that that woman had been in the shelter system for like four or five years. That's what made me say, "Oh shit—I'm not trying to do that." So that made me really latch onto

Picture the Homeless, because I saw how long it took for *me* to realize that there was an organization that was dealing with homeless people, whether they were sheltered or not. And a lot of folks did not know about Picture the Homeless, and I looked at this woman's plight and it's like—four years? Five years? That kid was born in the shelter? I'm like, “I got to get out of here!”

So, I kind of snapped out of it, and said, “Okay, what am I going to be able to do to get my fourteen daughter and myself out of the shelter. And that's why I really started becoming engaged in what Picture the Homeless was doing, because now I was more aware of my surroundings now, in the shelter. And I started seeing now, even though the building structure was decent, it wasn't the best—but the people were *suffering inside*.

And people were caught up in a sense of... What's the word I want to use? Some were complacent and then some were just... They were very despondent. They were just like, “Ugh, I'm over this. I don't see a way out of this.”

I've always been like, you make the best out of whatever the hell it is anyway, you know? So, rather than complaining, it was always, “what are you going to do to make it better?” I think that's what attracted me to the work that Tyletha was doing, because it was like—these people are really fucked up, and this city is saying one thing and we're witnessing a totally different thing.



2006: THE PTH ORGANIZER TRAINEE PROGRAM LAUNCHES

PTH wanted to hire organizers from membership, folks who were taking leadership and doing the work. As Nikita became active in the shelter campaign, PTH launched its organizer trainee program. Nikita was in that first cohort of organizer trainees, working closely with Tyletha Samuels.

As issues with HSP unfolded, PTH organized to make sure that DHS and HRA were “at the table” with homeless folks to fix issues with HSP, while Linda Gibbs demonized homeless families in the media and through these failing policies.



Nikita Price: So, then the city started going through this whole process whereby... They could not get people out of the shelter because the city *then*, as now, doesn't have a means by transitioning folks from shelters into real housing. So, they came up with bullshit vouchers. Vouchers that you would give to a resident and say, “Here, we will pay part of your rent, find an apartment and we'll pay.” During that time, it was the HSP, Housing Stability Plus. I remember being in a couple of meetings with Tyletha and people are saying, “I got a fucking voucher, and it doesn't work, ahhhhhhhhh.”

We were making a joke. They called it Housing Stability Plus, and we were calling it *Housing Instability Plus*. In the

beginning, everybody thought, “Oh well, this is great, they're going to pay!”

We didn't like the way the voucher worked, because it was a step-down. They would pay your rent for five years. They would pay the *full* amount for the first year, and then every year thereafter it would be a step-down process.

Finally, it didn't take us long to realize, “What the fuck! I'm not going to be able to pay this rent after five years, even with a job.” That's when the reality came, that the majority of the folks that were in the shelter that were members of ours, did not make a living wage, and with this step down, each year you would have to pay that much more, that much more, that much more, that much more. We were looking at people's salaries and we were looking at the rents that were being asked, and it's like, “No, this is bullshit!”

And that's when we start engaging the city. Like, “This is not going to work!” I remember us speaking with then folks at HRA and also at DHS, and saying, “This shit is not going to work! People are going to be right back in the shelter.” *And they would not listen to us.* And I remember us ruffling *a lot* of feathers at DHS—Maryanne Schretzman, Susan Nayowith, and a few other people. Whenever they would see us coming they're like, “Here come *these* motherfucker's again.” You know, “What do you want? We gave you a voucher!” Well, the voucher is not going to work.

When the city started realizing that they were having problems with the HSP voucher, they set up an advocacy meeting. So we, Picture the Homeless, we'd get a bunch of shelter folks in, that were getting fucked over by the HSP voucher, and we would go up and we would tell the DHS staff how this is not working.

The bullshit with that was, we'd all get our badges downstairs and go up to the whatever floor, and then we'd go into this big room, big table, and you look off to the side and they'd be sandwiches and sodas and all this shit there. And the unfortunate thing is with a lot of people I think, that are suffering—they see that shit, and then they gravitate towards that, and they kind of relax. *And that's bullshit* because when I go sit down at that fucking table, the same problem I walked in here with is going to be there. The only thing is I'll be a little fuller. And I was never comfortable with that. I always saw that as a way of taking your mind off of *what the fuck the issue was*.

I do remember, dealing with the two main people, Maryanne Schretzman and Susan Nayowith, on the issues of why this was not going to work. And because I had phone calls with both of them, on a regular basis—whenever there was an issue with the HSP and then, “Well, come to the advocacy meeting, bring your people there.” And I think they regret inviting homeless people up there.

One of our things was, we would always say in these meetings, “Okay, DHS is here. But DHS is not the entity that's closing their HRA cases. When your HRA case got closed, they stopped paying your rent. There was always this disconnect. But if HRA closes your case, they're not sending any checks out, and then people started being in these apartments and not knowing that when their case had got closed, the rent wasn't being paid. And now you went through all the shit to get your case opened back up, but now you're behind in your rent. And they didn't pay the back rent.

Now, you're getting ready to be taken back to court and that's when we started talking about the revolving door of going back into the shelter and I remember sitting down with the then DHS Commissioner, Robert Hess. Like I said, these

fucking people would sit there and just like, [imitates voices] “Yeah well, uh, it's going to work, it's going to be fine.” And we were like, “Well, you're not the people that are closing the cases. Why isn't HRA at the table?”

And I remember we were struggling, trying to get all of the entities that had something to do with this voucher, at the table. And they would always be coming up with excuses. And that's when I really realized how bullshit it was, because you can't get those motherfuckers at the table.



2005: WARDS ISLAND SHELTER

The Wards Island Shelter Complex was within walking distance of PTH's office on 116th Street. Nearly 1,000 homeless (mostly) men were sheltered on Wards Island, in dormitory style shelter, sleeping on cots with small lockers for their belongings. During outreach, PTH met a lot of men coming

from the shelter at 125th and Lexington Avenue, and at times rode the bus over to Wards Island to do outreach. Conducting surveys and listening to folks, PTH identified several issues with Wards Island.



Sam J. Miller: That's where the bus stop is. That's where there's always, at any given moment, a ton of *mostly men*, but not exclusively—who are homeless, who are waiting on the bus to go to the several shelters that are on Wards Island, and you know... There's also several methadone clinics in the area.

It's just sort of like this very stark, horrific example of the ways that folks are forced into vulnerable situations, where they're also really heavily policed. You know, there was a heavy, heavy police presence there. There still is. The subway station is just downstairs from there, and there are always *tons of cops there*. More than any other station I know of. More than Times Square, which is supposedly this terrorist target hot spot. But the underground economy at 125th is more of a threat to public safety, evidently.



Wards Island Shelter Surveys and Documentation.

On December 8, 2005, the shelter campaign raised several issues impacting people staying in the Wards Island shelter complex that had been identified over the course of several months. These issues reflected the experience of the majority of shelter residents that PTH met during outreach. PTH's shelter campaign reached out to DHS with issues as well as recommendations.

Issues included a lack of transportation to and from Wards Island for shelter residents in wheelchairs, maintenance issues including a lack of hot water, lack of nutritious food, staff treating shelter residents like prisoners, lack of safety, illegal

close-outs and throwing shelter residents belongings away, taking away beds for no reason.



Marcus Moore: I just felt like I cannot *just be here* in this space where I was at on Wards Island. *People need to see this.* And so I interviewed some of the men there.

I just knew deep down inside my soul that I had to go and interview some of these guys around here because they was really experiencing some real tough hardship that was going on in the shelter system at that time. And I was able to make them feel comfortable and relaxed to talk on camera and I was just documenting stuff that was going on at the time when I was in the shelter, where the shelter was like my residence for a little while.

People will complain, but I felt like I needed to do *something*. I didn't know Picture the Homeless like that, yet. But I knew that I had to document stuff that was going on where I was living in the shelter at the time. I was documenting and interviewing people in a shelter even before I got a chance to have opportunities with Picture the Homeless to do certain types of media work.

I can remember that people was in the shelter system for so long. I got them to talk about that on camera. The food was, was very sickening, you know? People were complaining about the showers. People was doing things in the showers where people have to wash up, and it wasn't sanitary, you know? Sometimes some of us don't need to be in the shelter, some of

us need to be in a nursing home. And it was just like—social issues within the system that people are being neglected.

Some people wasn't comfortable, that's understandable—but I got people to talk about that. People was able to get stuff off their minds and I thought that was very important to do. I felt somewhat like it was my job to do it. And today I still feel the same way, you know. So, that's what I was doing at that time to help me to get through all this, this muck of why people are in the shelter system this long.

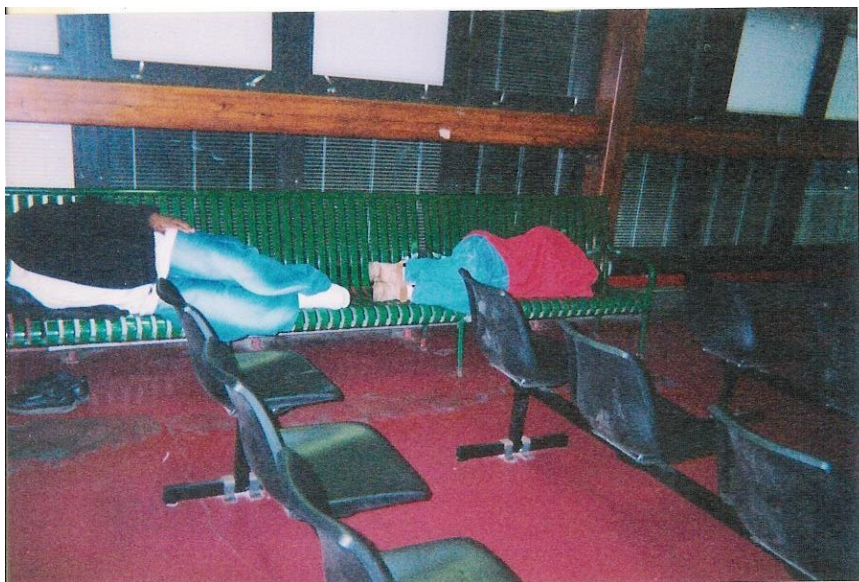
Some of them just been bouncing around from one building to the next, some of them been there, three years, six months, nine months, a year, you know... It was really frustrating for me to just hear this.

And it just got to the point where people was doing things desperately, like taking pills just to get housing fast. Because if you take some kind of pills and the doctor could provide a description, and make it out that you need some extra attention—then you get your place faster. To this day that's not talked about enough.

I'll never forget when fellows was trying to get me to take this pill, so I can get my housing faster... I came into the shelter system as healthy dude, and I left as a healthy individual in my right state of mind.

So, I realized that people was *endangering their health* to able to get some form of housing and they didn't care what they did to their bodies to get it to be diagnosed of whatever type of degree of health that you would have to have your own housing *immediately*, as opposed to waiting for the system to house you because you're able bodied, so you could just get out there get a job or something, and do your own housing.

But I learned that a lot of men at the time, because I was in a men's shelter, they just got to the point where they just endangered their health, they didn't care no more. They're gonna, *take these pills*, and get checked out by the doctor where they have to address them to some kind of housing package *immediately*.



Waiting for a bed at Wards Island. 2005

2006/2007: LAUNCHING THE RENTAL SUBSIDIES CAMPAIGN

The shelter campaign organizer Tyletha Samuels and shelter campaign leaders were attending DHS Advocacy meetings, conducting outreach to shelters and holding weekly campaign meetings. Many of the members of the shelter campaign were also involved in the housing campaign, and the civil rights committee.

While there were many complaints about the shelter system itself, PTH member's priority was getting out of the shelter system, into housing.

In late 2006 the Shelter campaign “ended” as a stand alone campaign and the campaign focus turned to Rental Subsidies. Shelter solidarity and mutual aid continued, as did individual case advocacy throughout PTH's history.



PTH SHELTER CAMPAIGN WRAP-UP

2002 Moved the Department of Homeless Services Commissioner Linda Gibbs to create Office of Client Advocacy.

2004 to 2007 Built power with residents of specific shelters to hold operators accountable to make changes including new beds, fixing rodent infestations; posting notices to residents; making repairs, installing new locks on doors.

2007 Launched the Rental Subsidies campaign originated in the work of the shelter campaign.

2004 to 2007 The shelter campaign brought clarity around PTH's understanding that the shelter industrial complex is a business. While the shelter can be fixed or reformed, the energy and time required to fix a system that no one wants to be in didn't fit PTH's mission. PTH members wanted Housing Not Shelters and that's where PTH chose to direct its energy.

2007 to 2020 PTH continued to support homeless folks in shelter, including dealing with 24 hour shelter transfers, abusive staff, organizing to end the cluster site shelter program and publishing both *Gaining Ground* and *The Business of Homelessness*, participatory action research projects documenting how monies funding the NYC shelter system can be used to create housing for homeless and poor New Yorkers.



William Burnett: There originally wasn't the housing campaign. Remember, in the beginning they were trying to sort out, "Well here's our experiences in the shelter system, what can we do to improve the shelters?" And again, it was a collective process, but eventually we were to the point, "Listen, we can spend our time trying to improve the shelters, but how many people in this room really want to live in a shelter?"

And so—a better shelter?! We want our *own housing*. So, we could spend our time demanding improvement of the shelters, or we can spend our time fighting for housing and we chose to fight for housing.

It all happened organically from the experiences of homeless folks. *So, there was no top-down policy analyst telling us what we need.*



Organizing Lessons Learned:

Ongoing evaluation lets you know when it makes sense to end or evolve a campaign with a more strategic focus. And as always, multiple tactics are necessary:

- Continual Outreach
- Surveys and documentation are necessary
- Collective analysis of issues and solutions
- Political Education about the root causes and current conditions
- Conduct research and write your own reports
- Confront policy makers
- Create your own media
- Be inviting to folks, especially folks sleeping in the streets, parks, etc.
- Know Your Rights Education
- Support homeless folks to visibly represent the group
- Creative actions create space for media coverage and narrative shifting
- Whether you're filing a lawsuit or proposing legislation, direct action is needed to keep up momentum and pressure
- Convert spaces of oppression to spaces of liberation
- Have fun

Narrators:

Anthony Williams

Betty Yu

Charley Heck

DeBoRah Dickerson

Marcus Moore

Nikita Price

Sam J. Miller

Tyletha Samuels

William Burnett

SHELTER CAMPAIGN CHANTS

Shelter money is poorly spent
Give us the money to pay our rent

We don't have to beg
We don't have to plead
Homeless people takin what they need

Homeless People Sit and Wait
Give Us Back Our Section 8

DHS we hate your budget
We need housing, don't try to fudge it!

We can't work with HSP
Your new plan don't work for me!

About this Project

Zines created by the Picture the Homeless Oral History Project are based on oral history interviews with homeless social justice leaders, staff, and board members of Picture the Homeless (PTH) as well as political allies and incorporate archival materials and public records. This is part of a series of campaign zines, covering highlights of each organizing campaign.

The Picture the Homeless Oral History Project covers the first 17 years of Picture the Homeless (PTH). We began with homeless leaders who have been with PTH for a minimum of 10 years because we want to understand why homeless folks came to PTH – and why they stayed and how PTH built a powerful, homeless led organization.

Our intention is to support homeless and poor folks organizing by listening and understanding what PTH meant to the people who carried out the work. Standing up and fighting for your rights isn't easy, coming together to collectively identify issues and solutions is real work. The sacrifices of these leaders were many, often in the face of extreme hardship. Picture the Homeless has changed many lives and made a difference in New York City, around the U.S. and internationally. The PTH Oral History project is a work in progress. Email us if you would like to stay in touch or have something to contribute!

The Picture the Homeless Oral History Project
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