

The Picture the Homeless Oral History Project

Don't Talk About Us: Talk With Us!

The Rental Subsidies Campaign



Rogers, Brenda Stokely, Sophia Bryant, Gina Hunt, PTH Rental Subsidy campaign puts Mayor Bloomberg on trial. June 24, 2008

The Picture the Homeless (PTH) Rental Subsidies campaign ran from 2007 to 2009, and focused on holding the city accountable for a series of misguided rental subsidy or voucher programs. It's origins began in 2004 when PTH shelter campaign members found it harder to exit the shelter system into housing. The quadruple whammy of rising rents and decreases in the number of rent stabilized apartments, federal cuts to the Section 8 program, and the Bloomberg administration's decision to end the homeless preference for Section 8 vouchers, meant that homeless New Yorkers were stuck in the shelter system with few options.

In 2006 shelter campaign members chose to focus on the Rental Subsidies and Housing campaigns. Rental subsidies were a short to medium term strategy for homeless folks to get housing. Vouchers aren't a permanent solution to the housing crisis, and often function just to enrich greedy landlords. PTH's housing campaign focused on systemic changes, ending vacant property warehousing, and researching community land trusts and alternative housing models.

Nikita Price was the Rental Subsidies campaign organizer. When he left PTH, that work was consolidated under the Housing campaign. The Housing Campaign continued to document and provide individual case advocacy with PTH members experiencing the endless rental assistance voucher problems.

The Rental Subsidies campaign utilized direct action, Know Your Rights education, participatory action research, street theatre, individual case advocacy and political education. This zine tells the story of the roots of the rental subsidies campaign, what the campaign focused on, the tactics used and what was achieved. It is based on oral history interviews with shelter campaign members, staff, allies, archival materials, and public documents.



Nikita Price: I was looking at the people that we were dealing with, and I was starting to look at all of the abandoned property, and the bullshit voucher that they had, and everybody was disjointed, nobody was talking to the other side.

That's when I really started coming up, and I still use it today with the way in which things are done, when they're dealing with homeless people. You get all of these electeds and appointeds and academics and all these people, and they go in a room, they close the door, and they shit in their hand and then they throw it against the wall, and whatever sticks is what they're going to come out of that room with and jam it down your fucking throat.

So, we knew from HSP, and all the other big three, big fives, or whatever the programs were, they weren't going to work and Picture the Homeless was always of the mind, "If we're not at the fucking table, then what you're saying doesn't include us, how could you possibly know? You can't learn this shit out of a book."

And I've since gone on, someone told me recently within the last six months—if you're not at the table you're on the fucking menu.



2004: A PERFECT STORM – Closing the Door on Section 8

As rents and homelessness increase in NYC, the impact of federal government cuts to Section 8 is compounded by the Bloomberg administration's decision to end the Section 8 preference for homeless New Yorkers after two decades.

The Bloomberg administration justified this because in their view homeless New Yorkers were entering the shelter system *just to get housing*.

Over 1,000 households in the NYC shelter system who already had been approved for Section 8 vouchers and were in the process of looking for housing, were told that their vouchers were no longer valid. Case workers reported to PTH staff that they had clients talking about committing suicide.



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."



Nikita Price: 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 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.

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

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.



2004: ROCKEFELLER CENTER Christmas Caroling Action

PICTURES OF THE WEEK | December 11 - 17, 2004



3 OF 8 ◀ PREVIOUS | NEXT ▶

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

2005: HOUSING STABILITY PLUS Bloomberg's New Rental Subsidy

Housing Stability Plus (HSP) was a rental subsidy created as part of Mayor Bloomberg's Five Year Plan to End Homelessness. The temporary rental subsidy program 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. People working to be able to afford housing were suddenly faced with having to stop working and apply for public assistance to qualify for rental subsidies but at the same time were demonized by the administration and the mainstream media as being unwilling to help themselves and gaming the system.

PTH shelter campaign members immediately identified problems with HSP:

1. The value of the HSP subsidy was less than the value of Section 8 or market rent.
2. Many landlords were refusing to take the voucher because they could get more money from market rent, or discriminated against homeless folks.
3. Landlords told homeless applicants with HSP that they had to pay additional money "side deals" to get approved for the apartment.
4. The apartments offered weren't inspected and were often in deplorable conditions.
5. Because HRA issued rent payments, if someone's case was closed – often to caseworker error, their rent wasn't paid, and they didn't find out until they were served an eviction notice.
6. DHS and HRA were not coordinating their efforts

From 2005, the shelter campaign organizer Tyletha Samuels and shelter campaign leaders, including Nikita Price documented and organized to end this failed program. Nikita was a new member but joined the first cohort of organizer trainees at PTH. Campaign members attended DHS advocacy meetings, documented, and exposed problems that PTH members were facing, conducted outreach to shelters and welfare centers, held weekly campaign meetings to analyze how the subsidy was impacting people and to identify solutions, and called for DHS and HRA to coordinate efforts to ensure that rental payments were made, so that folks weren't evicted and homeless again.



Example of an apartment approved for a homeless household with an HSP subsidy, photo taken by PTH shelter campaign member.

City Limits WEEKLY

Week of: May 31, 2005, Number: 487

TAKING SIDES: LANDLORDS SEEK CASH FROM HOMELESS

Some Housing Stability Plus recipients report that voucher alone isn't enough to land an apartment. *By Cassi Feldman*

Landlords are asking homeless families trying to move out of city shelters to fork over extra cash, *City Limits* has learned. The families are recipients of a new voucher known as Housing Stability Plus (HSP), which is supposed to cover their entire rent for one year and then decline by 20 percent each year after that, ending after five.

Roughly 1,750 families have signed leases using HSP since the program started in December. But several recipients say their landlords are quietly demanding additional rent each month, above what the voucher pays. Shaquan Anderson is one of them. After eight months in a homeless shelter, the baby-faced 25-year-old was dying to move into her own place. "I figured the faster I get out, the faster I can get on my feet," she said. She visited a few apartments, settling on a one-bedroom in East New York. It wasn't perfect, she said, but it was the biggest one she'd seen, with a living room she could convert into a bedroom for her toddler son. There was just one catch: According to Anderson, her shelter housing specialist, Leslyn Wharton, told her the owner wanted \$900. Since her shelter allowance plus voucher only totaled \$820, she'd have to come up with the extra \$80 per month herself. Anderson reluctantly agreed. (Wharton declined to be quoted for this story.)

But when Anderson went to the Department of Homeless Services to sign her lease, she learned that the deal was illegal. The program rules stipulate that landlords cannot rent apartments for more than the amount of the subsidy. So Anderson, who had already handed over \$160, has refused the landlord's requests for further payment.

"He said, 'If you don't pay me the money, you might have to go back to the homeless shelter,'" she recalled. "But I know my rights. There's nothing he can really do." The owner of the apartment, Shirley Williams, referred the call to her real estate broker, Dave Spencer. Spencer acknowledged the deal.

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 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.*

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. 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 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.

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. 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, "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?" 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.



Rachel Brumfield, PTH Shelter campaign confronting DHS Commissioner Linda Gibbs about newly announced rental subsidy program. May 31, 2005.



Left, Tyletha Samuels and Mohammed Siagha, PTH Shelter campaign confronting DHS Commissioner Linda Gibbs about newly announced rental subsidy program. May 31, 2005.



PTH Shelter campaign. May 31, 2005

2005: ACCOUNTABILITY SESSION 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. PTH members weren't getting answers in the DHS Advocacy meetings and demanded that DHS come to PTH's offices in to answer questions about the program. 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.



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

LATE 2006: PTH LAUNCHES the Rental Subsidies Campaign

It became clear that DHS and HRA were lying to homeless folks and the media about the failures of the HSP program. Many PTH members were being harmed by these failures and knew that documenting what was happening would be up to PTH. It was also clear that recommendations to improve the rental subsidy program would have to come from people with direct experience with the subsidy program.

From April 2007 to October 2008 PTH members, volunteers and staff completed 500 in-depth surveys with New Yorkers in the following situations, in all 5 boroughs:

1. In homeless shelters and approved for a housing subsidy and looking for housing,
2. In housing subsidized by one of the rental subsidies program,
3. In shelter and in the process of applying for a subsidy,
4. Were homeless again because they had been evicted due to problems with their subsidy.

Additionally, PTH learned that shelter provider contracts included penalties for not moving a set number of families into housing, which sound good on the face of it, but which meant that families were forced into accepting sub-standard apartments that resulted in some returning to the shelter system.



*PTH Rental
Subsidies
campaign protest
and community
education in front
of HRA for closing
public assistance
cases and forcing
evictions of rental
subsidy holders.
This was a key site
for survey
collection. July 6,
2007*



2007: FAITH LEADERS JOIN PTH, CALL FOR AN END TO ABUSIVE TREATMENT OF POOR AND HOMELESS NEW YORKERS Call

PTH continued conducting outreach to families applying for shelter at the PATH office in the South Bronx. While PTH no longer had an EAU or shelter campaign, we continued to learn of families who had vouchers becoming homeless again, often for non-payment of rent by HRA. PTH continued to document and to educate the public about how the homeless system continued to fail homeless New Yorkers.



Faith Leader Solidarity Press Conference, PTH Rental Subsidy campaign. October 30, 2007

From that day's press release:

"The city has a problem: Bloomberg promised he would reduce the number of homeless New Yorkers by two-thirds by 2010. But people are still poor, and they can't afford housing. So now, the city is making it even harder for families to enter the shelter system – they're punishing the people who need housing for the simple fact that shelter numbers aren't going down." **Sophia Bryant, Leader of Picture the Homeless Rental Subsidies Program.**

2007: HSP Ends, Advantage Subsidies Begins (AKA: The More Things Change, The More They Stay the Same)

It was a win to expose the flaws in the HSP program and contribute to it's ending. Some many "wins" however, are short lived. Unless folks are involved in designing solutions and have power to hold the city accountable, sometimes the "win" can be just as bad, or even worse.

Ending HSP and creating the Advantage Subsidy program meant expanding the eligibility criteria by adding a few "eligible populations", such as a category for working families in shelter, but it shortened the length of the subsidy, in some cases from 5 years to 1. Transitioning from HSP to Advantage didn't go smoothly and some were evicted for nonpayment. Families were again, left with a flawed program and a broken system, at the cost of millions.



The Advantage Rental Subsidies

From Time's Up: Homeless New Yorkers Demand Alternatives to Bloomberg's Failed Five-Year Plan.

The Advantage subsidy program was five different subsidy programs targeting homeless households with distinct types of income, as well as one for domestic violence survivors. Homeless families were competing for market-rate apartments with less-than-market-rate vouchers. The Advantage program was a reflection of Mayor Bloomberg's refusal to address the housing crisis.

- **Work Advantage** offers shelter residents a full year's rental subsidy, with the possibility of a one-year extension. Recipients are required to save 20% of their monthly income and pay a \$50 fee directly to the landlord each month. At year's end, the City may match the client's savings up to 20% of the rent and will evaluate the possibility of extending the subsidy another year. A minimum wage worker doesn't stand much of a chance under this arrangement.

- **Fixed Income Advantage** targets families living in shelters who have a family member receiving federally recognized disability benefits. It is a one year rental subsidy, with a priority application for a Section 8 voucher, but with no guarantee to transitioning to Section 8. The tenant under Fixed Advantage will need to assume the entire rent amount, which may be higher than their monthly income.

- **Children's Advantage** subsidies may be available to homeless families with an open child welfare case. Like Fixed Income Advantage, it is a one year subsidy and prioritizes the client for Section 8, again with no guarantee of transitioning to Section 8.

- **Short Term Advantage** offers four months of rental assistance, one month's security deposit, and a small broker's fee.

- **Domestic Violence Work Advantage** clients in HRA domestic violence shelters may receive the Work Advantage subsidy for up to six months. The work and savings requirements may be waived if the client moves out of the shelter and into an Advantage apartment.

The Advantage subsidies do not apply to all homeless people. Homeless single adults and undocumented immigrants still do not qualify for rental subsidies. Homeless families are not eligible to apply until they have been in shelter for *six months – during which time the Department of Homeless services is paying up to \$3,300.00 per rent just for a room for a homeless family!* Perhaps most importantly, the subsidies are not part of any comprehensive strategy to create decent jobs, or to create new units of housing for low income people.

These temporary rental subsidies are a homeless management system, not a strategy to reduce homelessness, and certainly not by two-thirds as intended by the Mayor's Five Year Plan. While time limits to housing assistance have been spun by the city and the mainstream media as a generous hand-out in order to help homeless people to become self-sufficient, it is simply unrealistic to expect that folks with fixed incomes and low wage workers can assume the full rent amount after one year, or even five years, given the rent amount of even a studio apartment in New York City.

The same implementation problems that plagued HSP also apply to the Advantage programs. The arbitrariness of the Bloomberg Administration's homeless policies is in evidence as well. Single homeless folks' eligibility for rental assistance was suddenly terminated by DHS in August 2007, just 5 months after the launching of the Advantage programs, with no public announcement. Picture the Homeless was surprised to discover that single adults in shelters were barred from joining the Advantage program, which was initially available to them. No official announcement was made—we only learned this when shelter providers posted a crude flyer in a single family shelter, even though we were in constant contact with the DHS Commissioners office during this period and had the majority of seats on the DHS Commissioners Consumer Advisory Committee.

The creation of the Advantage subsidy programs and their expanded eligibility to cover working shelter residents, as well as to those on fixed incomes, represented a major victory for the Picture the Homeless Rental Subsidy campaign as well as the advocacy groups who worked hard to pressure DHS to end HSP. However, the lack of a transfer process for the thousands of families with HSP left those formerly homeless households subject to the Catch 22 described above.



"I was the first person to receive a voucher for Child Advantage. Under this program you receive an interview with NYCHA for Section 8. I complied with everything. My paperwork was lost, and DHS offered no apology or explanation. What they offered was one more year on Child Advantage. The Revolving Door Syndrome is very real."

--SOPHIA BRYANT, PICTURE THE HOMELESS



PTH Rental Subsidies Campaign with OTADA Commissioner Hansel, Albany NY. January 31, 2007

Nikita Price: During that time, it was like we were always saying, "We need a seat at the table, we need a seat at the table." Just so that we could be involved in the process of policy making and that was always our push, you know, for the shelter [campaign] was being at the table. They're hearing

what we're saying, and the frustration was, "Well we're talking to DHS, we're talking to HRA..."

And I remember I was going up to Albany and talking to OTADA. Hanson who is now—what's he, he's ACS now? He's commissioner of ACS. But he was a nice guy! He just had no fucking power. I mean he signed checks, but he could not buck the system as far as the way it was laid out, as far as funding for shelters and shit.



2008: PTH Organizes Town Hall Meeting on HSP to Advantage Transition and Ongoing Subsidy Issues

*Nikita Price, D and Abdul
Sabur, PTH Rental
Subsidies campaign,
preparing for Town Hall
Meeting. May 29, 2008*





Rental Subsidies Campaign outside of town hall hearing, South Bronx. May 29, 2008.



Ryan Gibbs, PTH member, documenting Rental Subsidies campaign Town Hall meeting, May 29, 2008



“Town Hall” Event Criticizes Bloomberg Administration’s Failed Homeless Policy

By [Alex Kane](#). May 31, 2008

South Bronx, New York—On May 29, twenty-five people gathered at the Transfiguration Church here on Prospect Ave. to highlight the failure of Mayor Michael Bloomberg’s plan to end chronic homelessness in New York City in five years.

The event, organized by Picture the Homeless, a grassroots organization led by homeless or formerly homeless people, consisted of different skits to highlight the often humiliating process that homeless people go through in order to get assistance, as well as a panel discussion. On the panel was Jessica Hurd of Citywide Task Force on Housing Court, and David Holmes, Dolores Williams and Abdul Sabur of Picture the Homeless. Letitia Ledan, an organizer trainee with Picture the Homeless, moderated the event.

The Bloomberg Administration’s Housing Stability Plus (HSP) and Work Advantage programs were the focus of the panel. HSP is a defunct program that was replaced by the Advantage program, and attempted to move homeless people into stable housing. The Advantage program seeks to stem the problems associated with the HSP plan by making sure that the housing is up to par and having the program apply to the working poor as well as homeless people.

Although the Bloomberg Administration officially ended the HSP plan in 2007, it is still affecting people who were in the program before it was ceased. According to Picture the Homeless, “thousands...still live in HSP apartments and have no ability to opt out, and are at constant risk of eviction due to regular

interruptions of payment on the part of the city agencies responsible for paying rent.”

Abdul Sabur was recently evicted from his apartment because of the city’s failure to pay rent to his landlord. Sabur, a 43- year-old Bronx resident, is now homeless due to what he says is faulty paperwork and bureaucratic traps that are a result of the HSP plan.

“When [the city] makes mistakes, we don’t even get an apology,” said Sabur. He described his ordeal as comparable to a “natural disaster” and said that the city’s policies on homelessness result in a “revolving door,” from being homeless to having temporary housing to becoming homeless again. After being evicted, his landlord threw all of his personal belongings out, including birth certificates, social security information and credit card applications.

Homeless advocates say they are relieved that the HSP program has ended, but point out that the Advantage plan has numerous faults as well. According to an article written by the assistant director of City Wide Task Force on Housing Court, some families whose adults cannot work will be excluded. Also, the program only delivers assistance to people for two years, as opposed to the five that HSP provided.

Dolores Williams gave a testimonial that laid bare the difficulties homeless and formerly homeless people face every day when trying to get assistance from these programs. “I have not worked every day because I am looking for an apartment, but no landlords want to take the Work Advantage program because it does not pay enough and tenants can’t afford to pay the rent once the program is done with,” said Williams in a prepared statement. “This Work Advantage Program is not an easy process to get on from HSP because landlord’s don’t want to sign another lease for this program.”

Panelists and organizers at the event continued to emphasize that the problem of homelessness was a result of the lack of affordable housing in the city. Picture the Homeless plans to take the fight for a just policy on homelessness directly to the Mayor. On June 24, 2008, the fourth year since the Bloomberg Administration announced its plan to combat homelessness, Picture the Homeless will stage a “show trial” of Bloomberg for his “crimes” against homeless people.

2008: PUTTING PRESSURE ON THE CITY COUNCIL

Bill De Blasio was chair of the New York City Council General Welfare committee for 8 years. He had the power to force the Commissioners of DHS and HRA to testify about the HSP program and hold accountable. He never did.



Betsy Gotbaum, Public Advocate, Bill De Blasio, Rosemary PTH Rental Subsidies campaign member and PTH speaking on steps of City Hall about flawed HSP program. August 2008

THE SENTENCE:

For crimes against the homeless, and for wasting hundreds of millions of taxpayer dollars every year, the **HOMELESS PEOPLE'S COURT** passes the following sentence on Mayor Michael Bloomberg:

SPEND one year in a city-funded homeless shelter—

SLEEP in the bathtub in an overcrowded public housing apartment, like his workers tell homeless moms to do—

IMPLEMENT the "Housing, not Warehousing" Legislation, which will stop landlords from keeping buildings empty and turn those properties into housing for the homeless—

STOP the NYPD from arresting homeless people as a way to push them out of public space and give the appearance that homelessness is "under control"—

PRIORITIZE HOUSING, NOT SHELTER for homeless people—

GO BACK to the drawing board and meet with Picture the Homeless to fix your Five Year Plan based on the demands of homeless people themselves!



2008: PTH PUTS MAYOR BLOOMBERG ON TRIAL

The Verdict:
Guilty as
Charged



*Mayor Bloomberg Trial, Guilty for failing to meet the goals of his own 5 Year Plan.
June 28, 2008*

onNYTurf

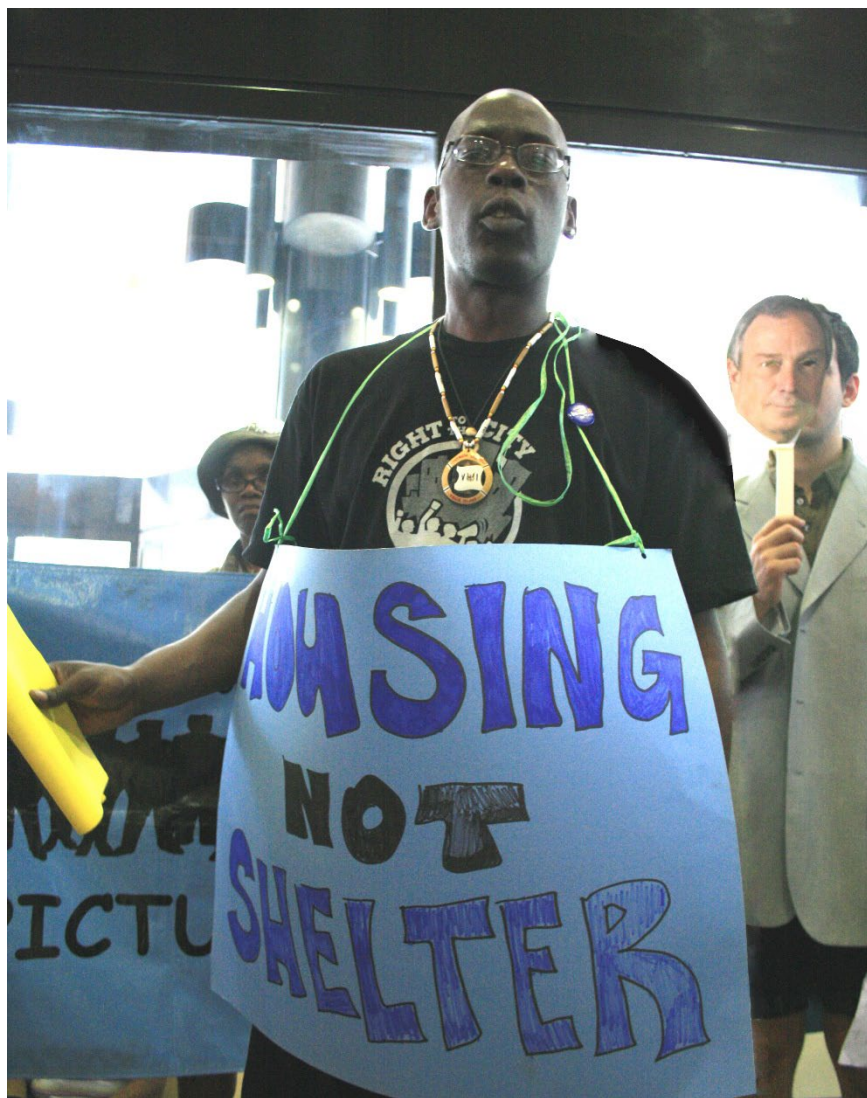
Jun 27, 2008 [12:53 PM]

Bloomberg Indicted over Failed Homelessness Policy



After four years, the Mayor's homelessness plan by its own measures is a disaster. He predicted wild drops in homelessness, instead nothing has improved.

Yesterday Picture The Homeless put the Mayor on trial for his failed policies. Yesterday, to commemorate the fourth anniversary of Mayor Bloomberg's Five Year Plan to end homelessness, Picture the Homeless put the Mayor on trial for the failures of his administration's homeless policies. After four years the Mayor's policies have proven to be a disaster. By the Mayor's own measures he has failed miserably. Picture the Homeless put together some amazing graphs that tell the sorry.



Sylvia Gina Hunt, Turhan White and Mike Sellick as Bloomberg. June 26, 2008.

2008: PATH Winter Sleep-Out

PTH never left the families applying for shelter at the PATH behind. PTH continued conducting outreach to families applying for shelter at the PATH office in the South Bronx. While PTH no longer had an EAU or shelter campaign, the dual issues of access to shelter and exit to housing were part of PTH's daily life because of the severe impact on PTH members. PTH slept out all night in a winter storm in solidarity with the families desperately seeking shelter inside.



*PTH
Rental
Subsidies
campaign
winter
advent
sleep-out
with faith
leaders.
December
2008*



Excerpt from PATH Winter Sleep-Out Article

the newspaper of the nyc independent media center

a free paper for free people

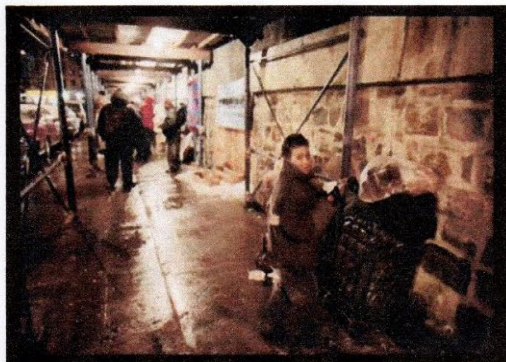
THE INDYPENDENT



Homeless Face a Cold Fight

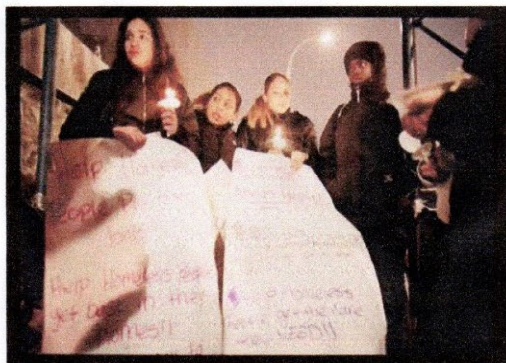
By Alex Kane

From the January 12, 2008, issue



Prevention Assistance and Temporary Housing (PATH) intake facility for homeless families in the Bronx was home to the “sleep-out” protest Dec. 13 against the Department of Homeless Services’ policy of denying people emergency shelter. Frigid temperatures did not keep homeless families, community leaders and activist groups from voicing opposition to the Department of Homeless Services (OHS) policy in the form of a candlelight vigil, defiant chants and a press conference.

Organized by Picture the Homeless, the sleep-out was held in response to a recent decision by the DHS to deny emergency overnight shelter to families who had been deemed to have housing alternatives that they were not using. Under the new policy, the only families who remain eligible for emergency shelter are those who can show that their housing circumstances have changed since being assessed by DHS. However, advocates for the homeless say that the policy denies families with legitimate claims of having nowhere to go for the night, while endangering many of the city’s neediest.



“I spoke with a woman who came down [to New York] from Massachusetts, and she is a domestic violence survivor. At one point she had stayed briefly at her friend’s two room apartment, and she came down with three of her children, so that’s seven people in two rooms. DHS is telling that person that she could live back there with them,” said Picture the Homeless organizer Nikita Price.

Until October 2007, any family who did not qualify for permanent shelter with DHS because they were deemed to have “an available housing option” could arrive at the PATH intake center facility in the Bronx after 5 p.m. and apply for emergency shelter. Families would then be bused to shelters around the city — sometimes not receiving a place to sleep until the early morning, only to be awoken at 6 a.m. by shelter workers.

2009: PTH RELEASES

PARTICIPATORY ACTION RESEARCH REPORT

PTH's fourth participatory action research project focused on the rental subsidy programs, Housing Stability Plus and the array of "advantage subsidy" programs.



Frank Clark, Nikita Price at PTH Rental Subsidies Campaign release of Time's Up: Homeless New Yorkers Demand Alternatives to Bloomberg's Failed Five-Year Plan. CUNY Grad Center. July 14, 2009

From *Times Up*

THE ADMINISTRATION'S RENTAL SUBSIDIES HARM THE HOMELESS

Picture the Homeless conducted in-depth, face to face interviews with 500 homeless New Yorkers over an 18 month period, interviewed landlords and shelter providers, and collected ethnographic evidence.

We found that the current rental subsidy programs are not viable avenues to reducing homelessness or sustaining housing.

FROM TIMES UP:

“Administration officials like to claim poverty when they're explaining why they can't come up with real solutions to homelessness and the housing crisis. Yet this argument is clearly made in bad faith, considering that the city is already spending massive amounts of money to keep people in shelter—far in excess of what it would cost to provide rental assistance, totaling \$750 million a year. One member of Picture the Homeless received confirmation from HRA that the city was paying over \$3,300 a month to keep them in a tiny shelter room with a shared bathroom and no kitchen. But when that same couple was offered a Work Advantage voucher, the amount was just over \$960 a month! The city has no problem spending massive amounts of money, as long as (1) homeless people continue to represent an opportunity for other people to profit, and (2) real estate business as usual can continue.”

Key findings include:

69% of respondents had been to housing court because of a subsidy-related issue. Instead of enabling homeless people to attain housing stability, these subsidies create a whole new nightmare for people exiting the city's shelter system.

41% of respondents were in rent arrears because of the city's failure to pay its portion of their rent, with an average debt of \$3,000.

City agency ineptitude puts homeless people at risk of eviction and return to the shelters.

While 84% are currently unemployed, 71% said they were mentally and physically capable of working. Far from being a helpless community in need of expensive services, homeless families are kept in poverty by a lack of living-wage-paying jobs and excessive rents.

NEW HOMELESS POLICIES CONTINUE THIS TRACK RECORD OF FAILURE

On May 9, 2009, homeless shelter residents with jobs received word that they were now expected to pay up to 50% of their income in rent. This policy inexplicably only applied to homeless families with children. After two weeks of bad press and massive outcry from homeless people, shelter staff, and some elected officials, the City announced that “technical issues” had forced them to stop the policy. On June 4, NYC papers reported that the Department of Homeless Services was putting homeless families up in vacant luxury condos; one week later, in the face of headlines like “Luxury Lunacy,” Bloomberg told the press “We want to move them out.” To fix these flawed programs and create effective avenues for homeless folks to gain housing and keep it, we recommend the following policy changes that are immediately actionable.

CREATE A RENTAL SUBSIDY THAT WORKS FOR ALL HOMELESS NEW YORKERS

The “Advantage” subsidies introduced in 2007 comprised a dizzying array of five different homeless sub-populations—and they still leave out massive numbers of homeless people. Without a subsidy that works for all homeless people, our city's homeless policies will continue to be haphazard, expensive, and ineffective.



Linda, Dalida, Maria Walles, DeBoRah Dickerson, Evicting Mayor Bloomberg. 2009

2011: ADVANTAGE PROGRAM MAKES PEOPLE HOMELESS, AGAIN

Maria Walles: I had the Advantage Program, and what happened was in, I think it was like 2011, one of my neighbors received a letter in the mail. I'm like, "I didn't receive that letter." She explained to me what the letter was. I'm like, "Oh, I never received it."

So finally, when I received the letter it said, "Oh, it was going to discontinue." I looked at that letter. I said, "Hell no." We got the letter, and I got hysterical. And I'll never forget that day. I told my mom, "I got to go!"

So, I got the letter and everything, read the letter, and I just couldn't believe it. I was pacing back and forth. I'll never forget that day. And I told Allan, "You need to read this." And Allan looked at me and said, "Well, what we're going to do?" And that's when I said, "We're organizing." I started the organizing. I called it the Advantage Program Tenant Unions. That's what we called it. And every week I would organize, and we all sat down and talked. It was late Saturday night. We sat down and talked, and we had food. We had drinks. And we just sat down and talked about this.

I said, "Listen, y'all working and everything. I'll go to the meetings, and I'll let y'all know what happened." So, every week we was having meetings until it got to the point where one day I just said, "I better call my city council." I went to my city council office in my district. Well, it was only a couple of blocks and when I showed her the letter and everything, that's when I guess he called somebody and said, "Oh, it was taken care of." And that's when that lawsuit came out about, "Oh, wow, why is this happening?" You had people that had the

voucher and just getting in the apartments, and then you want to cut up the program?"

They didn't give us much notice because I heard later on that a lot of people were going back and forth to landlord and tenant court. And that's when the Coalition of the Homeless came up with the lawsuit. I think they came up with a lawsuit of why they're going to cut the program out. And so that's the reason why the Coalition got involved. They had to slap a lawsuit about that to the city saying, "Why are you going to do this when you have tenants that are paying, and you want to get rid of the program?"

Even though it doesn't matter how long the program is, you still shouldn't do that. You know what I'm saying? People are going back and forth to court, housing court—at that time. It didn't come really until after the whole thing was over and Allan didn't have the money to pay it. He didn't have nine-hundred and sixty-two [dollars] to pay. The full rent was nine [hundred] sixty-two [dollars].

I did go back and forth to court with my apartment, and thank God I did leave before the marshals came because it probably would have been tough for me and the fact that I had to start all over again. It took me a minute to finally go back into the shelter because at first I was like, "Oh, I don't want to go. I just lost my apartment. So now I gotta go through this bureaucracy of being told what to do, what not to do." I couldn't do it anymore, you know? But me and Allan decided to go back into the shelter. It took us like, two months. This is during Hurricane Sandy. So, we went back. We didn't go back into the system until after the hurricane.

I was going through so much. I felt that Picture the Homeless was my home, you know? I felt that despite the fact I was going through, I'll never forget when I lost my apartment.

I spoke to somebody about my situation, and I explained, "Well, you know I've become homeless." I think I did ask permission to use the shower. I said, "Well, you know, I'm in a bad situation right now, and is it possible to use your shower? You know, it's been a long time." They was like, "Oh yeah Maria! You could use it!"

So, I took advantage of using the shower and brushing my teeth and getting cleaned up. I know one time I came there real early in the morning, I guess I got there a little before ten, and I just had a stressful night and I think I came running there and I was like, "I need to use the bathroom. I got to go, I got to go, I got to go." I was doing the bathroom dance. I forgot the brother's name. I think he was like the manager of the house? Jimmy.

I guess once I did all the dancing and stuff and he looked at me, he's like, "Okay, go ahead in." "Oh, thank you." So I took a shower and everything, and I felt better after that.



Maria Waller, Dalida, flying in City Hall subway station on the way to serve Mayor Bloomberg an eviction notice. February 2009

2011: ADVANTAGE CRISIS AND HOW NYC CREATES HOMELESSNESS

IF THE CITY HAS STOPPED PAYING YOUR RENT, THAT DOES NOT MEAN YOU NEED TO PACK UP AND LEAVE.

REMEMBER: THE POLICE CAN NOT EVICT!!

**1. SHOW PROOF THAT YOU LIVE THERE.
EVEN IF THE OWNER IS PRESENT, THIS IS
A CIVIL ISSUE—NOT A CRIMINAL ONE!**

**2. AS LONG AS A CRIME IS NOT BEING
COMMITTED—YOU'RE GOOD.**

3. REMEMBER: THIS IS NOT YOUR FAULT.

4. DO NOT MOVE OUT OF YOUR HOME.

5. WAIT FOR A VACATE ORDER.

6. THEN REMAIN IN YOUR HOME.

**7. AS LEGAL AID HAS SAID, THEY CANNOT
EVICT YOU WITHOUT TAKING YOU TO
COURT.**

8. SO DON'T BE INTIMIDATED!!

EMERGENCY MEETING!!



CHALLENGES WITH SUPPORTIVE HOUSING

Supportive housing doesn't work for everyone. In order to qualify for supportive housing you need a disability, either of chronic mental illness, substance addiction, HIV/AIDS or have been released from prison. PTH consistently maintained the public policy position that dividing up homeless folks based on narrow eligibility criteria was not a solution to the housing crisis.

Not being able to afford some of the highest rents in the entire country means you need help, but it doesn't qualify you for Supportive Housing.



Marcus Moore: 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 systems 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 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*.



PTH Rental Subsidies Campaign Wrap Up

2004 to 2007 The shelter campaign brought clarity and evidence to PTH's analysis that the shelter industrial complex is a business.

2005 Exposed the failures of HSP a flawed housing subsidy for homeless folks with public assistance cases that put homeless people in unsafe and unsustainable apartments, where landlords illegally forced desperate homeless voucher holders into "side-deals", paying out of pocket monthly amounts higher than what DHS/HRA approved.

2005 Pressured DHS to hold monthly workgroup meetings to include HRA and DHS, as well as homeless New Yorkers to provide oversight of HSP.

2007 Launched the Rental Subsidies campaign.

2007 Moved HRA and DHS to consolidate public assistance cases for folks in shelter to one HRA location.

2007 Forced the city to create the Advantage rental subsidy programs for homeless folks with low-wage jobs, or who had disability income.

2007 Forced the Department of Homeless Services to create an improved inspection process for apartments rented through these subsidy programs.

2009 Published report, "Times Up", an expose on Mayor Bloomberg's failed 5 Year Plan to End Homelessness, based upon over 500 surveys and data gathered from City agencies.



Nikita Price: Because, it's one thing to say, "Okay, you know we're getting fucked, we're getting fucked..." But we had to come up with, you know—what's the next step? We know what the problem is, so what do you do? How do you fix it?

And I think that was when we would then introduce the issue of all this abandoned property, and that's when we're also doing our abandoned building count. The City *does own* some of this property and there are this many people in the fucking shelter, and on the street... I don't think the shelter campaign talked a whole lot about street homeless people. We really focused on shelter folks, which was the largest population.



Organizing Lessons Learned:

Multiple tactics are essential. Direct Action, confrontation, and disruption, combined with research and collective analysis, allowed PTH to create space for the perspective of homeless New Yorkers to be heard. It was also important to continue to support folks trapped in the rental subsidy shuffle, long after the campaign was “over”.

- Diversity of tactics is necessary
- Without direct action we don't win anything
- Continual outreach is crucial
- Document what's happening in the streets.
- Collective analysis of issues and solutions
- Political Education about the root causes and current conditions
- Research
- Write your own reports
- 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
- Take the action to spaces of oppression
- Convert spaces of oppression to spaces of liberation
- Have fun

Narrators:

Marcus Moore

Maria Walles

Nikita Price



Rental Subsidy Campaign Chants

DHS is really crazy
Give us housing don't be lazy

DHS is really whack
We're not gonna take that crap

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

Housing—NOT SHELTERS
Housing—NOT SHELTERS

Housing Policies Are Wack
Bloomberg Must Be Smoking Crack

Homeless People Sit and Wait
Give Us Back Our Section 8

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

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

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

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

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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