

The Picture the Homeless Oral History Project

Don't Talk About Us: Talk With Us!

The EAU Campaign



PTH EAU Campaign, Homeless families walk out in protest of conditions inside the Emergency Assistance Unit. August 14, 2003

The Picture the Homeless EAU campaign was began in 2002 and ran until 2005, when it became subsumed into the broader work of PTH's Women and Families committee.

In 2002 PTH began receiving calls from pay phones outside of the EAU. Desperate families were reporting that they were told that they weren't really homeless and therefore ineligible for shelter, that inside the EAU was overcrowded and rat infested, they were being served moldy food, their children couldn't attend school and so many other issues.

PTH responded by going to the EAU in the South Bronx, meeting families on the street and in McDonald's, listening and learning. We began conducting surveys to document what we were hearing.

PTH used direct action, surveys, participatory action research and other forms of documentation, created agitational outreach, street theatre and popular education pieces to amplify homeless families concerns, engaged mainstream media, and directly pressured the Judge who was charged with overseeing compliance by NYC with state and city laws, and ensured that PTH's recommendations were included in the final report by the Special Master Panel.

The EAU was closed down, and intake services temporarily relocated to the PATH in the South Bronx. While PTH alone did not force the closure of the EAU, PTH's organizing and supporting homeless families to be visible and to be heard was instrumental in breaking the decades long stalemate which had resulted in the severe abuse of homeless families at the hands of the agency funded to help them.

This zine contains some of the highlights of this work and the thinking behind it, based on oral history interviews with PTH EAU campaign members, staff, allies, archival materials, and public documents.



Tyletha Samuels: Coming to the EAU, having their children with them, and having to stay in there all day, eating a sandwich maybe and then at twelve or one o'clock a.m., waking up to go to a shelter to stay just for one day or two days, and then have to come right *back* to the EAU. It was just ridiculous bouncing back and forth, back, and forth, back, and forth.

It wasn't pretty. It wasn't nice. I mean, if a family came from Queens, and they had to go to school... Or had to be put in a shelter in Manhattan, and they was already going to a school in Queens... That was very unfair. How were they going to do that, you know? Or they lived in the Bronx and was going to school, and put in a shelter in Queens. They was displaced.



2002: THE EMERGENCY ASSISTANCE UNIT (EAU)

The Emergency Assistance Unit is located in the South Bronx, and remains the only intake office for all five boroughs where families with children and pregnant women apply to enter the NYC shelter system.

Taking the train to the EAU from Judson Memorial Church to the South Bronx, most families would only speak with PTH down the street or around the corner and far away from the EAU itself, for fear of retaliation. Even elected officials were prohibited from entering the building. Nor were families allowed to leave the building without a pass, for fear of being “logged out” and starting over in their applications for shelter. PTH met women with orders of protection covered in bruises who had been told by EAU staff that they could “go back home”, and others who had been told dozens of times that they were ineligible and not really homeless.

Families had to remain in the EAU all day and night unless transported by school bus to an “overnight placement.” PTH created a series of events and agitational flyers based on what we were learning through conversations and surveys with homeless families.

PTH organized a Mother’s Day celebration in 2002, up the street from the EAU at Hostos Community College to create a space for families to talk about what they wanted to do about conditions in the EAU, and to “develop together an action plan.” Ongoing meetings were held in a park around the corner, in the McDonalds up the street and the PTH office.



EAU Mother's Day Flyer in Spanish:

Ha Llegado El Tiempo de: Cambiar El EAU!

Si Usted Es :

- * Cansado/a de esperar en lugares sucios y que los maltraten?
- * Escuchando sus hijos preguntando cuando se van para la casa?
- * Entregando papeles pero nunca resuelvan nada?
- * Recibiendo papeles que dicen que no qualifiquen pero usted sabe que no tienen a donde ir?

Juntanse con otros sin viviendas! Demandamos servicios con respecto y demandamos viviendas sin tantos obstaculos!

Vengan a un reunion con y desarrollamos un plan de accion.

10 de Mayo, el Viernes
antes del Dia De Las Madres

en el Colegio de Hostos, 500 Grand Concourse
"Cafeteria B" 12 de la tarde hasta las 3pm
Toma el tren #2, 4, 5 Sera refrescos y carfare
provided, ninos son bienvenidos.

2002: THE EAU SURVEY PROJECT

EAU Survey Results

Picture the Homeless conducted surveys during the first two weeks of May 2002 with fifty homeless families in order to document conditions in the EAU. The survey questions reflect the most common concerns voiced by families during outreach, phone conversations and concerns brought to our EAU Committee by homeless families directly impacted by EAU.

Survey questions were divided into the following categories:

- Eligibility
- Space/Food
- Staff Problems
- Placements
- Civil Rights


This survey demonstrates that individual complaints by people who are homeless reflect an *abusive system that is denying emergency shelter to homeless families through a process of intimidation, humiliation, and no accountability while the City of New York denies the crisis exists.*

May 2002 survey results reveal:

- 74% have been denied eligibility from 1 to 17 times and have been told they have somewhere else to go even with proof that they are homeless
- 59% don't know their rights to file a grievance
- 70% have spent from 1 to 50 nights sleeping in the EAU, including infants, pregnant women, school aged children and people with medical and mental health issues
- 94% report conditions in the EAU from dirty to filthy
- 91% report that the food is bad, including moldy food and sour milk
- 70% report that the food made them or their children sick
- 82% report unsafe numbers of people in the building
- 73% report that there is no ventilation

- 91% say that staff are disrespectful to people, including cursing, yelling, and physical assaults
- 82% report that it is unclear who is responsible for what
- 67% report that they do not know how to file a grievance against a staff person
- 70% report that the overnight placements are dirty
- 50% report that the overnight placements are unsafe
- 44% report that the overnight placements are too far from their children's school resulting in missed days and children being held back
- 61% report that "they keep moving us around"
- 61% report that staff try to keep them from organizing and demanding their rights
- 73% report that they are threatened with losing their children to ACS if they don't comply

PTH Flyer from 2002:



**ATTENTION ACS:
THE EAU
IS
ABUSING OUR CHILDREN!**

PTH EAU Committee Organizing Goals

June 4, 2002

- I. Improve Services at EAU/Hold the Government Accountable**
- II. Housing Not Shelter**



2002: IDENTIFYING WHO HAS THE POWER TO CHANGE THINGS

In 2002 PTH learned that State Supreme court Judge Helen Freeman oversaw litigation against the City of New York by the Legal Aid Society through the Koch, Dinkins, and Giuliani administrations. PTH began reaching out to her because she had power over the city.

When Judge Freeman refused to meet with PTH and the homeless families seeking shelter placement at the EAU, PTH made flyers with her phone number, giving them to families in front of the EAU and urging them to call Judge Freeman, along with quarters for pay phones. During this period the Judge appointed a Special Master Panel to study and make recommendations about how to resolve the deep problems at the EAU.

Attention Families in the EAU!

It is a violation of the Court Order that homeless families are sleeping in the EAU! Judge Helen Freedman is getting tired of the City not following the law. Call Judge Freedman and let her know how *you* feel about sleeping on the floor of the EAU!

212 374-8387

Judge Freeman: Enforce the Law!

Hold Mayor Bloomberg and Commissioner Gibbs accountable for their treatment of homeless families!

Ask the Judge what the plan is to transport homeless families to their overnight placements early enough so that our kids can get do their homework and get a good night's sleep!

PICTURE THE HOMELESS

55 Washington Sq. So., New York, New York 1001

212 982-5947 (ph/fax) ♥ PictureTheHomeless@att.net

Protest in Front of the EAU

151 E. 151 St. at Walton Ave., take # 2, 4 or 5 train to 149th and
Grand Concourse

Thursday, August 29, 2002, at 10:00AM

Tell Mayor Bloomberg:

Stop Abusing Our Children!

Demand that the City take families with kids to the
overnight placements at 6pm so the kids can *bathe, do
their homework, and get a good night's sleep!*

Tell Commissioner Linda Gibbs that it makes more
sense to give weekly passes to families to take their
kids to school instead of getting in line every morning
for a pass.

***Hold Mayor Bloomberg and Commissioner Gibbs
accountable for their treatment of homeless
families!***

PICTURE THE HOMELESS

55 Washington Sq. So., New York, New York 1001 212 982-5947
(ph/fax) ♥ PictureTheHomeless@att.net

2002: THE EAU IS ABUSING OUT CHILDREN, WHY CAN'T WE CALL ACS?

The children of the families applying for shelter in the EAU were suffering in specific ways in addition to being homeless, and the trauma and grief associated with that. Families were taken in school buses to overnight placements but often after midnight, only to have to return early the next morning for a pass to take their children to school. Families reported that overnight placements were too far from their children's school, and excessive absences often meant reports by the school to ACS for "educational neglect," although it was policies at the EAU that created those conditions in the first place.



www.nydailynews.com

HOMELESSNESS IN NYC: THE GROWING EPIDEMIC

La creciente epidemia de gente sin casa

NYC — *again.*

A May 2002 survey conducted by Picture the Homeless, a group founded by two homeless men in 1999, showed a pattern of humiliation and intimidation at EAU.

According to the study, Ordóñez's case is the rule rather than the exception. In fact, Picture the Homeless revealed that 98 percent of the families seeking assistance have been denied eligibility between one and 17 times, and have been told they have somewhere else to go—even when they have proof they are homeless.

A case in point is that of Reinaldo Negrón, 39, the Bronx-born father of a 6-year-old boy and 3-year-old twin girls. Despite showing the folks at EAU a 72-hour eviction notice, he was deemed ineligible. He had been trying to get EAU to help him for two months, and as hundreds of other homeless families, he had spent several nights in the EAU's dreary office with his wife and children, despite a court order specifically forbidding the city to use such facility as a shelter.



Lisa Ordoñez.

(Continued on page 16)

Socialist WorkerONLINE

NYC's homeless crisis drives teen to suicide
Victim of the shelter system

By Lee Wengraf | August 23, 2002, | Page 2

JASON-ERIC WILSON is a victim of the disastrous state of New York City's social services. But Mayor Michael Bloomberg and his administration won't even admit that there's a problem.

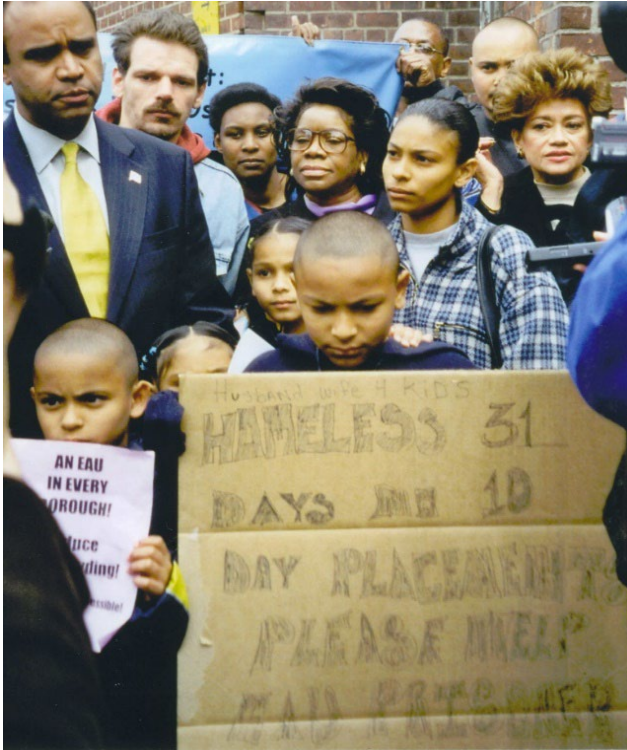
On August 7, Wilson, a mentally ill 16-year-old, killed himself in his family's shelter room in Harlem. "My son committed suicide because we were being threatened with being sent back there," Eric Wilson, Jason-Eric's father, told the *New York Times*.

"There" is the Emergency Assistance Unit (EAU)--New York's only referral office for the homeless to find room in a shelter, located in a poor, Bronx neighborhood. New York law requires that homeless New Yorkers be given space in a shelter, but many people end up waiting at the EAU for an assignment until well after midnight.

"I never saw anything like it in my life: babies lying on the floor, even newborns," said Carmen Garcia, an unemployed security guard who spent a week at the EAU with her husband and four children, according to the *Times*. "We filled out papers. They told us to wait, and we waited."



2003: PTH STOPPED DHS FROM OPENING THE BRONX JAIL AS AN OVERFLOW SHELTER



PTH EAU Campaign members Mike Slater and Mylene Soto, with Bronx Borough President protesting Mayor Bloomberg's plan to use jail as overflow for homeless families. May 2003

DAILY @ NEWS

NEW YORK'S HOMETOWN NEWSPAPER



CONTRAST Bronx Borough President Adolfo Carrón talks yesterday with Mylene Soto during demonstration outside the mother-based Emergency Assistance Unit on E. 154th St. He opposes plan to reopen Bronx House of Detention as a shelter for families.

Beep: Jailhouse crock

He blasts plan to use lockup as shelter

2003: EAU WALKOUT

In 2003 PTH moved to 116th Street in East Harlem and hired Diomaris Rosario as the full-time EAU organizer. PTH continued to hold organizing meetings in the corner McDonalds and a nearby park. In 2003, over 200 families decided to walk out of the EAU in protest, saying that they would rather sleep in the street with their children than stay in the EAU.

Their demands included an EAU in every borough, and improved conditions for families seeking emergency shelter.

Because access to inside the EAU was prohibited, and families risked being logged out, their protest carried real risk for them and their families.



PTH EAU campaign walkout. August 14, 2003

But EAU campaign members protested, took photos of spoiled food with disposable cameras supplied by PTH, got petitions signed and did media interviews. Homeless families were consistently portrayed as abusing the system by the administration, and staff at the EAU. Rarely did reporters verify *their claims*.



PTH continued to support families to expose conditions in the EAU by giving them the phone numbers of Department of Homeless Services Commissioner, Linda Gibbs, Judge Helen Freeman, and journalists who were only repeating information from the City and not speaking with homeless families. After an article declaring that no families had spent the night in the EAU, EAU campaign members who had slept there overnight descended upon the offices of the *New York Times* demanding fair and accurate coverage.

Attention: Homeless Families with Children in the EAU

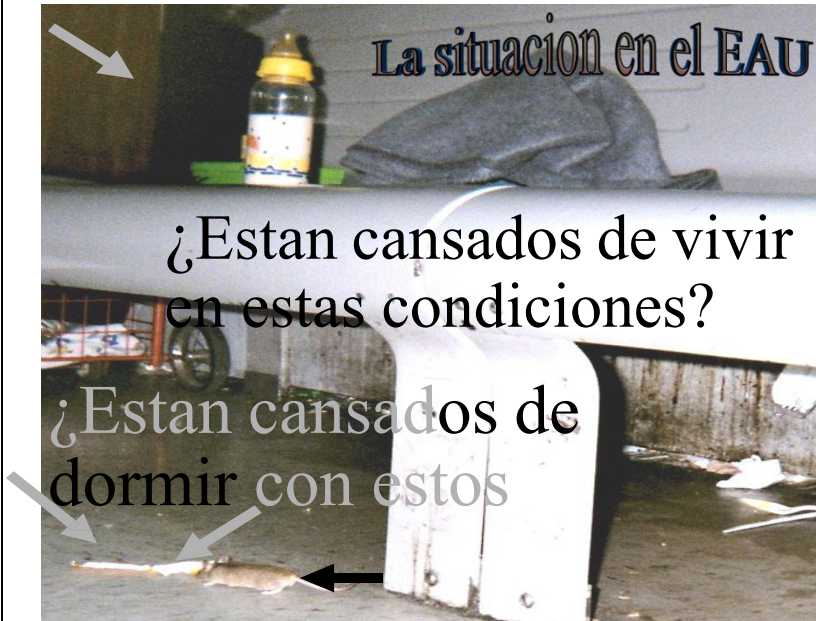
On both Tuesday September 16, 2003, and Wednesday September 24, 2003, reporter Leslie Kaufman of the New York Times and Daily News Staff Writers Kerry Burke, Austin Fenner and Tracy Connor published articles in both newspapers that not a single family slept this summer on the floor at the city's Emergency Assistance Unit, and that more families were moved into permanent housing last fiscal year than ever before.

If you, as a homeless family from the EAU do not agree with what is being said by the Department of Homeless Services about Homeless Families sleeping on the Floor of the EAU, and don't think that the newspapers should be publishing what's not true.

Call and ask to speak to Mrs. Leslie Kaufman Reporter of the New York Times @ 1(212) 556-1872 to educate them on the TRUTH. "That families are, still sleeping in the EAU".

Families took great risk to take photos of conditions inside the EAU, but they provided critical evidence of the conditions there, disproving the Mayor's claims.

Example of a 2003 EAU organizing flyer calling on families "tired of living in these conditions, tired of sleeping with these rats" to meet in the park:



*Photo accompanying
Gotham Gazette article,
"Families Still Sleeping on
Floor of the EAU." January
26, 2004*



2004: PTH SELF-PUBLISHES REPORT

Our second participatory action research project
documented conditions in the EAU over a 2 year period:

Abuse and Neglect:



How New York City

Violates the

Human and Civil Rights

or

Homeless Families inside the EAU

Picture the Homeless
170 E. 116th St. #1W
New York, New York 10029
(212) 427-2499
info@picturethehomeless.org

Recommendations

- Picture the Homeless calls upon the Special Master Panel to exercise its power to immediately address these issues that are of an emergency nature to the families experiencing them.
- Open an EAU in every borough;
- Bring each EAU into compliance with the law by maintaining standards of cleanliness, minimize crowding, provide translation, move families to overnight placements by 7pm, and make accessible for persons with disabilities;
- Ensure that the location of overnight placements corresponds to where the youngest child attends school in accordance with the federal McKinney Vento Act;
- Provide legal representation for homeless families filing fair hearings when they have been determined ineligible;
- Post the Homeless Bill of Rights in every DHS and other publicly funded facility that serves homeless people and ensure that it is translated into all relevant languages.;
- Implement a grievance process to ensure accountability in the system for homeless families;
- Include homeless families in the training of professional staff to ensure sensitivity and professionalism.
- Include homeless families in the identification of issues and solutions system wide.

2004: FROM EAU to THE WOMEN and FAMILIES COMMITTEE

Tyletha Samuels was hired as the EAU organizer in 2004. It was soon clear that once families entered the shelter system they faced another set of problems, that mirrored what single adults and couples were telling PTH. She took on the work of the EAU campaign in 2004 and the formation of a Shelter campaign, under the Women and Families Committee. She also began holding meetings for women, *When Women Gather*.



Tyletha Samuels: It bad. It was horrible. There were so many *different* things... To have to sit with your child for so many hours to go to a shelter, late at night...

Then the medical part of it, you know? The way they would tell me how you had to go in there, and then you had to submit your child to being... Okay, I understand. When you go into a place, you want your children to be safe and not bring in germs and stuff. But the way they told me how they used to do it, like if I'm dirty or *I'm diseased*, or something like that. The way the system was, they felt like they dehumanized you.



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: A HEART TRANSPLANT

Tyletha Samuels: I would give a flyer, and I would have it posted maybe up around a [park] fence or something. It would be like every Thursday. We tried to keep it consistent, so that it would be word of mouth. "Look, next Thursday, I might not be here. Tell anybody, you going to a shelter? We meet here on Thursdays in the park." So, I would go up there on the weekdays and give out flyers, "If you're here on Thursday. If you're not here on Thursday, tell the families..." And it would be families that met me in the park. It was a park around two blocks around the corner from the EAU and I would have a good little turnout.

My only disappointment with this and any organizing that I did, was that when you organize around people who's having difficulty... It's hard for them when you're not solving their problems right then and there. If I'm homeless and I'm trying

to get a bed at night, to want to come to a meeting... I mean like, "I ain't got time to talk about coming to a meeting if you ain't going to feed me." Or, if I'm in a Welfare Center and I'm trying to get some food on my table, I'm about to be evicted, and here you come talking to me... That's the only difficult thing.

But the families and the people that I did talk to, *did* talk to me. They did say, "Well look, this is worth it. We're glad to hear that there's somebody out there who cares... Somebody out there that wants to do something. That we want to stop what's being done to you."

We want to stop it, and the only way we could stop it, is with you. We can't stop it unless you want it to be stopped. You're the one has to stop it. I'm not going through it, you are. You have to be the one to do it, I can't do it for you. This could be your daughter one day, doing this. Do you want her to go through this, you know?



Sam J. Miller: My first day was May 4th, 2004, and that was the day before we had a really big protest. Tyletha was organizing the Women's and Families committee at the time, and they were going to do a protest at the Emergency Assistance Unit where homeless families with children have to go.

The only facility of its kind, in the Bronx where people had to go to get placed in a shelter, where they were subject to humiliating fraud investigators who would go and interview their past living conditions and the people that they had been

staying with for the past couple of years and where the conditions were so bad that the summer before a young man had taken his own life when his family got sent back to the EAU from their temporary shelter placement.



Tyletha Samuels: The action where Jean is all up in their face, the heart transplant, that's one of my favorites. I was glad I was a part of that. That was really, really good. They didn't like that. They didn't like us saying that they was heartless.

But, I think that anytime that you make children stay awake and wake them up two and three o'clock in the morning to move them to a shelter, is heartless. Anytime you treat them the way you treat them and make them sleep and stay on hard benches with rats, and the conditions that you put them through, I think that is heartless.



Sam J Miller: The atmosphere in the office, as it is the day before an action, was frenzied and excited, and a lot of yelling especially because it was Tyletha's action and Tyletha yelled, a lot. It was all hands on deck when it's an action. It wasn't like, "Here's your housing committee get started." It was like, "Sam, do whatever needs to be done to help this action out."

We were doing press calls, and somebody was like, "Oh sure, we'll do an interview. Who's there?" Right? I was like, "Okay,

let me put Tyletha on.” And not knowing that Picture the Homeless had an organizational value where members are the ones who speak to the media. And so, you being like, “Ah, no that’s not going to be Tyletha, get the person’s number and we’ll call them. We’ll get a member to do the interview and we’ll call them back.” And I was like, “But they’re on the phone now... What if when I call back they’ve moved on?”

So, coming up against the sort of awesome but unusual, methodology that Picture the Homeless had for organizing. So then, my second day was the action, and I had never seen anything like it. Where people were *so angry* and so upset about the conditions that they were in... I’ve never seen people mobilize like that. I had never seen so many people so angry and so powerful and compelling in how they talked about it. It was a ton of work, and it was kind of like horrifying and terrifying and stressful, but then it was this amazing action.



Sam J. Miller: We met in the park beforehand, with the leaders who were actively involved in planning and executing the protest. I can remember their faces, but I don’t know their names. And a lot of them were people who, as amazing as they were on that day, we didn’t see again. Or we saw a couple of times, but then they got placed and then they were really far away, or they were trying to deal with their situation. These were homeless families. Most of them single mom households, but not all of them. All of them, Black and/or Latino. This was a starkly racialized, starkly gendered issue where the people were really powerful and angry and went in there and got everybody to march out, and everybody marched out.

Everyone who came out that door was taking a real risk, right? Because if they could get logged out, they would have to start the process all over again. So the sixteen hours that they had been waiting, or whatever, would be for nothing. So, it meant something that people were marching out. It wasn't just like, "Hey guys, come on outside for a minute." It was like, "There's going to be consequences for participating in this." But everybody was so angry and so outraged.

There was a press conference. I did translation for one woman who was a monolingual Spanish speaker. Actually, her I do remember! I remember that her son's name was something like Leandro... He was probably ten year old, a really scared-looking kid. But the way that people came out was so energetic and powerful.



Nikita Price: I think what Picture the Homeless offered then and offers now, is the opportunity for you to be able to take that anger and that frustration and exhibit it in a way... So, when people are saying, "Well, at least people have shelters." Picture the Homeless was able to go and tell you, "Yeah, you have shelters, but these are *the conditions in the shelters*."

So, the EAU was closed before I came to Picture the Homeless. When people were saying, "Yeah well, homeless people can come here and then they go into the shelters and the EAU is nice and clean..." You folks had already sent people in with cameras to dispel that myth. And that was big to get the EAU closed. That was before my time. I always liked the fact that Picture the Homeless always *pushed back*, and... This is the reality of the bullshit that you're trying to jam down people's throats. And I think during *that time*, we didn't have a *big voice*, but we were consistent, and we were not going to back down.

Sue Lob: Anybody who needed to apply for housing had to go to this one HRA office up in the Bronx called the Emergency Assistance Unit and it was just a zoo in there and people would wait for hours and hours and hours and if you went to the bathroom you were afraid that your name would be called and then you'd have to start all over again. And there was no food and people were sleeping on the floor and there were rats, and it was awful. They had been sued by Legal Aid several times I believe and yet the system really never improved.

Picture the Homeless was going to have a demonstration out front and we wanted to support it and so we had a group of our members come, and I was *really impressed*. We had never done our own demonstration.

I think at that point we hadn't done one yet. PTH had chants written and practiced and had press kits and actually had managed to get the press to schlepp up to the Bronx, which was like an amazing thing. And you know, we stood outside, and we were chanting.

*Sue Lob and
Voices of
Women with
PTH at EAU
action. May 5,
2004*



Norma Cruz Testimony

Hello, my name is Norman Cruz. I came to the EAU in January of this year with my son Lizando, I have been found ineligible 19 times. Since January I have been going back and forth from overnight shelters to the EAU not knowing where I'm going to sleep. I feel my son is going to have a nervous breakdown. I haven't been able to send my son to school for two months now because of what we are going through with the EAU. He is in Special Ed., and he needs his schooling. I suffer with Sugar Diabetes, High Blood Pressure, and Asthma. When I came to the EAU I had to go through a metal detector and the security guards took my sugar diabetic testing machine. I was told that when I needed to test my sugar I could do so, but when I came to test my sugar no one was there with my machine. Now to this day EAU says they don't know what has become of my machine. I am not testing my sugar regularly like I'm supposed to, now I have to go to the hospital every time I want to test my sugar.

The food in the EAU and the overnight shelters



EAU Heart Transplant Rally. May 5, 2004

that they send us to is no good. My son and I both have gotten sick because of the food. We have witness other adults and children complaints about the food and how they have gotten sick also. The EAU is very nasty with DIRT, RATS, and ROACHES! There is no ventilation, and they don't open windows. The staff is very disrespectful; when you ask them a question they answer you very nasty or not at all. The security guards are very abusive. I've seen them hit and curse at families in the EAU.

All I want is a decent place to live with my son in New York. I've lived, worked, and paid taxes in New York for 28 years and my son was born here. The EAU wants to buy me a one way ticket to Puerto Rico. I have no one to stay with in Puerto Rico this is my home. I WANT TO WORK AND LIVE HERE!



Homeless families describing what it means to be found "ineligible" over 30 times by EAU staff. Behind her are photos of rats and filth inside the EAU. May 5, 2004



Jeff, Jean Rice refusing to leave the public sidewalk in front of the EAU, being harassed by EAU Officer Arroyo. May 5, 2004

Sam Miller: Jean was in doctor scrubs as were several other people with giant cut out hearts.

Lewis: What helped people walk out of an office which was their *only access* to getting shelter, and then potentially housing? What was it that we were doing, if anything, that created space for people to do that?

When you're in the system, you have no power, or the power that you have is heavily penalized. So, we were providing a way for people to vent the complaints that they had, and anger that they had, where there was no constructive outlet for it.

One example is that there was this security guard, or DHS police officer, who was a fucking asshole and was super abusive to people and who was so outraged by our presence

there... He got in a screaming match with Jeff... And you know that—I think *that*, and our general awesomeness made it really clear to people that we were *not the system*, we were not on the side of DHS, that we were trying to call them to account for their bad behavior.

We were actually across the street; we weren't able to be on the sidewalk right in front of it. The buses were still pulling up to take people to, or bring people back from temporary placements, while the fraud investigators did their work. We had the giant blow ups of the pictures that people had smuggled out—of the food, and the rats and the roaches, and the filthy, filthy bathrooms.



Sam J. Miller: It was also my first experience of just how fucked up the media is when it comes to homelessness, because our good friend, Melissa Russo of NBC I guess, was there and she interviewed nine different people. She talked to nine different people until she found the one person who countered the actual narrative of, “The City is doing terrible things to us.” The one person who was like, “Oh yeah, I just came from Jersey because I heard this was how I get a Section 8 voucher.” And that was the person who she quoted and included on the news.

So, seeing not only how bad the situation is, but how invested the media is in advancing the wrong narrative, that, “The city is doing a great job. This is what needs to happen, these people are scammers. These people are terrible. They are putting themselves in this position.”

Sue Lob: One of the big issues was that they were claiming that people were applying for shelter because that was the only way to get housing and that really they had other places to live. I thought we had a pretty successful demonstration; the press was there... And I went home, and couldn't wait to watch the media and see us on the eleven o'clock news, and was just shocked by the coverage.

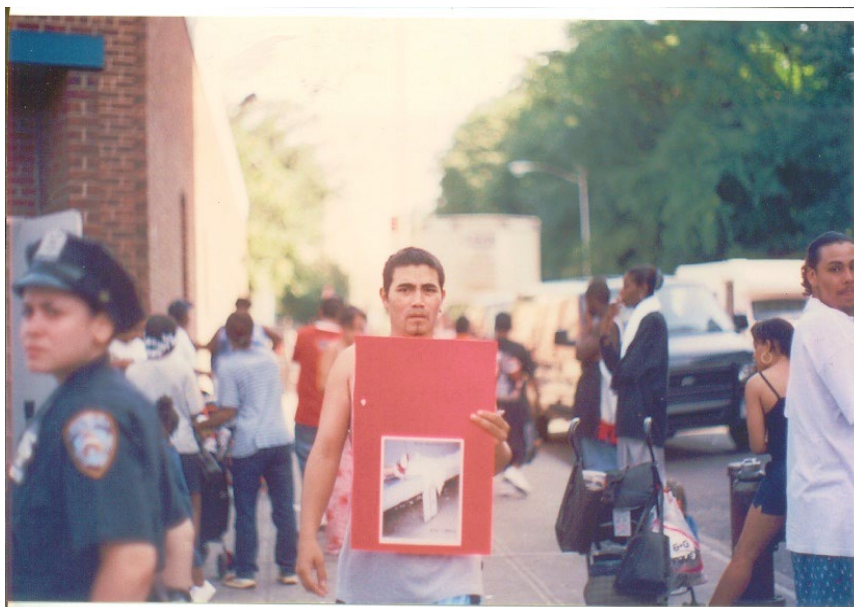
You could hear Picture the Homeless chanting in the background, but they were never mentioned. It was like, "homeless people were out demonstrating." But the group never got the credit and then it immediately switched to a woman outside at the front door being interviewed by one of the reporters, and she had a baby—like a little kid attached to her leg crying. And she was like, "I can't take this shit anymore. I can't stand it. I'm going to my aunt in New Jersey!" Which was exactly proving the point of the other side.

And then there was an interview with the head of DHS, Linda Gibbs, who the press loved. I mean, she was actually a social worker and came across as very rational and measured. And so really the lesson to me was that even though you had done everything that I would've thought was the right thing to do, the press ended up telling the story that the city wanted told and not the story that we were there to tell.

And they managed to find somebody who could kind of seemingly bolster the city's position and not interview all the other people who we had brought and who, for our members, people were being told that they could, "Go back to your husband." Or, we knew teenagers who were being sexually abused who had run away from home who they were sending back to their home. Like, just obviously inappropriate expectations that they would stay with relatives that they were not welcome to stay with, or not safe to stay with. So that was a big lesson.

Liz Theoharis: I remember up on the [office] walls a sign with photos from EAU, the Emergency Assistance Unit and the moldy food that people were being fed and the uncleanliness to say the least, that moms and their kids and families were being faced with. You know, here in this in this city that is one of the richest cities in the world, in a homelessness assistance kind of unit, that has at this point a billion dollars a year, right? And yet, the realities of the conditions.

I think we actually brought some students to the EAU when it was out near the old Yankee Stadium, and I remember it having a pretty big impact on a bunch of the students that I had brought. You know, definitely there were quite a few people that really weren't aware of the kind of real life conditions that really millions of people in this country face.



Luis, EAU campaign member outside of the EAU with photos of rats and filth. 2004

2004: PTH AND THE SPECIAL MASTER

PTH brought homeless families to meet with the special master panel five times, including meetings where the special master panel came to PTH's office. PTH won inclusion of some of our recommendations in their final report because of the courage of those families.

PICTURE THE HOMELESS

Report to

THE SPECIAL MASTER PANEL

March 1, 2004

Picture the Homeless identified the following critical issues that both individually and collectively constitute a pattern of abuse by the Department of Homeless Services of homeless families seeking emergency through the Emergency Assistance Unit in New York City. Homeless families are essential partners in identifying solutions, but the City of New York is accountable for the misuse of public resources and the violation of the human rights of homeless families. Picture the Homeless calls upon the Special Master Panel to exercise its power to immediately address these issues that are of an emergency nature to the families experiencing them.

- ✓ **Eligibility**
- ✓ **Churning**
- ✓ **Language Access**
- ✓ **Education of Homeless Children**
- ✓ **Abusive Physical Conditions**
- ✓ **Americans With Disability Act/Health Issues**
- ✓ **Staff Professionalism/Accountability**

2004: KEEPING THE PRESSURE ON

Although we were “engaged” in a process with the special master panel, it was important to continue to hold direct actions to give families a means to express what was happening and what their demands were. Throughout 2003 and 2004, PTH gave families in the EAU disposable cameras to document conditions inside. Photos of rats, filth, overcrowded conditions, and moldy food were smuggled out by brave families who risked being “logged out”, or having to start their applications over. Additionally, families gathered postcards, petition signatures and shared information about meetings with one another.

On May 12, 2004, PTH travelled with a group of families from the EAU to Judge Freeman’s courtroom, including enlarged photos of moldy food.



2004: SPECIAL MASTER PANEL RELEASES REPORT AND RECOMMENDATIONS

In June of 2004, the Special Master Panel released it's findings and recommendations. They met five times over a one year period with members of the PTH EAU Campaign and Women and Families Committee. Many of their recommendations were modelled after or were consistent with what families impacted by the EAU were calling for.



Dawn Quinones, Jeanette Lopez, Michael Slater of the PTH EAU Campaign receiving the Samuel Peabody award for Community Activism from the Citizens Committee on Children with members of the Special Master's Panel. October 25, 2005

2004: ENDING HOMELESS PREFERENCE FOR SECTION 8

The twisted logic of the Bloomberg administration's homeless policies were based on their belief that homeless families were coming to the EAU and applying for shelter to game the system and get an apartment. In October of 2004, they ended the homeless preference for Section 8. Replacing it with a series of flawed voucher programs catalyzed the founding of PTH's Rental Subsidies campaign in late 2006.

2007: EAU CLOSES, PATH OPENS

Closing the EAU was a huge win. However, families still had to travel to one intake center in the South Bronx to apply for shelter. The number of families becoming homeless was increasing and it was harder and harder to find affordable housing for low income folks without going into the system.

The building was better, but the process remained the same. PTH no longer had an EAU campaign but continued to do outreach to homeless families at the PATH, inviting them to join PTH as well as to continue to monitor how homeless families were being treated. By 2007, PTH was seeing families return to the shelter system because of the failed subsidy programs, especially the disconnect between DHS and HRA. PTH continued to support families through direct action, including side walk sleep-outs across from the PATH, organizing faith leaders, individual case advocacy and teaching families about their rights.



Families applying for shelter at the PATH walking through frozen slush to board a "cheese", or yellow school bus, to be transported to an overnight shelter. December 2007.

Maria Walles: We got kicked out the family shelter because they kept denying us. They took us in the shelter. We stayed in the placement for like, twelve days, thirteen days, something like that. And then, when we was trying to reapply, we was on some type of list, saying we couldn't apply, and they threw out in the midst of the street. Like, "You can't come back here no more."

Which I felt like at that time was illegal! Because I'm like, "Well, where's me and my daughter going to sleep? So, me and my daughter—me, Allan, and Alexis, we went to Lincoln Hospital. It was, "Well, let's go here. Let's make sure that we're okay, and then we can sleep."

So that's what we did. We slept at the hospital! At that time, I was scared. I didn't know what to do. I didn't experience that, and we had a child. And it was scary, because I didn't know what was going to happen. I think the next day, they left us alone. They was kicking other people out. They said, because I had a child, "We're not kicking you out. You could stay here." And that's what we did.



Maria Walles: Since they kept denying us and denying us, we decided to go as a couple. The first six months we tried to do it as a family, but it seemed like it wasn't working out. So we decided to go as a couple. At the time it was really hard for me. I didn't really want my daughter to stay at families and friends.

At times she would stay with a friend of Allan's, and unfortunately, he passed away. He was formerly homeless himself, and him and his wife were homeless, and they went

into the shelter and his wife and him were child care providers. They loved my daughter, and they was like, "Okay, she could stay with us while y'all get yourselves together." I was like, "Oh, okay, no problem."



Maria Walles: To explain what all overnight is, if you don't qualify for temporary housing in a family shelter, you have to go and do an overnight with your child, or your children. And that runs at night from five o'clock until the next day.

You go on a school bus; you go to your destination, in the five boroughs. You stay at the overnight, you take a shower, you do what you got to do, you do your homework with your kids, get yourself ready for the next day.

The next day the bus comes, pick you up and drops you back to the Bronx. And yeah, and you have to share the bathroom, but you have your own room.



Homeless Families lining up with their bags to board the cheese bus to their overnight placement.

Maria Walles: As far as Picture the Homeless is concerned, that's when I met Nikita, when we was going through the EAU/PATH, and that's when I met you. I think y'all came down to find out what was going on, back in the fall of 2007, when they was just kicking families out.

At that time, the EAU or PATH, whatever you want to call it, had services like ACS in there, which surprises me! You're kicking families out of the shelters, *in the streets*. Isn't that illegal? Isn't that where you take a kid away?

I thought I was cool with them. I was trying to build a relationship with them, because I felt like if I build a relationship, I think they could try to help me! Unfortunately, that didn't work. It took them, the first time when I was homeless—almost two years to say, “Hey, you was found eligible.”

We had to separate our family and to this day, shelters are still crowded. It's still the same, still getting denied. You know, people are fed up! “Oh sorry. You got to do overnights, overnights, overnights.”

Maria Walles: I met Nikita when we was at Powers Avenue (PATH). Yeah, we was at the Powers Avenue EAU, and he was talking to me, and Allan and he was asking us questions about the families and stuff, and I spoke how I felt. I guess y'all thought I was a very powerful person, a powerful woman. Even though I was scared because I spoke from the heart, and I didn't know if I would get laughed at later.

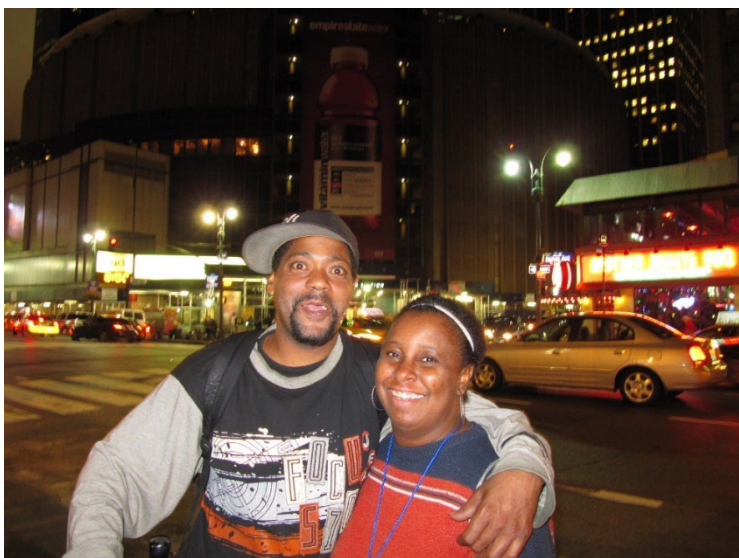
I think the sad part about it was that you had caseworkers there that supported what was going on and then you had caseworkers that didn't support what was going on. So, the ones that we did get along with, they liked me and Allan and our daughter, a lot. Some of them showed solidarity because

they would walk on by and show solidarity in that they just said, “Oh, you’re going to be okay, blah-blah-blah.”

I was taking a risk when we did that sleepout. The whole purpose of that sleep out was because of what was going on, how they was just kicking people out for no reason.

The church in the community took some of the families in and Legal Aid got involved. I remember I went to that Legal Aid and there was some type of hearing; I think it was at City Hall or something.

Then when they heard me and Allan's story, I think that's when the Coalition got involved, and that's how I met Tony [Taylor]. He was like a big brother to me. He would always say, “Oh, Maria, calm down.” I'm like, “No I'm tired of how the systems treating our family.”



Allan and Maria, August 2010

PTH EAU Campaign Wrap Up

2002 Launched a survey project documenting the conditions in the EAU, documented filthy conditions inside by giving homeless families cameras to smuggle into the EAU

2003 Organized a walk-out from the EAU of over 200 families, demanding improvements

2003 Stopped the Department of Homeless Services from opening the Bronx jail as an overflow site for homeless families with children

2003 Documented conditions inside the EAU which violated the Americans with Disabilities Act

2003 Pressured Judge Helen Freeman to appoint a special master panel to make recommendations for a better intake system

2004 Self-published *Abuse and Neglect: How New York City Violate the Human and Civil Rights of Homeless Families Inside the EAU* based on 2 years of survey results, photos, and testimony

2004 Coordinated five meetings of the special master panel with homeless families in one year, winning inclusion of our recommendations in their final report

2007 PTH was instrumental in closing the EAU, PTH members took serious risks smuggling in cameras and petitions, hold walk-outs and press conferences outside of the facility. We won some improvements in the new intake facility (PATH) and eventually at the newly constructed EAU



Lynn Lewis: I have a memory of you coming to the office in the Bronx with these black plastic bags full of letters saying that you were ineligible for shelter, which basically means you're not really homeless.

Maria Walles: Yeah! Six months straight! Six months straight. At that time, I was trying to be the strong woman, but Allan was the one that was very emotional because he just got tired of going through it, and stressing him out.

I think to this day, he would've been here if we didn't go through that whole situation, he would still have been here to this day, if you didn't keep denying us and stressing him out.



Organizing Lessons Learned:

Legal battles over the EAU had persisted through three NYC Mayoral Administrations - Koch, Dinkins, and Giuliani when PTH first heard those desperate voicemails from homeless families and began organizing. The conditions that homeless families were subjected to in the EAU were revealed by PTH by documenting and exposing conditions, direct action, and creating opportunities for homeless families to be heard.

PTH didn't close the EAU all by ourselves, but what had been missing was the organized leadership of homeless families which directly contributed to the closing of the EAU.

Multiple tactics are crucial:

- Outreach
- Surveys and documentation
- Being flexible about meeting folks where it is convenient for them
- Collective analysis of issues and solutions
- Political Education about causes and current conditions
- Research
- Write your own reports
- Be inviting to folks
- Know Your Rights Education
- Support homeless folks to visibly represent the group
- Creative actions create space for media coverage and narrative shifting
- Direct action is needed to keep up momentum and pressure
- Convert spaces of oppression to spaces of liberation
- Have fun

Narrators:

Charley Heck
Maria Walles
Sue Lob

Rev. Liz Theoharis
Nikita Price
Tyletha Samuels

Lynn Lewis
Sam J. Miller



PTH and VOW, EAU campaign protesting outside of the EAU. May 4, 2005

**E.A.U. March Chants
August 14, 2003**

2,4,6,8 Homeless Families Need A Break

9,10,11,12 EAU Should Go To Hell

**Hey-Hey, Ho-Ho The EAU Has Got To Go
Hey-Hey, Ho-Ho Linda Gibbs Has Got To Go**

**The People United Will Never Be Defeated
The People United Will Never Be Defeated**

**El Pueblo Unido Hamas Sera Vencido
El Pueblo Unido Hamas Sera Vencido**

**What Do We Want, Housing
And When Do We Want It, Now**

**1, 2, 3, 4 Children Shouldn't Sleep On Floors
5, 6, 7, 8 Homeless Children Need A Place**

**We're Fired Up; We Won't Take It No More!!!
We're Fired Up; We Won't Take It No More!!!**

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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