

Leading New York City's Response to the Challenge of Homelessness: Insights from Seth Diamond, Commissioner, New York City Department of Homeless Services

Government at all levels is operating in an era of fiscal austerity. The revenues may be falling, but demand for critical services continues. Within this new reality, government executives are confronted with very difficult choices that go to the heart of effective public management. As we continue to engage government executives who are changing the way government does business, Seth Diamond, commissioner, New York City Department of Homeless Services, joined me on The Business of Government Hour.

The New York City Department of Homeless Services oversees one of the most comprehensive shelter systems in the nation, bringing real support to homeless New Yorkers when they need it most. While providing shelter and services to those in need is critical, the city has sought to go beyond managing homelessness to ending it, especially chronic homelessness; creating viable permit solutions, enhancing support systems, and ultimately transitioning those seeking assistance from shelters to self-sufficiency. What is New York City doing to prevent chronic homelessness? How is the city working to transition homeless New Yorkers from shelters to self-sufficiency? How is the city using common-sense approaches to make a difference where it counts? Seth Diamond provides his insights into these questions and so much more. The following is an edited excerpt from our conversation. —MJK.

Before we delve into specific initiatives, would you give us an overview of the history and mission of New York City's Department of Homeless Services?

— Seth Diamond —

It is a relatively new agency in New York City terms, having been around since about the mid-1990s, so almost 20 years. Our mission is to overcome homelessness in New York City. DHS prevents homelessness wherever possible and provides short-term emergency shelter and re-housing support whenever needed. These goals are best achieved through partnerships with those we serve, public agencies, and the business and nonprofit communities.



The largest part, and perhaps the most well-known, is the city's shelter system. Working with 90 or so not-for-profit agencies, we administer shelter in about 250 locations throughout New York City. The department has about an \$800 million budget. Almost 90% of that goes to not-for-profit providers who provide the services and run the shelters, and then the rest goes to the government staff, which totals about 2,000. On a typical night, there are about 40,000 New Yorkers with no other alternatives but to stay in one of our shelters—a combination of single adults (i.e., meaning people with no children) as well as families. We have shelters in almost every neighborhood in New York, but for most New Yorkers they're not aware that there's a shelter in their community. I think that's a tribute to the not-for-profit organizations we work with and the people of the Department of Homeless Services. We blend into communities and work effectively with them. We are a partner in the neighborhoods we serve.

Seth, with such an important mission and a critical, expansive role, what do you see as the top challenges you face as commissioner of the New York City Department of Homeless Services?

— Seth Diamond —

One of the things that we really have tried to do more in recent years is to prevent homelessness before it occurs. There are in New York City thousands of people who are in precarious housing situations and have difficulty at any one point in time with their housing. Some of those people, if we work with them early enough in the process, will be able to sustain themselves in the community. We're always analyzing the critical issues that make people who are in these difficult situations come into shelter. Are there things we can put in place that will help them stay in their housing and not have to access the shelter system? It costs on average about \$3,000 a month to keep a household in shelter. It also can be very disruptive for families, particularly children who may have to leave school. Our priority is to identify those families that are potentially at risk and [decide how to] put services in place that can help them.

Another challenge involves the basic management of a very large shelter system. Our challenge is to make sure every one of the 200-plus facilities we administer is safe and secure every night for the people that live there. We always have to make sure we have the resources quickly in place, so if the heat goes off at 10 o'clock we have something we can do so people are not freezing through the night, or if the boiler breaks in a building, or if a pipe breaks and so



there's flooding, that we're addressing that very quickly and that the families are not at risk and that they're safe and secure every night.

The other major challenge is always making sure that as the public face of the agency, I convey the right kind of message. If you're communicating effectively to the public and to the people you're serving what you're doing, that really goes a long way to securing buy-in. The most important job of a leader is to convey a very clear and direct vision. It can be difficult in the face of the day-to-day difficulties to keep the focus, both internally and externally, on what you're trying to accomplish and conveying that message. It is critical that we never forget who we're serving.

Seth, there's a typical perception about homelessness, that a homeless person is predominantly male, perhaps ill, mentally ill, and living on the street. Perhaps you can shed some light and clarify some of the misperceptions, highlighting the population that represents the majority of the folks you serve?

— Seth Diamond —

Numerically, in New York City, most of the homeless are families. There are no families living on city streets. In the shelter system, there are about 8,500 families, so about 17,000 children, would be about 25,000 people all together. They're typically a mom and two kids who have come into the shelter system for a variety of reasons—sometimes for economic reasons, domestic violence reasons, and/or substance abuse reasons. They're coming from living with somebody else and that relationship has run into some difficulty.

Regarding the single-adult shelter system, again, most of the people in that system come from living with somebody else. Almost 70% of the people in the single-adult shelter system either come straight from their own apartment or an apartment that they were sharing with somebody else. The perception is a little bit different than the reality. Most people do come from living with somebody else, so we think that creates opportunities before people get settled in the shelter system to try and work with them to see if that might be an option instead of coming into shelter.

However, the people who are living on the city streets are not doing it because there's not space for them within the shelter system. We would gladly accommodate every one of them or make sure we could. They're living there because they've made a choice. Often they are not thinking as clearly as we would like because there's mental illness or substance



Photo by Spencer T. Tucker

Mayor Bloomberg opens the city's new Prevention Assistance and Temporary Housing (PATH) Center, available to aid homeless families after years of development.

abuse involved. Sometimes it's based on a misperception or an old perception of the shelter system's being a dangerous place where they don't want to go. We've made a real investment through what we call outreach to try and help people on the street get off the street. We have people 24 hours a day, seven days a week, that are out on the city streets, approaching people who are ... living there.

Seth, New York City is considered a leader in pursuing innovative, common-sense approaches to addressing homelessness. To that end, would you tell us more about the award-winning Homebase Program? What are the key principles that frame the purpose of this program?

— Seth Diamond —

Homebase is a citywide program designed to help families and individuals overcome immediate housing problems that could result in becoming homeless, and to develop a plan for long-term housing stability. The program is comprised of a network of organizations with 13 offices that work in communities throughout the city, particularly those areas where there's a concentration of people that may be at risk for homelessness. Homebase clients are assigned a case manager who will coordinate all their services. Some of these services will be provided directly through Homebase, and others will be provided by community partners.

We seek to intervene as early as possible to prevent homelessness. Often, this intervention involves old-fashioned casework. We work with families that may be facing employment issues to find a better job; we also work with families that

have financial budgeting issues to figure out how to make their money stretch a little bit further. We assist families that may be in dispute with a landlord.

The most important principle that frames the mission of the Homebase program is to provide assistance to at-risk families as early as possible. If we can get involved early, then often we can help these families deal with the situation. We've tried to increase awareness of this program throughout the city. We want people to know that if they run into difficulties their first option early in the process could be to access the Homebase program.

The second principle that frames the mission of our Homebase program is flexibility. One of the great things about the Homebase program is it doesn't subscribe to a one-size-fits-all set of rules. The organizations involved know that their caseworkers have to potentially do almost anything, from, as I say, employment work, financial planning, or counseling. It involves directly tailoring and targeting services to those who we are serving.

We have also sought to ensure that Homebase is an effective and efficient use of public resources. We hired an independent research firm working with researchers at leading universities to really study the Homebase program—to really look at whether prevention services actually work and are effective. About a year and a half ago we started a study. We took two groups, a control group and a treatment group, with 200 in each group. One group received Homebase services, prevention services, and one group received other services

in the community, but not Homebase. We're following these families for two years and want to understand if communities served by Homebase send fewer families to shelter than those not served by Homebase, how can Homebase services best be targeted, but for Homebase services would targeted individuals have entered the shelter, how can services best be designed to target those most in need, and a variety of related questions. I think we'll firmly answer the question of whether the services are cost-effective.

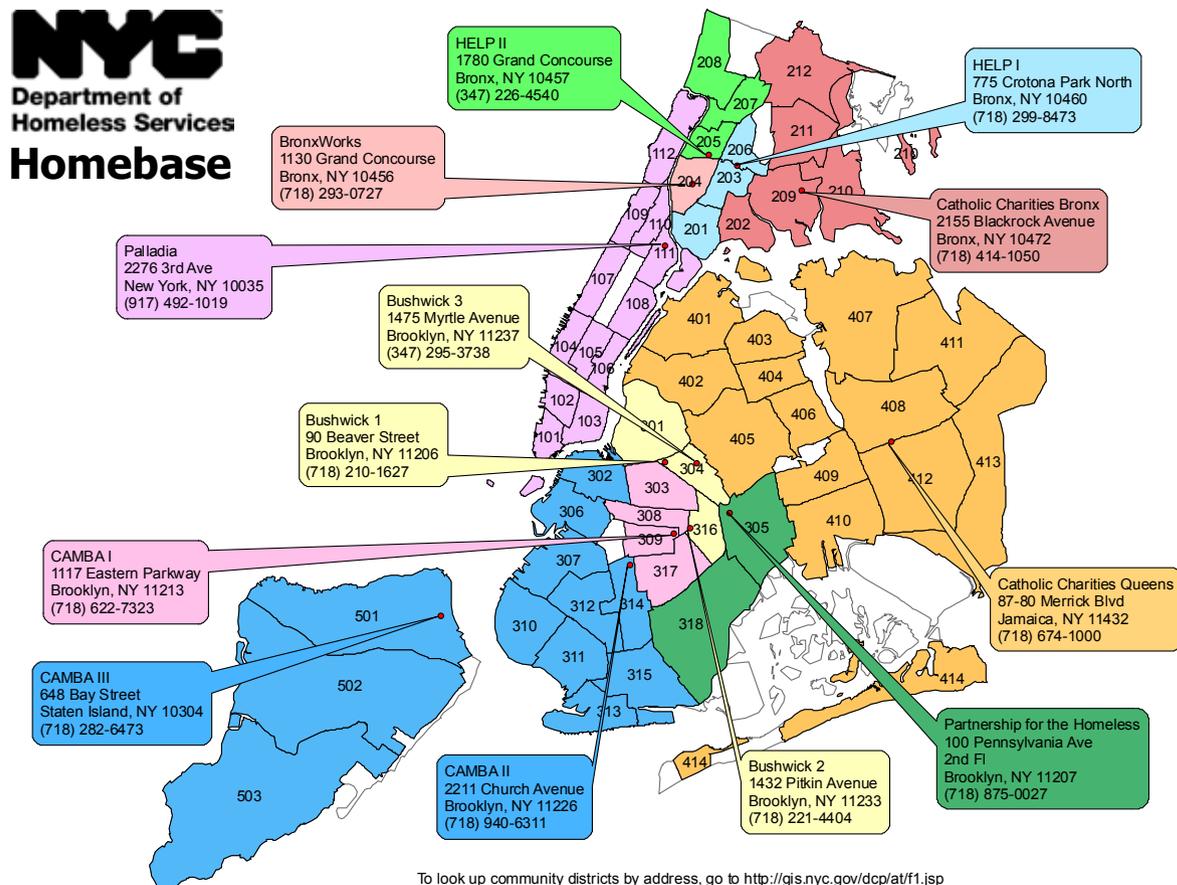
Seth, I'd like to understand what happens when a family finds itself in need of short-term housing. Would you tell us more about the city's Prevention Assistance and Temporary Housing (PATH) Intake Centers? How have you sought to modernize the work that you're doing in these centers and what are some of the services you provide at these centers?

— Seth Diamond —

Mayor Bloomberg has made it a major priority and investment in reforming the shelter system by making a better front door for families. When he came into office, all families went through an office in the Bronx called the

Emergency Assistance Unit (EAU). It was a horrible place. Families often stayed for days there under [un]sanitary conditions. The process was very long and laborious, so that families would sleep either outside or in the office, with children, for days on end.

Last May, the city opened its \$70 million, new state-of-the-art intake center for homeless families seeking shelter. With more than 75,000 square feet, the new Prevention Assistance and Temporary Housing (PATH) facility has 213 percent more space than the original intake site, and houses more than 200 specialists from the Department of Homeless Services, Administration for Children's Services, and Human Resources Administration. With this investment, the city recognizes that families facing these unfortunate circumstances should be treated professionally, fairly, and in a dignified manner. We are now able to process families in hours, not days. We've reformed the physical structure but, more important, we also have reformed our processes to be more effective and efficient. For about 20% of the people that enter the intake center, we are able to find alternatives to the shelter system. We do an extensive interview to try and understand the background and needs of the families.





We have a number of city agencies onsite. Our goal in that initial interview is to capture all the information we need, so that we can find alternatives or design a plan that can help them out of shelter.

Seth, it's critically important to understand the population you're serving. Would you tell us more about the annual Homeless Outreach Population Estimate or Hope Survey?

— Seth Diamond —

The HOPE survey is one of the tools that we use to help evaluate how many people are sleeping on the city streets. The federal government requires cities that access a certain type of funding to perform such a count at least every two years. New York City does it every year. We use a very rigorous methodology and have been a leader in the way this is done. It ends up being really a community event in New York City. It involves 3,000 New Yorkers in neighborhoods throughout the city. Thousands of volunteers canvass parks, subways, and other public spaces across the five boroughs to count the number of people living unsheltered in the city. We take over schools and other kinds of facilities in dozens of sites throughout New York. It starts at 10 or 11 p.m. and people fan out for hours throughout the evening in groups. It involves people from every walk of life. I did it this year with college students. I did it with some West Point cadets. You get a lot of city employees who are familiar and want to help. What we do is we go out around the city and count the number of people living on the street; we use that tally to, again, assess how we're doing, one of the tools to assess how we're doing on serving those who are on the street. It is one of the most comprehensive surveys of its kind nationwide. HOPE enables the city to efficiently allocate resources to the issue of street homelessness, ultimately aiming to help this population transition from the streets into housing. Just one night of your time will help us collect vital information that is used by outreach teams to help homeless people leave the streets for a better life.

Seth, are you using the power of analytics to make data-driven decisions?

— Seth Diamond —

Mayor Bloomberg has focused [on] cementing the city's connection to data in managing government. We have probably more performance indicators than any other city agency. We are constantly using metrics to look at what we're doing, how we're doing, and how effective are our services. We

Homeless Outreach Population Estimate (HOPE) 2012, The NYC Street Survey, <https://a071-hope.nyc.gov/hope/welcome.aspx>



look every day, certainly every week, at a range of indicators and try and make adjustments.

One of the things that you learn is that, just like we try and prevent homelessness by intervening early, you can often prevent poor performance by intervening early. Even a small trend of a couple weeks can be cause for concern. You really want to get in front of that potential issue before it becomes something more. The city is trying to move beyond just sort of using it within one agency, but to look at the broad framework of all the agencies, particularly in the social services area, that collect data, and how we can use that information better across agencies. When we look at how to prevent homelessness, we only look at indicators affecting people who come into our system. Maybe if we looked at those recently released from jail, people who access the child

welfare system, or those who used food stamps, maybe those would be good indicators of who may access the homeless system. On the opposite end, when we send families back into the community, the ones who come back to shelter, maybe there are certain characteristics of how they behave in the community in terms of their connection with government benefits or services that could give us information about who [is] really at risk of returning to shelter.

It's a big project that's really in its infancy. It really has the potential to better position our approaches to service delivery as well as how we may more effectively deliver services to those most in need at the right time and in the right manner.

Seth, I'd like to switch our focus to the folks who work with you and work for you. In an era of fiscal austerity, where revenue is going down but the demand for critical services seems to be increasing, how do you keep your staff motivation high and focused on delivering results?

— Seth Diamond —

Well, it can be very difficult, especially when the problems that we're dealing with are enough to demoralize anybody. The human difficulties that the people we serve deal with every day can be very difficult and emotional. I think one of the keys to motivating people, the most important, is communication and telling people that you understand what they're doing, that you know it's tremendously hard work, that you support them, and congratulate them when they do a good job. Our people want to feel appreciated. They deserve to feel appreciated. ■

To learn more about the New York City Department of Homeless Services, go to www.nyc.gov/html/dhs/html/home/home.shtml



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