



Testimony of

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Before the

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General Welfare Committee

Oversight Hearing:

Overview of DHS' Homebase Evaluation

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Good morning. My name is Caroline Nagy and I am the Policy Associate for Housing and Homelessness at Citizens' Committee for Children of New York (CCC). CCC is a 70-year-old independent, multi-issue child advocacy organization dedicated to ensuring that every New York child is healthy, housed, educated and safe. I would like to thank Chair Annabel Palma and the members of the General Welfare Committee for holding this hearing today on the DHS Homebase Evaluation.

Family homelessness has reached crisis levels in New York City, with over 10,000 families, including over 21,000 children, living in the municipal family shelter system.<sup>1</sup> In the context of record homelessness in New York City, CCC believes that preventive programs such as Homebase must be an essential component of any coordinated approach to ending homelessness. Therefore CCC is pleased to see the Abt Associates' findings that the Homebase program is a cost effective program that reduces shelter stays for at-risk families.<sup>2</sup>

It is important to contextualize the Homebase Evaluation's findings within the current situation of record, growing homelessness in New York City. Today, as I testify before you, there are 10,384 families living in the DHS shelter system, including 21,566 children.<sup>3</sup> This represents a 47 percent increase over the average number of children living in homeless shelters in Fiscal Year 2011, which was 14,701.<sup>4</sup> In addition to the record numbers of homeless children, families with children are sleeping in shelters for increasingly longer periods of time: the average length of stay for families was 408 days in July 2013,<sup>5</sup> as compared to 260 days in Fiscal Year 2011,<sup>6</sup> a 57 percent increase.

Experiencing homelessness is extremely disruptive to the lives of children, separating them from their homes, friends, schools, and broader communities and negatively impacting their physical and mental health. Therefore, one of the best ways to reduce the number of families in the shelter system, and eliminate the trauma shelter causes for children, is to prevent families from becoming homeless in the first place. Current preventive services in New York City include the Department of Homeless Services' HomeBase program, the FEPS rent subsidy for public assistance recipients, HRA One-Shot deals, civil legal services and other innovative program at nonprofits working with residents of some of the most at-risk neighborhoods in the city. CCC has long advocated for increased funding for current homelessness prevention programs to improve their capacity to meet the need for services. These essential, cost-effective programs must be supported with sufficient funding through City and State funding streams.

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<sup>1</sup> New York City Department of Homeless Services, Daily Census. Sept. 10, 2013

<sup>2</sup> Abt Associates, Final Report: Evaluation of the Homebase Community Prevention Program, June 6, 2013. Available at: <http://www.nyc.gov/html/dhs/downloads/pdf/HomeBase-Final-Report-6-06-13%20FINAL.pdf>

<sup>3</sup> New York City Department of Homeless Services, Daily Census. Sept. 10, 2013.

<sup>4</sup> New York City Department of Homeless Services, Fiscal Year 2011 Critical Activities Report. Available at: <http://www.nyc.gov/html/dhs/downloads/pdf/familyfy11.pdf>

<sup>5</sup> New York City Mayor's Office of Operations, CPR Agency Performance Reporting: Department of Homeless Services. <http://www.nyc.gov/html/ops/cpr/html/home/home.shtml>, last visited Sept. 11, 2013.

<sup>6</sup> New York City Department of Homeless Services, Fiscal Year 2011 Critical Activities Report. Available at: <http://www.nyc.gov/html/dhs/downloads/pdf/familyfy11.pdf>

CCC remains concerned about the methodology employed by DHS and the contracted evaluators who conducted the Homebase Evaluation, which included a randomized control group of vulnerable families who were denied services they were eligible for. That said, we were pleased to see that the evaluation found Homebase to be effective in helping to prevent homelessness. Specifically, the Homebase Evaluation found that participation in the program reduced nights in shelters by 70% over two years compared to the control group. This reduction in shelter stays is calculated to save New York City \$1.25 for every \$1 invested in the program.<sup>7</sup> Similarly encouraging is the recent New York City Comptroller audit of the Homebase program, which found “no issues with the services offered to the Homebase clients” and, more specifically, that Homebase providers were successful in maintaining a minimum caseload and ensuring that at least 90 percent of clients did not enter a DHS shelter within one year of enrollment for Homebase services.<sup>8</sup>

CCC continues to support the Homebase program and encourages the City, State, and Federal government (which currently funds the majority of the program) to provide sufficient funding to meet the need for homeless prevention services in New York City.

While CCC understands the value of randomized control studies, we hope that, in future situations where a study has very real and potentially harmful impacts on human subjects, other methodological approaches will be considered and used. For example, because the Homebase program has undergone a series of significant programmatic shifts throughout its existence, a qualitative, programmatic evaluation would be helpful both in interpreting the findings of this evaluation and in creating a greater understanding of how the program exists currently.

Finally, while preventive programs like Homebase provide an important front line of defense for families at risk of becoming homeless, much more is needed to serve the record numbers of families currently living in shelters as well as the families who are moving out of shelters. More than two years after the end of the Advantage program, New York City still has no large-scale program to provide rental subsidies to families exiting the shelter system, leaving shelter providers and families struggling to find alternate routes out of shelter. Without a housing subsidy, it is extremely difficult for low-income families to find suitable housing on their own, and as a result too many families are getting stuck in shelter for dramatically increased periods of time. Additionally, there are concerns that the families who do move out of DHS shelters are moving into unstable situations that may not be tenable in the long term, and may, in fact lead to repeat episodes of homelessness.

In order to better support families in their move from shelter to permanent housing, CCC urges the Council and Mayor’s Office (be it this Administration or the next) to work with

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<sup>7</sup> Abt Associates, Final Report: Evaluation of the Homebase Community Prevention Program, June 6, 2013.

<sup>8</sup> New York City Office of the Comptroller, Management Audit: Audit Report on the Department of Homeless Services’ Monitoring of the Homebase Program,” June 27, 2013, at 6. Available at: [https://comptroller.nyc.gov/wp-content/uploads/documents/MG12\\_125A.pdf](https://comptroller.nyc.gov/wp-content/uploads/documents/MG12_125A.pdf)

the State government to create a new housing subsidy program for homeless families. While housing subsidy programs may seem expensive, they are more cost-effective than shelter: the cost of shelter is \$3,200 per month<sup>9</sup> compared to the cost of a rental subsidy, which would be approximately \$1,000 per month. Other steps the City can take to reduce NYC's family homelessness epidemic include granting homeless families prioritized access to NYCHA public housing units and Section 8 Housing Choice Vouchers, prioritizing homeless families for access to new affordable housing units, and increasing the supply of supportive housing.

In conclusion, CCC looks forward to working with the City to continue to support homelessness prevention and other solutions for ending family homelessness in New York City. Thank you for this opportunity to testify. CCC appreciates the City Council's interest in this very critical issue.

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<sup>9</sup> According to the Homebase Evaluation, DHS spends on average \$105.08 per night of shelter per family. Abt Associates, Final Report: Evaluation of the Homebase Community Prevention Program, June 6, 2013, at 14.