

Homelessness skyrockets in New York

Alan Whyte
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The city administration in New York has admitted that the number of homeless people seeking a place to stay in its shelters has increased dramatically, up about 30 percent compared to last year. It is anticipated that new records will be set this winter.

According to city figures, on a typical night in July there were 28,029 people in need of a bed in a shelter. These included 6,252 families and 11,594 children, constituting an increase of about 1,000 families from the month of July last year. In addition to families, there were 5,682 single men and 1,692 single women seeking shelter.

These numbers will increase, as they do every year, when winter arrives. City officials and experts on the subject anticipate that the number of homeless seeking shelter this winter will easily surpass the previous record of 28,737 people, which was set in March 1987.

The depth of the problem lies not only in the fact that more people are entering the shelters, but also that fewer are leaving. As a result, the homeless describe the conditions in the shelters as extremely dirty and unbearably overcrowded.

The city's Department of Housing Preservation and Development provided only 117 apartments for the homeless in a nine-month period last year. As a result, the city often has to put the homeless in hotels or temporary apartments, paying landlords about \$3,000 a month. Some of the homeless end up sleeping on the floor of the Emergency Assistance Unit.

The WSWs interviewed Anthony, 47, a resident at the Bellevue Homeless Shelter, whose experiences express many of the housing problems confronting the working poor today.

"The condition of the homeless shelters are very bad. They are dirty, and overcrowded. I have seen rats roaming around. Only when there is an inspection, which takes place about every six months, do things get better.

"A dorm has about 12 beds. However, if you are very lucky, you will get a room with only two or three other men.

"I have been here for about six months. During this time, I have noticed that the shelter has become increasingly overcrowded.

"I used to do construction work, and still do whenever I get a chance. The company I was working for illegally underpaid all the workers, but there was nothing we could do about it.

"The rent situation in this city is ridiculous. Me and my wife, who passed away about two years ago, used to pay \$215 per month. They renovated the building, a new landlord took over and increased the rents to \$530 per month. They then harassed the tenants to drive us out in order to bring in people that didn't mind paying the higher rents. I was one of the last to leave.

"I don't know the percentage, but there are a lot of people in this shelter who work. If you met them on the streets, you would never know that they are homeless. They leave in the morning, work and come back before 10:00 p.m., when they sign in for a bed for the night."

In a recent news conference, Mayor Rudolph Giuliani defended his administration's handling of the homeless situation. He claims that he has been blocked from building 2,300 new housing units because community activists don't want to give up their gardens where new homes could be built. According to the mayor, much of the burden for the problem falls on the shoulders of these "save the garden" activists. However, advocates for the homeless say they have been struggling with the city administration for years to create more housing units, long before the arrival of garden activists to the political scene.

Giuliani also criticized landlords for not accepting more of the homeless under Section 8 of the federally subsidized housing program. Giuliani said that 900 vouchers were not used for this reason. In response, Joe

Strasburg, president of a major landlord association, pointed to the problems landlords face dealing with the city bureaucracy. He maintained that renting an apartment to a homeless person takes weeks, during which time it remains vacant, and authorities did not always provide subsidy checks to the landlord.

New York City landlords have, however, taken advantage of the economic boom over the past decade, which has enabled them to dramatically increase the rents, driving thousands of the working poor onto the streets. Although, this takes a particularly sharp form in New York City, this lack of affordable housing for low-paid workers and their families is a significant element in the growth of economic and social inequality nationwide.

The National Coalition for the Homeless issued a report more than two years ago identifying some of the basic causes for the increase of homelessness throughout the country. These include a significant increase in the number of people in extreme poverty, the declining value welfare checks, the reduction of the number of people who receive public assistance, the increase in rents, and the declining availability of affordable housing for low-income people.

There are signs that the developing economic downturn in New York is having its impact on workers and the poor. Food pantries and soup kitchens have reported a sharp increase in emergency requests for food. In addition to this already critical situation, nearly 39,000 families, or about 75,000 people in the city, will have reached their five-year lifetime limit for receiving federal welfare by the end of the year.

Despite Giuliani's latest pretense to be concerned about the fate of the accelerating number of people without housing, he has a long history of trashing the homeless. When he first took office, he said that the city ought not to provide subsidized housing for the homeless because it encouraged people to apply for shelters as a means of obtaining low-cost apartments.

The mayor's policy on tax delinquent houses is another expression of his attitude towards the homeless. Advocates for the homeless have asked that these properties be used to provide housing for the poor. Instead the Giuliani administration has transferred them to private interests who have been able to profit by charging the sharply increasing market rent.

The mayor's latest concern with the homeless has

more to do with his fear of the development of a potentially explosive political situation. The growth of homelessness has, for the most part, taken place under the conditions of the stock market boom of the past decade. The current economic downturn, compounded by the fact that so many welfare recipients confront their five-year federal limit on benefits, will deepen the homeless crisis.

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[5 July 2001]

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[9 June 2001]

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