

"We are not animals, we are human beings"

Record numbers swamp New York City's homeless shelters

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The record growth of homelessness in New York City is the starkest indication of the deep social crisis and the yawning gap between wealth and poverty in the US financial and corporate capital.

According to the city's Department of Homeless Services, the number of people flooding municipal shelters is the highest since records were first kept 20 years ago. For December 2002, an average of 38,039 people stayed in municipal shelters each night, an increase of 25 percent in only one year.

The recent cold spell has only swelled what was already a flood of people into the city's shelter system. This included 16,633 children, fully 44 percent of the shelter population, while another 13,439, or 35 percent, were adults in families. Families constitute the fastest growing segment of the homeless population, and the number sleeping in shelters has doubled in the last four years alone.

During January's cold snap, one homeless man, 60-year-old Arthur Cafiero, froze to death on the church steps in Manhattan where he had been sleeping for the last three years. Like many homeless, he preferred the streets to the shelters.

With New York facing a prolonged period of sub-freezing temperatures, large numbers of families are showing up at the Emergency Assistance Unit (EAU) in the Bronx, the only place in the city where homeless families may go to apply for shelter.

The intake center has been the subject of recurrent lawsuits over the city's failure to provide even minimally humane conditions. A judge found the city in contempt of court last summer for having families it was unable place in shelters sleeping on benches and floors at the EAU.

The city's billionaire Republican Mayor Michael Bloomberg responded with a plan to move families directly from the EAU to a nearby abandoned jail, where they were placed into cells in a facility ringed by barbed wire. This blatant criminalization of homelessness sparked heated protests. The city was ultimately forced to abandon the plan after it was discovered that the old jail was contaminated with lead paint, placing the health of the children housed there in serious jeopardy.

Most recently, the city announced that it is considering a scheme to float the homeless off shore on derelict ocean liners.

In the wake of its recent settlement of a long-standing lawsuit brought on behalf of the homeless, the Bloomberg administration is seeking the power to further penalize them. He has asked the courts to give the city the right to evict homeless families from the shelters if they are found in violation of shelter or social service rules or if they refuse the first offer of permanent housing. The families could be

denied shelter for as long as 180 days, with parents thrown into the streets and their children placed in foster care.

Families who spoke to the *World Socialist Web Site* at the EAU earlier this month complained of receiving spoiled food that made their children sick, filthy toilets and abuse at the hands of security guards. Placement in shelters for many comes so late that their children get little sleep and are unable to attend school.

These conditions have in turn triggered a severe child health crisis. Fully 40 percent of the children in the shelter system suffer from asthma, the highest childhood asthma rate reported anywhere in the world.

Many of those applying for shelter are employed, but their salaries are inadequate to meet New York City's soaring rents. Attempts to make do by doubling up with family members inevitably break down.

"I am working at a McDonalds in Brooklyn," said Gary Martin, 25. "I have to get up at 4:00 a.m. to get there by 6:00 a.m., and then come back here by 4:00 p.m. to wait until midnight or later to be placed for the night. I sometimes get only one hour of sleep, never more than four. I make \$6.00 an hour and work a maximum of 26 hours a week. If I rent a room for \$100 a week, I can't even afford that. We were living in Flatbush in a room with my mother, but the landlord forced us out, saying we were using too many utilities."

Gary's wife, Migdalia Roman, told the WSWs that her husband suffers from asthma and that she has seizures. She complained that they were getting sick from the food in the shelters. "Why do they have to feed you like this? Just because we are homeless, we are not animals, we are human beings."

Nikisha David said that after losing their apartment, she and her husband had slept on subway trains and abandoned buildings before coming to the EAU. "I actually believe we were better off in abandoned buildings," she said. "The places they put you have rats; some places are filthy. You have no privacy. The guards can see you in the mirror when you are taking a shower. My husband lost his job and I'm six months pregnant with twins. We came here on the 11th of January, and I had to sleep on the floor."

For many, the search for shelter is an endless treadmill, with long delays after which they are found "ineligible" because of a lack of documentation or their supposed ability to move in with relatives.

Wilbert Reed told the WSWs: "I have been coming here for four months. They keep finding me ineligible. They say I am able to stay with my daughter, but I'm not because my name is not on the lease. She and her boyfriend are living in a one-bedroom. She can get thrown out if the landlord finds me there. She worked 33 months to

get that apartment, and I'm not going to get her thrown out.

"I have had to go to court four times because they say I am ineligible. Each time the court sends me back here to go through the whole process all over again. I lost my job because of these people. I started working in December as a security guard in a warehouse store, but I missed too much time with all this running back and forth. My daughter missed a month of school. You can't get much sleep; and the kids are throwing up because the food is bad. I just want a stable condition where I can go on with my life."

Even for those who do receive placement, conditions remain precarious. The slightest brush with the police can result in being thrown back on the street.

"I was in Tier 2, which is like an apartment of your own, for four months," said Sonia, aged 39. "On January 23, I was arrested for trespassing and spent the weekend in jail. When I didn't show up at the shelter by midnight, they put my two kids out in the street. They went to my older daughter's house. She had just gotten out of the shelter system herself. When I was released from jail, they told me at the shelter that I was discharged.... They packed my things and put them on the steps. Then I had to come back here and apply all over again."

Sonia was caught up in one of the NYPD's periodic "sweeps" against the homeless. She said that when she was arrested, most of the people brought to Central Booking were homeless, picked up on the same charge of trespassing. "It's hard, if you're a single parent, and the kids are crying to go home, but you don't have a home to go to," she said.

Michelle, 18, was at the EAU with her mother and her five brothers and sisters, ranging in age from five to 13. "We have been 16 days going through this procedure," she said. "We are supposed to stay in the same shelter for at least a week, but we keep having to come back here every day. Kids leave from here at midnight or one in the morning. A lot of kids are missing school. If you miss too much school, they call ACS (Administration of Child Services) and take your kids away from you. The food here is jail food—cold bologna sandwiches—kids don't like to eat that. Babies are vomiting because they give you spoiled milk."

Senior Policy Analyst with the New York City Coalition for the Homeless Patrick Markee points to three main reasons for the rise in homelessness: a severe shortage of affordable housing, cutbacks in government housing assistance, and the economic recession.

The number of apartments renting for under \$500 a month declined by 51 percent in the decade of the '90s, and has dropped further since. Real estate values, driven by the demand for luxury housing for the city's wealthy elite, have continued to escalate even as the stock market crashed. Meanwhile, the city reported losing 82,300 jobs last year, six times the number it lost in 2001.

A state program to build supported housing for the severely mentally ill, which reduced shelter stays for its participants by 86 percent, has not been renewed since 1999. Currently there are 1,800 approved applicants for some 200 vacancies. A small Family Rental Assistance Program designed to help working homeless pay market rents is now on the chopping block in Mayor Bloomberg's latest budget revision.

While cuts in welfare funding and other forms of assistance have been a major contributing factor to the rise in homelessness, Bloomberg's Department of Homeless Services budget includes nearly \$9.2 million for "a plan to increase public assistance enrollment" for families in the shelters. The aim is to secure state and

federal revenue for the city as reimbursement for welfare expenditures. The result will be increased pressure on shelter residents who are working to sign up for welfare instead. Under current regulations, they will then be obliged to work for their benefits.

Alexander Peña, 30, was waiting at the EAU to be placed with his wife, who is eight months pregnant, and their three-year-old daughter. "I am capable of working, but I can't work with the way the system is here," he said. "Today was supposed to be my first day at a new job, but we aren't placed yet, and I can't leave my wife alone. I had to call to say I wouldn't be coming in, and I will probably have to call in again tomorrow. If you work, they make it harder for you to get help from the system. They would actually rather have welfare take care of your assistance, because the city gets those moneys back.

"The shelters are overcrowded. You have to wait for a family to be ejected to get a place. Last August I lost a house, my wife went back to live with her mother, and I stayed at a rooming house. Now DHS wants to break up my family. They say I can stay with my mother-in-law, but I am not welcome there. I would have been better off coming here right away with my eviction notice, rather than trying to work things out on my own.

"I've been working since I was 14. At one point I was holding down three jobs. Now that I need the system, it's screwing me over."



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