

New York City to move 8,000 homeless people from hotels to crowded shelters, ending COVID-19 prevention program

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New York City Mayor Bill de Blasio plans to move about 8,000 homeless people out of hotel rooms, where they have been staying during the pandemic, and back to shelters. The timing of the move is uncertain, but the administration plans to complete it by the end of July. The campaign will disrupt the lives and threaten the health of homeless people to make hotel rooms available for tourists as de Blasio declares, “This is going to be the summer of New York City.”

The Delta variant of the coronavirus, which is about 2.5 times more infectious than the wild-type variant, now accounts for more than 10 percent of tested cases in New York City. It is on its way to becoming the dominant strain in the United States. Only 49 percent of city residents and 48 percent of state residents have been fully vaccinated against the virus. Moreover, vaccination rates for homeless people may be significantly lower than those in the general population, according to advocates.

Yet city, state and national politicians are prematurely proclaiming the end of the pandemic and removing all impediments to the generation of profit. New York Governor Andrew Cuomo, a Democrat like de Blasio, ended almost all restrictions related to the pandemic on June 15. Capacity limits, social distancing and information for contact tracing are now optional for offices, retail stores and other businesses. Shelters themselves are merely required to have residents wear masks.

“It is time to move homeless folks who were in hotels for a temporary period of time back to shelters where they can get the support they need,” said de Blasio at a news conference earlier this month. But many homeless people have continued to receive support at the hotels

and do not want to return to shelters. Moreover, the Federal Emergency Management Agency offered to pay for the hotel rooms until the end of September.

“I don’t want to go back—it’s like I’m going backward,” Andrew Ward told the *New York Times*. Ward was moved from a shelter to the Williams Hotel in Brooklyn. “It’s not safe to go back there. You’ve got people bringing in knives.”

Before the pandemic arrived in New York, the shelters were notoriously overcrowded. In some shelters, as many as 60 people stayed in one room. These conditions enabled the rapid spread of the coronavirus. More than 3,700 residents of New York’s main shelter system became ill with COVID-19, and 102 have died, according to city data. But considering the inadequate systems for testing and contact tracing, particularly in the early stages of the pandemic, these figures are undoubtedly underestimates.

The pre-pandemic crowding of shelters, combined with the continual rise of homelessness, emphasizes that the existing shelter system is inadequate to meet the needs of all homeless New Yorkers, including those who stayed in hotels recently.

In spring 2020, the de Blasio administration moved homeless people out of the shelters and into 60 Manhattan hotels, many of which were in middle-class or wealthy neighborhoods. The residents of these neighborhoods soon complained about noise and claimed that homeless people were using drugs and urinating in public. A neighborhood group in the affluent Upper West Side area demanded that approximately 300 homeless men be evicted from the Hotel Lucerne. When the city developed a plan to move them to a hotel in the Financial District, residents of

that neighborhood filed suit to stop its implementation.

Understandably, many homeless people prefer the hotels, which provide far better living conditions than the shelters. Hotel rooms have granted homeless residents privacy, kept their belongings secure and reduced confrontations involving residents with substance abuse or mental health problems. “It’s peaceful. It’s less stressful,” Ward explained to the *Times*. He added that if he were moved back to a shelter, “I’d just stay in the street like before.”

The spread of the Delta variant of the coronavirus and the inadequate distribution of vaccines create the conditions for a health disaster if homeless people are returned to shelters or sleeping rough. “There are people sleeping in shelters who are still testing positive and getting sick,” said Giselle Routhier, policy director at Coalition for the Homeless, in a statement. “Until permanent affordable housing can be secured, the safest option remains placement in hotel rooms.”

Moreover, shelter operators have been able to maintain most of the treatment and counseling services for those without homes while the latter have stayed at the hotels. “It is simply inaccurate to say that people aren’t getting services in hotels,” said Routhier, in a direct response to de Blasio’s statement.

When he ran for mayor eight years ago, de Blasio decried New York’s inequality, using “A Tale of Two Cities” as a major theme of his campaign and promising to reduce homelessness dramatically. Today, homelessness in the city is at its highest level since the Great Depression. During fiscal year 2020, 122,926 individual homeless men, women and children slept in the city’s shelter system. The number of homeless New Yorkers sleeping in shelters each night is 39 percent higher now than it was 10 years ago, and people from every New York City zip code are homeless.

But these stark figures do not provide a full picture, because they do not account for those who do not sleep in shelters. Natalie Monarrez is a homeless woman who works full time at Amazon’s JFK8 warehouse in Staten Island, a borough of New York City. Her hourly wage of \$19.30 is too low to afford a studio apartment in Staten Island or New Jersey, so she sleeps in her car. Her clothes are stored in suitcases, and she keeps food in a cooler.

Monarrez maintains a membership at Planet Fitness gyms so that she has a place to shower and brush her

teeth. She relies on fast food restaurants and retail stores for their public bathrooms. When businesses were locked down and their bathrooms inaccessible, Monarrez was forced to buy anti-bacterial wipes and use her car.

“Jeff Bezos donates to homeless shelters for tax write-offs and PR. He needs to know that some of his own workers (without family or a second income) can’t afford rent,” she told Vice News .

The candidates in New York City’s recent Democratic mayoral primary scarcely acknowledged the crisis of homelessness. As of this writing, Eric Adams, a former policeman and former Republican, is ahead in the initial first-choice results in the primary election. Adams has made vague promises to provide housing for homeless New Yorkers, but these promises are as meaningful as those that fellow Democrat de Blasio made eight years ago.

Andrew Yang, the businessman and former candidate for the Democratic presidential nomination, depicted homeless people themselves as the problem, alleging that they degraded other New Yorkers’ quality of life. No doubt he was appealing to the affluent and heartless residents who demanded that homeless people be ejected from “their” neighborhoods. That such a vile position is accepted within the Democratic Party is a further indication of its reactionary character.

The crisis of homelessness in New York City is a product of capitalism, which is itself in historic crisis. Homelessness cannot be addressed in a humane or meaningful way by either of the capitalist parties, which uphold the interests of finance capital and subordinate all other considerations to private profit.



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