

New York City adds 200,000 to affordable housing wait list for first time in 15 years

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This week, the New York City Housing Authority (NYCHA) began notifying 200,000 winners who will be put on a wait list for the Section 8 housing voucher program, which it administers for the federal government. NYCHA accepted applications from June 3 through June 9 for the first time in 15 years.

There were an astonishing 633,000 applications during that week, with little advanced publicity. The sheer number is a clear indication of the extreme shortage of affordable housing in the city.

The program has randomly selected 200,000 applications to join the wait list for subsidies in housing in New York City, which will cap rent at one third of their income. To be eligible, an applicant's income cannot exceed an annual \$54,350 for a one-person household and \$77,650 for a four-person household. This is exceedingly low in a city where the median rent exceeds \$4,400 per month, or nearly \$53,000 per year. Additionally, at least one household member must be a US citizen or have eligible immigration status.

The lottery does not make families eligible for one of NYCHA's own 161,585 housing units, which have a separate application process. As of January 2023, 274,745 families were on the waiting list for public housing.

In addition to the 633,000 applicants for Section 8 vouchers, there are thousands who remain on the list from the last lottery. CBS New York quoted NYCHA CEO Lisa Bova-Hiatt as saying "We currently have 3,700 people left on our waiting list from 2009. We are working through those families, and so now is a perfect time to open up the waiting list to an additional 200,000 individuals."

NYCHA will issue 1,000 vouchers a month until it reaches the federal cap of 115,000. However, since some 96,000 vouchers have been claimed by families already in the program since 2009 or before—and they have first option to renew—only 19,000 vouchers are available for the 203,700 families on the wait list. Four hundred and thirty thousand families who applied for Section 8 voucher but did not even get on the waiting list will continue to pay an outrageous

portion of their incomes for rent—or simply be homeless.

The 200,000 who are added to the waitlist will now be interviewed to confirm their eligibility. Families will have to submit a host of documents including those related to income, immigration status, residency information for the last three years, rental and utility payments, records of assets for the last year, etc.

The administration of New York City's right-wing Democratic mayor Eric Adams has been quick to claim that NYCHA's selection of 200,000 new applications will help alleviate the housing crisis in the city. Deputy Mayor for Housing, Economic Development, and Workforce Maria Torres-Springer told the media: "As our administration responds to the housing crisis, it's vital that New Yorkers in need of Section 8 vouchers have this opportunity to receive them. NYCHA's forthcoming issuance of 1,000 vouchers a month will be a lifeline to 200,000 New Yorkers who need affordable housing."

This is a boldfaced lie. Not only will just a mere one in ten of the lottery winners receive anything resembling a lifeline, but the Adams administration has blocked the expansion of CityFHEPS, a city rental assistance program given to those who have spent time in a city shelter, proposed by the City Council. Adams has maintained that the city cannot afford the \$17 billion cost over the next five years for the expanded program.

On Thursday, a Manhattan judge upheld Adams's action, ruling that the City Council was overstepping its authority. A group of low-income New Yorkers had taken out a suit against the city to demand the expansion of the program. In a statement, Robert Desir of the Legal Aid Society, which helped file the suit, argued that the decision "will have a devastating impact on thousands of New Yorkers on the brink of eviction or already experiencing homelessness."

Nine in 10 New Yorkers earning less than \$25,000 a month currently spend at least half their income on rent according to city housing data. Nearly all New York renters are considered "rent burdened" by federal standards because they spend 30 percent or more of their income on rent.

This disproportionately affects the poorest sections of the working class for whom paying 50 percent of their monthly income on rent means, “difficulty affording necessities such as food, clothing, transportation, and medical care,” as one publication of the US Department of Housing and Urban Development put it. Only those in the top income brackets can afford to house themselves comfortably in the city.

This comes at a time when homelessness in the city continues to be at near record levels. Close to 150,000 people sleep in the city’s shelter system every night, including some 66,000 migrants and asylum seekers.

This month, the Coalition for the Homeless published a report that noted that homelessness in New York City has increased by about 20 percent in the last year. While some of this is driven by the influx of asylum seekers, there has been a notable increase in the number of unhoused long-term New York City residents. The report estimates that the number of homeless, including those in shelters, on streets and “doubled up” in homes of friends or family, is closer to 350,000.

The report stated, “To summarize the most basic measures of Mayor Adams’ and [Democratic New York] Governor Hochul’s performance in addressing the crises: there are now more people experiencing homelessness, there is less affordable housing available for those who need it most, and there are more people in desperate need of social services and mental health care than at any time in recent memory.”

As part of an effort to deflect from the housing crisis, the Adams administration has taken to blaming migrants for many of the deteriorating social conditions in the city. Fox News and other right wing news media have reported that migrants are getting more resources than NYCHA residents, attempting to pit long term residents and migrants against one another.

The Adams administration has also blamed immigrants for the widespread presence of illegal street vending, litter issues and prostitution along the Roosevelt Avenue corridor in Queens, an area where none of these things are new, but have garnered increased media attention lately, along with calls for “law and order” crackdowns from some.

On Friday, the New York Police Department raided the 3,000-person migrant shelter on Randall’s Island and displaced residents for hours during a heat emergency while they searched the premises for drugs and weapons.

Many migrants are being housed in hotels where the city typically pays between \$139 and \$185 a night per room, whether or not the room is occupied, in effect providing guaranteed fixed income to the hotel owners.

The *New York Times* has reported that with so many hotel rooms occupied by migrants there is a shortage of hotel

rooms available to business and leisure guests, which has in turn driven the price of rooms to new heights. Clearly this is a lucrative situation for hotel property owners. \$185 a night translates to \$5,500 monthly, a figure significantly above what it would cost to rent a one-bedroom apartment for a month in some parts of the city. Published figures vary but citywide the median rent for a one-bedroom apartment is near \$3500, with rents in Manhattan tending to be much higher.

A further indication of the severity of the housing crisis came from a report published in May that showed rents in the city are rising seven times faster than wages. Manhattan has the highest rents in the US and is among the highest compared to world cities. The outer boroughs while less expensive are far from affordable for the millions of workers living there. Compounding the problem, more affordable areas in the outer boroughs tend to lack public transit infrastructure making it difficult for many to access these areas.

More recently the city’s rent control board voted to increase rents on rent stabilized apartments by 2.75 percent on one-year leases and 5.25 percent on two-year leases. The Legal Aid Society issued a statement in response saying, “These needless rent hikes for an already struggling population will undoubtedly lead to increased rates of homelessness, eviction, and displacement.”

The housing crisis comes on the heels of a decades long construction boom in the city which created thousands of new “luxury” apartments in gentrifying areas. This boom enriched and benefited the city’s powerful real estate, finance and insurance industries while doing almost nothing to alleviate the chronic shortage of housing faced by workers.

The widening chasm between what workers can pay and the cost of housing are creating an increasingly intolerable situation for millions in the city who are unable to live in the way they traditionally have. This is rapidly creating conditions for a social upheaval.



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