



Testimony of

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Oversight: Update on DHS's Advantage NY and Home Base Programs

Before the
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General Welfare Committee

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Good afternoon. I am Stephanie Gendell, the Associate Executive Director for Policy and Public Affairs at Citizens' Committee for Children of New York, Inc. (CCC). CCC is a 66-year old independent child advocacy organization dedicated to ensuring that every New York City child is healthy, housed, educated and safe.

I would like to thank Chair Palma and members of the General Welfare Committee for holding this hearing today so that we can learn more from the Department of Homeless Services (DHS) about their Advantage and HomeBase Programs and their plans for serving homeless families in the future.

On April 12, 2010, 26,000 individuals were living in the DHS family shelter system, including almost 15,000 children. As we know, the economic downturn has led to a tremendous increase in joblessness in New York City, and more families are homeless now than ever before. More recently, the city's homelessness problem has been compounded by the Section 8 voucher freeze and the termination of 3,000 vouchers.

To try to combat the level of homelessness in New York City, the Department of Homeless Services (DHS) secured \$74.17 million in economic stimulus funding that was allocated directly to DHS. According to the City's Stimulus Tracker this stimulus funding is allocated for families as follows: \$39.93 million for HomeBase Homelessness Prevention; \$2.6 million for an aftercare helpline; \$2.1 million for anti-eviction legal services; \$9.7 million for expedited rehousing; and \$333,000 for rapid rehousing of youth. CCC applauds DHS and the Mayor's Office their work in securing these critical funds.

While CCC appreciates the efforts DHS has made to secure stimulus funds and then use the funds wisely, we remain very concerned about the numbers of children displaced from their homes and communities. It is too early to determine how successful this large allocation to DHS has been for preventing homelessness and expediting the transition of families from shelters to permanent housing. CCC urges DHS to be transparent and open about the uses of this funding and the outcomes of the Advantage Programs and HomeBase program.

With regard to HomeBase, CCC believes that a programmatic evaluation, which looks at the demographic information of families assisted by the program, the specific services provided to families and the efficacy of the intervention, would be invaluable to learning more its role in preventing homelessness in New York City.

Recently, DHS announced their intent to make changes to the Advantage housing subsidy assistance program and to begin collecting income contributions from working families living in shelter. CCC supports Senator Squadron's bill and the pending Senate Budget Resolution, both of which would prohibit the city from charging rent to families living in homeless shelters.

In addition, DHS is planning to eliminate the Children's Advantage Program and CCC has tremendous concerns about the impact this will have on children who have reunified from foster care. CCC urges the state OTDA and city HRA, DHS, and the Mayor's Office to reconsider this plan and for the City Council to take steps to prevent the dissolution of Children's Advantage.

Children's Advantage is currently a housing subsidy assistance program developed specifically for families in which the children have been reunified from foster care and the family is living in a homeless shelter. Thus, the families participating in Children's Advantage are those where the city (ACS) and a Family Court Judge have determined that prior abuse or neglect of the children warranted the child's removal from his/her home, that the child would be in imminent risk of harm if he/she remained in the home, and that placement in foster care was in the child's best interests. Removal from home and placement in foster care is often a traumatic event for children and their parents. It impacts children's attachments to their parents and requires children to spend part of their childhood living in someone else's home.

While the court process can often take years due to an overburdened court system, the goal for many children in foster care is that they eventually return home to their parents. Foster care provide services to foster children in an attempt to meet the children's needs and make it safe for children to live with their parents again. Often times, these services include job training and employment assistance for the parents. For the families participating in Children's Advantage, not only have the children been in foster care, but when they return to live with their parents, they are living in a homeless shelter. Children's Advantage has been helping these families obtain permanent housing.

DHS's plan to eliminate Children's Advantage such that child welfare reunification families living in homeless shelters can only obtain permanent housing if a parent works is concerning to CCC. In addition, families currently participating in Children's Advantage do not have to pay rent (even if they are working), but in the new plan, these families will need to pay 30% of their rent in the first year and 50% of their rent in the second year.¹

While CCC believes strongly in the value of work and the stability income can bring to a family, we worry that tying permanent housing to employment for child welfare families (and charging 30% or 50% of the rent) will result in more former foster children having to grow up living in homeless shelters, and even more concerning, may jeopardize the stability of some reunifications.

It is important to understand the challenges facing families who have been through the foster care system. The children have often experienced trauma associated with being removed from their homes and experiencing abuse and/or neglect, and often their parental attachments were disrupted while they were living in foster homes. The children often have a range of needs related to their mental health, education and development. Similarly the parents to whom they return also have many needs such as mental health issues and histories of domestic violence and/or substance abuse.

The elimination of Children's Advantage means that there will be additional stressors on these often fragile families, who are not only dealing with the child welfare system but are also struggling with homelessness. For many of the young children in these families, if their parents do indeed get a job to meet the requirements of Work Advantage, they will need to be placed in child care—meaning in the care of another stranger—at a time when the family is working to rebuild and strengthen their relationships to one another. (It also means that ACS will need to spend more money on child care vouchers even though ACS is already struggling to afford their current child care system.)

¹ In fact, Work Advantage (which will subsume Children's Advantage) has been only charging families \$50 per month in the first year, but DHS's proposal includes changing Work Advantage to require a 30% contribution in the first year for all participating families. CCC is also concerned about this increased rent contribution requirement for all families participating in Advantage.

DHS's plan does not provide for a child welfare assessment of whether obtaining employment at the same time as the family is moving to permanent housing and adjusting to reunification will have a negative impact on the family's stability.

Furthermore, the economic downturn has led to a significantly increased unemployment rate in New York City (10.2% in February 2010). Thus, it may be very difficult for parents to find jobs given the sheer number of people looking for jobs and the shortage of jobs created by the economic downturn. While work is often an asset to family functioning, CCC worries that the pressure on DHS and HRA to urge these often fragile families experiencing both child welfare interventions and homelessness, to obtain employment as a precursor to permanent housing, may jeopardize the success of reunifications and the safety of the children. We urge the city to reconsider this proposal.

Thank you for this opportunity to testify. CCC appreciates the City Council's interest in this very critical issue.