MAKE HOMELESSNESS PREVENTION VOUCHERS USEABLE

The New York City Council is considering legislation (Intro. 146) that would increase the value of the city’s homelessness prevention vouchers, named CityFHEPS, to fair market value. Vouchers are often one of the only means by which justice-involved individuals can search for housing, but the current voucher amounts are not enough to find quality housing. Unlike housing vouchers provided by the federal government, such as Section 8 vouchers, CityFHEPS vouchers issued by the New York City Department of Social Services (DSS) do not automatically adjust when rents rise on the market. On average, they are $400 below market rate rents. As a result, New Yorkers experiencing homelessness can rarely use vouchers to locate stable housing and are instead forced to rely on homeless shelters. This affects all New Yorkers struggling with housing instability, including families with children.

The City Council is actively considering legislation raising the value of the vouchers and held a committee hearing about it on September 15. To support the legislation, visit justreentry.org and:

➔ Email and call your council member asking them to support the bill.
➔ Share posts on Twitter and Instagram tagging @NYCSpeakerCoJo and your own council member and ask them to pass the bill as soon as possible. Tag @JustReentry and @FairHousing_NYC to support the campaigns and we will amplify your messages.

The federal government already establishes fair values for Section 8 vouchers. The City fails to do the same. The City’s vouchers meet only 75% of fair market value for single adults. That’s lower than the median asking rent for a studio in every single neighborhood in New York City. The vouchers also only meet only 80% of the amount families of four need to find an apartment.

The City leaves money on the table because vouchers are unused. The abysmally low voucher amounts mean that voucher-holders cannot find quality, affordable apartments in the time allotted for their use. Last year, over 11,000 people who had these vouchers remained within the shelter system. The City has leftover funding for the program each year.
Temporary shelters are twice as expensive as CityFHEPS vouchers. The budget for the Department of Homeless Services (DHS) has grown by $2 billion in recent years due to a dependence on hotels as temporary shelters, which are more expensive than permanent housing or providing vouchers. While these hotels can serve as an excellent and important stopgap, they are too expensive to be the long term solution.

We cannot wait for the State to take responsibility. Mayor de Blasio’s administration would prefer to see the State provide funding to increase the value of these vouchers. While state legislators have proposed legislation that would raise the value of these vouchers to 85% of fair market rent, the State is coping with its own budget deficits and does not appear ready to pass this legislation soon.

Lower voucher amounts harden existing patterns of segregation. Black and Hispanic New Yorkers make up a disproportionate amount of the city’s homeless population, representing 57% and 32% of heads of households in the shelter system respectively. If homeless prevention vouchers provide such low amounts of funding, they push these families of color into a handful of neighborhoods where rents are lowest but employment opportunities and services can be further away from home (for example, Norwood and Tremont in the Bronx, the Rockaways in Queens, and Gravesend in Brooklyn). This is at odds with the City’s goals to affirmatively further fair housing.

Most City Council members and many advocates agree to these reforms, but some resistance remains. Intro. 146 is cosponsored by 39 of the 51 City Council members and by Public Advocate Jumaane Williams. This proposal is supported by the Homeless Can’t Stay Home coalition, which includes organizations like VOCAL-NY, Communities United for Police Reform, and Neighbors Together. Christine Quinn, the former City Council Speaker who now leads shelter and supporting housing provider WIN, testified in favor at a recent City Council hearing. This is also supported by criminal legal system reform advocates such as the Institute for Justice and Opportunity at John Jay College and Bronx Connect. Contact Speaker Corey Johnson to ask that Intro. 146 be brought to a vote as soon as possible.

Discrimination against voucher holders will remain a challenge. New York City passed legislation in 2019 to ban source of income discrimination. This means that landlords cannot refuse to rent to prospective tenants because they pay for their housing through a voucher or other subsidy. A study by VOCAL-NY and TakeRoot Justice found that New Yorkers using vouchers are less likely to hear back from real estate agents or to be shown apartments than people whose income is from employment. The City’s own fair housing report Where We Live NYC, says it should expand resources to combat landlord discrimination, improve program design for voucher programs, and survey New Yorkers who use these programs on their needs.

Learn more about preventing housing discrimination against New Yorkers with criminal records, many of whom qualify for vouchers, in this two-pager on stopping NYCHA from separating families.